

GRASSROOTS MODERNISM: COLLECTIVE FILM EDUCATION, POLITICS, AND
AESTHETICS IN 1920s-1930s NEW YORK CITY

By

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ABSTRACT

With attention to film studies as part of workers' education, this project explores how film studies developed within 1920s and 1930s US labor movements. It centers progressive, mainly communist, film collectives' educational projects in the US. Friends of Soviet Russia with Workers International Relief in the 1920s and the Film and Photo League and Film and Sprockets Society in the 1930s were key organizations that developed educational programs designed for workers and designed by workers. US. By producing their own films, exhibitions, print materials, and schools, they made classrooms around the city to reach working-class people. Their films included newsreels and documentaries capturing post-revolution Soviet conditions and, in America, they filmed 1930s hunger protests, police brutality, Hoovervilles, Scottsboro Trials, and City College of New York students. They screened films in union halls, rural schoolhouses, and coal mines around New York and throughout the Midwest. Their efforts illustrate how modern art institutions often began with independent, amateur, and activist organizations. Members were mainly working-class Jews from first-or-second-generation immigrant families. Facing ethnic and economic barriers to traditional cultural-intellectual institutions, they invoked these experiences to provide more accessible learning to folks in their neighborhoods and beyond. These were also projects to build mass mobilization for diverse workers' rights and to get more Americans interested in film.

Formal film studies as a field did not exist, nor did film schools or sustained courses. Self-teaching and collaborative studying, therefore, allowed workers' film collectives to build knowledge of film techniques, theories, histories, and social issues. These alternative educational systems became central to underground institutions beyond WWII. I situate "film studies" in a wider working-class history and history of modernism. Collectives developed schools, journals,

exhibitions, distribution networks, and documentaries from the ground up as independent, democratic, experimental learning spaces in the 1920s-1930s. Groups frequently worked alongside European and Soviet institutions. In charting this process, New York City emerges as a central cultural landscape that made mobility between transnational film collectives possible.

Many involved, including Leo Hurwitz and Bernard Gordon, were Blacklisted in the McCarthy period. Despite this, several continued creating films independently or under pseudonyms and taught film in the 1960s-70s when radical politics and culture underwent changes. These 1920s-30s film activities influenced 1960s-70s documentary and avant-garde cinema cultures and film studies in US higher education. While most films are lost, through archival materials and oral histories, this project traces groups' creative dedication to elicit social change via film education.

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for showing me the possibilities of college education, especially the expansiveness of historical education to open so many worlds of learning, connection, and humor. Charlie still serves as my mentor, whether he knows it or not, and a role model, whether he approves of that or not.

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compassion, freedom, and dreams of a better world hold special places in my mind, heart, and soul. Robin Kelley's *Freedom Dreams* and bell hooks's works on education as rooted in hope and love mean the world to me, as do those who embody and practice these ideas.

As many know, I am endlessly angry at the constant egregious injustices many have and continue to face in our national, global, and local societies in addition to those in higher education. Intellectual work is emotional. My anger and hope to build a more just world drive my intellectual studies. Joy, however, is also part of this process. Ah, dialectics! The joy of seeing resistance to exclusion and inequity—historically and contemporarily--similarly fuels me to have hope. The university was never built for many of us. In fact, it was meant to *harm* many of us. It still does often, even with the progress made and even if unintentional in many cases. Sometimes educating as a marginalized person or someone with a radically inclusive value-set is a form of harm reduction. Thank you to all who never turn away from not only seeing, but challenging harm. And thank you to those who continually advocate for themselves in the face of the exhaustion and retaliatory consequences. Keep being unapologetically and wholly you. You are beautiful, you are brilliant, and you are meaningful in a multitude of ways. We need you.

And to my LGBTQ+ and disabled communities who continue to face ruthless attacks on our lives and wellbeing: I love you. As this dissertation hopefully shows, community-based mutual aid and genuine care for people struggling are core to getting through and around injustices. Keep taking photos, creating art, writing, filming, speaking, educating, and taking up all the space you want. Every piece of you is valuable. Government laws and vicious people do not get to determine our value or life trajectories. They affect our daily lives, but as Marsha P. Johnson noted, "History isn't something you look back at and say it was inevitable. It happens because people make decisions that are sometimes very impulsive and of the moment, but those

moments are cumulative realities.”¹ When people form false images against our communities, we can form our own realities to live in safety, happiness, and freedom.

Queer and disabled activists have inspired this project in many ways for their wisdom about how powerful knowledge is in sustaining just living conditions and how central lack of knowledge or weaponized ignorance are to oppressive systems. Sylvia Rivera once remarked,

They [transphobes and queerphobes] have been brainwashed by this fucked up system that has condemned us and by doctors that call us a disease and a bunch of freaks. Our family and friends have also condemned us because their lack of true knowledge... [But] We didn't take shit from nobody. We had nothing to lose. You [cis-hetero white people] all had rights. We had nothing to lose. I'll be the first one to step on any organization, any politician's toes if I have to, to get the rights for my community.²

Queer, poor, and disabled rage are life-forces in the world we occupy. Vito Russo passionately spoke about how indifference or purposeful neglect not only sustain unfair systems, but also fuel mass death of marginalized communities. People's homophobia, transphobia, and ableism kill because Americans don't care when diseases like HIV/AIDS and abuse ravages “the disposable population of fags” or when COVID disproportionately kills or jeopardizes “disposable” disabled populations. Russo's advice? We need to “kick the shit out of this system, so that this never happens again.”³ These folks dedicated themselves to helping intersectionally-oppressed people survive and celebrate their lives. They participated in or created collectives (such as S.T.A.R. or ACTUP) to bring education, resources, and action to the streets. When the category is justice, “You better WORK.” All these icons along with the historical figures in my study remind me that holding multiple identities at once is a strength—I can be poor, working-class,

¹ Marsha P. Johnson, *Pay it No Mind: The Life and Times of Marsha P. Johnson*, Dir. Michael Kasino (Redux Pictures), 2012.

² Sylvia Rivera, “Transvestites: Your Half Sisters and Half Brothers of The Revolution,” *Come Out!* vol. 2, no. 8 (Winter 1972): 10.

³ Vito Russell, “Why We Fight,” Transcript of speech: ACT UP Demonstration in Albany, NY, May 9, 1988 and the ACT UP Demonstration at the Department of Health and Human Services, Washington D.C., October 10, 1988, <https://actupny.org/documents/whfight.html>.

queer, disabled, a woman, from a dysfunctional family all at once. And we all can build community to be celebrated and enhance our living conditions.

And thanks to the folks in my study for grounding me in teaching and learning practices, and for reminding me of my privilege to learn from students. Education comes in multiple shades beyond formal classroom teaching.

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PREFACE

“Refusing to perform neurotypicality is a revolutionary act of disability justice. It’s also a radical act of self-love.”⁴

-Devon Price

“These aren’t radicals or weirdos, Mama. They are shop clerks and bankers and little old ladies and people who nod and smile to you when you meet them on the bus. ... Being gay has taught me tolerance, compassion and humility. It has shown me the limitless possibilities of living. It has given me people whose passion and kindness and sensitivity have provided a constant source of strength.”⁵

- Armistead Maupin

“Working within the conventional corporate academic world where the primary goals of institutions is to sell education and produce a professional managerial class schooled in the art of obedience to authority and accepting of dominator-based hierarchy, I often felt as though I was in the dysfunctional family of my childhood where I was often in the outsider position and scapegoated, viewed as both mad and yet a threat.”⁶

“It is my deep belief that in talking about the past, in understanding the things that have happened to us we can heal and go forward. Some people believe that it is best to put the past behind you, to never speak about the events that have happened that have hurt or wounded us, and this is their way of coping—but coping is not healing. By confronting the past without shame we are free of its hold on us.”⁷

“My hope emerges from those places of struggle where I witness individuals positively transforming their lives and the world around them. Educating is a vocation rooted in hopefulness. As teachers we believe that learning is possible, that nothing can keep an open mind from seeking after knowledge and finding a way to know.”⁸

-bell hooks

When I began this work, I did not realize how important it would be to me. It has not only shifted how I identify as a scholar—one of working-class, labor, social movement, and film studies. Just as much, it has shifted how I understand my whole self. Seeing the archival documents from Nancy Naumburg, Leo Hurwitz, Bernard Gordon, Sam Brody, and so many others ignited curiosity, but also comradeship. Their investment in education, radical politics, and

⁴ Devon Price, *Unmasking Autism: Discovering the New Faces of Neurodiversity* (New York: Harmony, 2022), 5.

⁵ Michael’s “Letter to Mama,” in Armistead Maupin, *More Tales of the City* (New York: Harper, 1980), 335-336.

⁶ bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (London: Routledge, 2003), 37.

⁷ Ibid., 12.

⁸ Ibid., 15.

art directed at diverse poor and working-class people allowed me to see a future for myself as a working-class, first-generation student in academia. Some of the most important teaching and learning occurs with people not authoritatively marked as teachers or schools.

When I entered academia, I thought I was finally finding my “people.” I quickly realized how much of an outsider I am once I listened to everyone talk about their two-parent households, middle-to-upper-class upbringings, and general experiences related to their financial and familial privileges (and power). Turning to Leo Seltzer recounting the nights he spent sleeping on a table with a film screen as a blanket at the Film and Photo League headquarters hoping he could find food in the morning resonated with me more than most of the stories my colleagues would share. Several FPL and FSS members noting their lives as first-generation students shed light on a hidden history of academia often overshadowed by lineages of families attending the same college. My purpose is not to glorify poverty, discomfort, or difference. It is simply to provide an example of how historical studies of working-class and poor people are incredibly meaningful to students from similar backgrounds.

At a job interview a couple years ago, I met with several brilliant students. The most memorable moment happened several days later when a working-class student emailed me to say how much they appreciated my focus on working-class histories. For them, it was validating for their current struggles to receive recognition and fair treatment as working-class and poor students at an elite college. It similarly was one of their first experiences meeting an academic telling history through working-class and poor individuals’ voices. This and similar experiences have reframed my work to more explicitly foreground working-class analyses of their experiences rather than fall back on “expert” scholarship that often imposes theoretical or empirical understandings onto people who were more focused on how they could survive daily

while imagining better living communities.

Scholarship of teaching and learning has also been a great influence on my work. Through the Residential College of Arts and Humanities, I received training in teaching while conducting my own research on best practices of teaching and learning. Mentorship from Joanna Bosse completely changed how I seek and perceive belonging in the academy. Her openness about her father being a car mechanic and her being a first-generation student finally made me feel connected. I recalled having to translate my auto-mechanic stepfather's writing from elementary-school level to academic language for university admin to take seriously. Reading bell hooks's work on teaching with love made me think more deeply about my own teaching but also the teaching of the figures in my study. Building community, especially via education, is and was a laborious process: intellectual labor but also emotional labor. Scholars discussing love in higher education helped me move through my insecurities of feeling like I needed to be a haughty scholar of high art to instead be myself as someone who loves working-class and poor people, as someone who wants to center the most vulnerable and excluded through their own narratives. So many scholars have spoken *for* those in their studies rather than *with* them.

Studying for a PhD has created a different set of alienations. Going back home to working-class and poor whites and Haudenosaunee Indigenous peoples in Salamanca, New York, I now am an outsider who left the community. I am an "elite" in many of their eyes because of my role in institutional academia. My studying and knowledge frequently are meaningless to them because I don't have the years of living in this space as an adult that they do. Switching between two worlds often feels exhausting. We often laud working-class and poor people for their resilience in going to college and graduate or professional studies. Not only must we assess the barriers that make that resilience necessary, but we also should assess the

continuation of that story that involves disconnect and difficult junctures in community. Bernard Gordon recalling how he connected with MoMA to borrow films for FSS screenings at CCNY but was made to feel an outsider because of his class and politics resonated with me in understanding the history of working-class and poor people moving between working-class and elite spaces.

The fact that working-class people had distinct, major influences on shaping film studies in the first half of the 20th century is not just historiographically significant. It perhaps has more seismic impact on how working-class students, teachers, and professionals see themselves presently and historically. This dissertation is dedicated to all working-class, poor, first-generation people—especially those interested in and participating in education, whether it is formal or informal. In universities/colleges or outside of them. For those who go to vocational school, who are brilliant in ways our society often doesn't capture but could not function without. It is often hard for working-class and poor people to even imagine themselves in educational spaces or find a sense of belonging within them. So, for those who have considered education or taken that leap into academic spaces, I hope this research brings you a similar sense of belonging and joy in learning history that it brought to me. I also hope it illuminates the diversity of learning experiences that can occur in any space at any time.

It is also true that I unapologetically find people like Kruse, Hurwitz, and Gordon inspiring—not only for their creativity in developing film education but also for their courage in imagining a more just US with rights to housing, employment, living wages, freedom from discrimination, and access to the arts and education. I proudly see this project as a reclamation of a lost history, one firmly rooted in communist community-building, collective action, and dreams for a better world. The amount of advice or critiques I have received without any

consideration of my learning differences has required exhausting emotional labor to shed imposed structures or ways of doing academic work to then build my own strategies that value my creativity and productivity. When I get bogged down in the traumas of navigating academia with disabilities or the frustrations of how academic training frequently stifles divergence, the figures in this study have propelled me forward to embrace creative impulses and realign with my values.

Truthfully, this dissertation almost went unfinished. Multiple COVID surges and mass death, fascist politics, global genocides, attacks on LGBTQ+ communities, skyrocketing costs of living, a mass shooting in the building I worked in daily while some of my students were barricaded in our classroom, family deaths, losing my soul dog, navigating abusive or toxic situations, and various other deep, emotional and physical difficulties weigh in on each page here. There are parts of writing that have been triggering, parts I had to sidestep for months before revisiting due to the environment or circumstances in which I originally wrote it. One of my main educational inspirations bell hooks claimed, “And there are writers who write because we need to make sense of the world we live in; writing is a way to clarify, to interpret, to reinvent... We communicate to connect, to know community.”⁹ Returning to this concept when feeling lost has been a source of energy forward. Rather than a solitary academic endeavor, this work is a community project that I hope has meaning beyond the thoughts in my head.

The toxic loop of academia also beat me down with the mindboggling realization that I spent most of my time around some of the most intellectually astute people who continued to overlook science, psychology, trauma, and empathy for the students and world around them. The idea that scholars could spend their whole careers studying oppression and teaching how humans

⁹ bell hooks, “Women Write Too Much,” *Remembered Rapture* (New York: Macmillan Publishers, 1999), 10.

have fought against oppression to then perpetuate oppression or act callously in daily life rattled me. Experiencing mass traumas and then being expected to compartmentalize emotions to remain productive is not only isolating, but cruel. I watched professors and administration coerce students into faking normalcy. I watched propaganda emerge from and spread within intellectual circles. I observed many academics saying progressive things yet acting conservatively. Or at times, I heard things that made me wonder why some academics would even work with students or, in some cases, why they have been allowed to. I was able to find beautiful relationships and experiences throughout my PhD. But to also understand why this dissertation is written as it is and why this emphasis on accessible, inclusive, and radical education has become so profound in the following pages and my own life, these darker sides are factors, too. But what has saved and grown my love for education are the chosen family, friends, and mentors; people and organizations in this study; and most of all, the brilliant, kind, empathetic, conscientious students and student-athletes I have interacted with. Their stories, humor, and determination keep me afloat on the toughest days. As the following pages hopefully accentuate, I believe most strongly in sustaining education for those who “don’t belong” and finding creative ways to support accessible, individualized, and collaborative studies.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

FPL	Film and Photo League
FSS	Film and Sprockets Society
FSR	Friends of Soviet Russia
WIR	Workers' International Relief
NYC	New York City
CCNY	City College of New York
CUNY	City University of New York
NS	New School for Social Research
NYU	New York University
HAPFS	Harry Alan Potamkin Film School
MoMA	Museum of Modern Art
NBR	National Board of Review of Motion Pictures

**INTRODUCTION:
“COLLEGE WAS NOT MADE FOR WORKING [PEOPLE]”**

*I told the pretty ‘professeur’:
“I come to school when the sweat
Of the night’s grind ain’t dried yet.
I work all night down at the shops
Rolling steel. I tell you, sir;
It’s hard as hell when the whistle stops
Our sweating—and the blinding steel
Has drained a man, and scorched his eyes
(till dawn shows only faded dyes)—
It’s hard—when the fires still reel
In a man’s brain, raw for sleep,
To key a mind for pedantry—and then
To snap back answers like I handle grates.”
The ‘professeur’ just smirked and said:
“You know, my man, a teacher hates
To hear excuses (hot steel splattering in my head)
And college was not made for working men.”¹⁰*

If college was not made for working people, how did American workers during the 1920s and 1930s receive and provide education? Many American workers in the interwar period—between World War I and World War II—gravitated toward labor organizing and radical cultural production for educational opportunities. One segment was those who invested in film as a labor organizing tool and revolutionary form of media. Film studies developed within communist labor movements of the 1920s-1930s with New York City as the epicenter of aesthetic, political, and educational projects. Participating in the activities they filmed while actively theorizing and historicizing new film developments created a culture of learning that fused everyday working-class experiences with avant-garde movements. Beyond an abstract notion of art for revolutionary change, film collectives and their members devised a culture of creating and studying modernist art for the sake of improving their individual lives and communities’ futures.

¹⁰ Don McKenzie, “Proletarian Student,” *The New Masses* (July 1930): 5.

Primarily in NYC, film was crucial to involving workers in the cultural participation of radical labor politics. Collectives created educational projects that contributed to the labor movement and shaped modernist cinema. Film, as a modernist or avant-garde art that could capture real people and events, could teach workers and fellow Americans ideas about the realities of workers' lives. It could simultaneously teach workers technical, artistic, and socio-political concepts, including those related to communism. It was not just film as an object that radical camera workers lauded, however. Film writing, print material, filmmaking, film exhibiting and distributing, and film schooling were all training centers where radical camera workers could express working-class identities, actively pursue social change, and build support for labor movements and film as a revolutionary artistic medium. Film activities functioned as "The workingman's [working person's] college" as an alternative route to higher education.¹¹ Although cultural critics and political leaders since about 1910 recognized film as a powerful educational tool for working people, the interwar period was characterized by workers taking ownership of film's value for their own lives. Rather than middle and upper-class progressives touting the arts and education as tools of moral uplift and social reform for lower classes to *consume*, workers in the 1920s and 1930s led their own cultural projects to make, share, and engage in artistic, intellectual, and political innovations. Workers were leaders in the advancement of avant-garde film culture in the US, as modern art was part of their everyday lives. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the Friends of Soviet Russia Motion Picture Department, Film and Photo League, and Film and Sprockets Society developed film education that was rooted in daily American working-class experiences.

¹¹ Jane Elliot Snow, 'The Workingman's College', *Moving Picture World* (Aug. 27, 1910), 458; Bill Marsh, "Visual Education in the United States and the 'Fly Pest' Campaign of 1910," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* vol. 20, no. 1 (March 2010): 21-36.

New York's local and international media circuits produced educational, political, and aesthetic opportunities for workers to create study programs tailored to workers' lives and needs. Members of film collectives were primarily working-class, Jewish, immigrant families who deeply understood that "college was not made for working men [people]."¹² For the "proletarian student," film and film collectives provided intellectual, political, and aesthetic education inaccessible elsewhere. But this was not just learning for learning's sake; film collectives engaged in educational projects that served multilayered purposes to advance labor rights, social-political justice, and avant-garde art. For leftist film and communist collectives in the interwar period, film education was one avenue to democratizing American society and revolutionizing class, racial, ethnic, and gender hierarchies. From exhibitions to journals to classes to productions, working people creatively built educational infrastructure for workers and other Americans. Film studies provided radical political training to learn about social issues affecting diverse workers—Jews, African Americans, women, immigrants, and native, white Americans. It also provided radical aesthetic training by showcasing the powerful ideas and impacts of documentary, newsreel, and fiction cinema.

Viewing this history through a lens of education allows opportunities to re-examine the relationships among workers, communism, film, modernism, and the avant-garde. While aligned with broader movements of the Communist Party of the United States, the international Comintern, Workers' International Relief, and modernist art movements, camera workers in New York in these film groups assembled their own versions of communist politics and aesthetics rooted in everyday experiences, particularly their New York, Jewish, and intellectual communities. By understanding their relationship to international institutions, they applied ideas

¹² McKenzie, "Proletarian Student," 5.

and practices to immediate New York issues—whether that was protesting Nazi films at Yorkville cinemas or developing films about City College of New York students.

What then does it mean to be an educated worker or a “proletarian student”? Why did some working-class Jews turn to communism, socialism, and leftism for political beliefs? And why did they believe film—in its modernist and documentary forms—and film education could spark revolution in the US to alleviate working Americans of hunger, poverty, homelessness, discrimination, and overall neglect or oppression? Many American and foreign workers in the 1920s and 1930s turned to creating educational systems that prioritized the complex, unique lives of working-class people.

Workers, like the one in Don McKenzie’s poem above, felt the weight of educational barriers in US cities. Restrictions were in legal forms, such as quotas limiting Jewish admits to universities and amounts of scholarships offered to Jewish students. Immigration status often compounded these challenges in addition to language barriers or nativist stigmas. Economic restrictions included costs of attendance, while the culture of labor limited workers’ ability to attend school due to long workdays of manual labor, immediate priorities of survival, and limited or nontraditional evening study hours compared to universities’ typical morning-afternoon schedules. Even when working people did make it into college, significant classism, antisemitism, and nativism made learning a challenge and often separated worlds of labor and education. But rather than succumb to life on the margins or pander to exclusive institutions, working people expanded “college” to the streets, to the cinema, to the midwestern farms, and more. Working people created cultural institutions designed for working people.¹³ While college

¹³ Workers’ schools proliferated in the 1920-1930s, partially in response to these exclusionary practices of adult higher education. Examples include the New York Workers’ School, Black Mountain College, and Rand School.

classrooms remained largely inaccessible to working-class and poor people between World War I and II, film served unique educational purposes to fill these gaps.

This introduction addresses several ideas and historical developments that underpin the study. First, it re-establishes links between the 1920s and 1930s through a radical film history and connections across film collectives. Second, it explains the centrality of New York for transnational, national, and local activities related to labor, workers' film, and modernism. Third, it frames relationships between communism, the left, and film—particularly modernist, avant-garde, and documentary film. Fourth, it explores the intellectual lives of working-class people as part of film collectives. Last, it explains interdisciplinary methodologies of this study.

Roaring Depression: Bridging the 1920s and 1930s

As this history could be organized in a variety of ways, it appears here as thematic chapters and subthemes rather than traveling chronologically through the 1920s to the 1930s. Chronological narration allows one to see the changes in workers' film activities from the early 1920s through the end of the 1930s with the emergence of the Popular Front and onset of World War II. However, this narrative is quite secure across cultural histories of the period. I found in this research that there was not much new to say about the change over time that other art and cultural histories have already covered superbly. Scholars such as Malte Hagener, Walter Kalaijdan, and Dickran Tashjian have analyzed the “interwar period” as one of great artistic and intellectual experimentation, especially in relation to American and global politics.¹⁴ What my

¹⁴ Russell Campbell and William Alexander focus on the FPL and its subsequent Nykino and Frontier Films. This study instead places the FPL projects within a lineage of radical film and educational activities before FPL's advent and the groups it inspired. See Russell Campbell, *Cinema Strikes Back: Radical Filmmaking in the United States 1930-1942* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Research Press, 1982); William Alexander, *Film on the Left: American Documentary Film from 1931 to 1942* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Dickran Tashjian, *A Boatload of Madmen: Surrealism and the American Avant-garde, 1920-1950* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995); Malte Hagener, *Moving Forward, Looking Back: The European Avant-Garde and the Invention of Film Culture, 1919-1939* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007).

research indicates is that while chronological developments did shape growth or slowing of certain activities, what is more pronounced is the continuity of various film activities across radical film collectives during the 1920s-1930s and their thoughtful curation of different information channels. Dumenil argues that continuities between the 1920s and 1930s transformed US society, culture, and politics. Even if 1929-1930 was a rupture, it was also more of a “logical consequence of the organization and complexity of a modern economy,” and I would add: of increasing resistance to that modern economy and capitalism.¹⁵ While exhibitions, schools, journals, film production, and political organizing shared goals of educating workers and Americans about both film and politics, each of these activities involved a distinct set of dynamics intended to advance the labor movement and film education.

Here, the histories of film, education, and communism guide the history of culture and politics in the 1920s and 1930s. While the Depression features significantly as a critical turning point in this study, focusing on the interwar period places American history in relationship to developments beyond the United States and its historiography. For example, the Soviet famine directly following the 1917 Revolution and related workers’ issues had considerable influence on American film collectives’ film projects in the 1920s, as did the Depression conditions in New York and European-American fascism in the 1930s. Therefore, the timeframe of this study deliberately places the American Great Depression and its influence on leftist film and labor in relation to the Russian Revolution and WWI. What this helps do is examine the rise of a “revolutionary generation” in America during the interwar period. Characterized by enthusiasm about radical transformation in the US, this generation was inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution

¹⁵ Lynn Dumenil, *The Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920s*. 1st ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 308-312.

in 1917 and carried this spirit through the 1930s.¹⁶ Members of this American revolutionary generation were typically young first or second-generation European or Russian immigrants, Jewish, and working-class. They were deeply invested in art and film as revolutionary, centering the power of art mediums to radically reshape and remake society, politics, and culture. Moreover, a key belief of this generation was that workers are intellectuals. Workers' education, with arts education as a cornerstone, was important to progress labor rights and global liberation of oppressed classes.

A common organizational link between the Friends of Soviet Russia, Film and Photo League, and Film and Sprockets Society is the Workers' International Relief. Centralized in Berlin, Germany, the WIR had branches scattered throughout Europe, Soviet territories, and the US. In the US, WIR headquarters began in New York City in 1921 to provide relief for Soviet families and workers affected by the *Povolzhye* famine and drought in the Volga and Ural regions. Workers' International Relief branches also helped Soviet territories rebuild after the Bolshevik Revolution and WWI. The Friends of Soviet Russia was the name of the US WIR branch. FSR headquarters moved to Chicago in late 1923, but maintained an active presence in New York City while the WIR remained centrally located in NYC. Max Eastman, Robert Minor, William Z. Foster are listed as members of the Advisory Committee in 1922. William F. Kruse was the first and only known Director of the Motion Picture Department for the FSR from its start in 1921 until 1926 when factional tensions in the CPUSA caused Kruse to disconnect from FSR due to his Lovestone affiliations. Kruse and FSR created at least five named multi-reel documentaries, along with several undescribed short newsreels and other films. In 1924, WIR

¹⁶ Matthias Neumann, "Youth, It's Your Turn!": Generations and The Fate of The Russian Revolution (1917-1932)," *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 46, no. 2 (Winter 2012): 273–304; Willian Beezley and Colin Maclachlan, *Mexicans in Revolution, 1910-1946: An Introduction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009).

created the *Mezhrabpom Russ* production company in the Soviet Union that coordinated and distributed with European and American companies and groups. FSR's pictorial division faded in the mid-1920s, the WIR continued to sponsor labor films, such as *Passaic Textile Strike* in 1926 and a film about Gastonia in 1929. These, however, were sporadic. The New York Camera Club was a small group connected with WIR that operated in the late 1920s. It had little success with film, as most emphasis was on photography. In the late 1920s, the WIR discussed projects to create a dedicated film unit in the US based in NYC.

In 1928-1929, more serious conversations amongst filmmakers involved in capturing the Passaic Textile Strike and Gastonia led to the formation of the Film and Photo League in New York.¹⁷ Sam Brody and Lester Balog were involved in these conversations because of their work on the aforementioned films, as were Brody and Harry Alan Potamkin for their participation in the Communist John Reed Clubs and their promotion of proletarian art.

As the Film and Photo League became formally established by 1930-1931 with the onset of the Great Depression, members designed and participated in a plethora of cultural activities that supported modernist approaches to documentaries and newsreels as revolutionary media. Beyond creating dozens of newsreels and short documentaries about workers' communities in the early 1930s, the FPL ran several film series at local theaters and the New School for Social Research. They also coordinated film exhibitions at union halls, schools, and workers' cultural centers while distributing films to other American cities and toured films in rural farming and mining districts. Members frequently wrote film histories, theories, and criticism in magazines and papers. Developing courses and schools for workers to learn film studies and gain access to

¹⁷ Sam Brody, video and audio interview with Judy Pomer and off-screen interjections by David Platt, Old Saybrook, Connecticut, 1987, <https://www.sambrody.com/interviews.html>. (hereafter cited as Brody, interview with Judy Pomer, 1987).

film equipment to experiment with film production featured as a regular activity as well. FSR had done similar activities in the early 1920s with their pictorial unit. The FPL, however, drew a larger membership and had more backing from national and international workers' groups given the immediate crisis of the Great Depression in the US. FSR had over two hundred branches throughout the US and at least forty organizing staff in New York. Involvement in its film projects, however, is unknown besides Kruse and other anonymous cameramen mentioned by Kruse in a 1926 article.¹⁸ While the FPL tallied national membership in the thousands with its multiple urban branches, in NYC its membership was larger than most with a couple hundred members. Even if not mighty in numbers, their steadfast dedication to radical social change and improving workers' daily lives made their small pockets of collaborative work even more intense and creative.

One group of constituents who became interested in FPL's and WIR's work around 1933-1934 was a couple City College of New York undergraduate students. As students in the Art Department at CCNY and coming from Jewish working-class families, Bernard Gordon and Julien Zimet attended FPL meetings regularly. They participated in FPL protests and educational activities, including seminars and workshops, at the headquarters. With no film courses available at CCNY, they found the FPL to be a study space where they could learn about film techniques, see latest films, and hear lectures from FPL members. Gordon and Zimet also enjoyed membership benefits, such as having access to shared film equipment at FPL headquarters—cameras, film stock, editing and cutting tools, projectors and screens, and darkrooms. So intrigued with the possibilities of film, Gordon and Zimet started the Film and Sprockets Society at CCNY in 1933-1934. Their film group gathered CCNY students interested in learning about

¹⁸ Tim Davenport, "Friends of Soviet Russia (1921-1930): Organizational History," *Marxist.org* (n.d.), <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/eam/other/fsr/fsr.html>.

and producing films. As the FSS grew in subsequent years, members regularly designed film series and single exhibition programs. In 1936-1938, especially, FSS leaders published pamphlets and exhibition programs for audiences to learn film history, theory, and techniques. They, too, worked on their own collaborative films throughout the 1930s to document CCNY student activities and provide members with opportunities to practice filmmaking with shared equipment borrowed and donated. While FSS was not as firmly tied to the WIR and explicitly communist as its FSR and FPL predecessors, Gordon and Zimet were members of CPUSA. FSS organized at CCNY, a college with a primarily working-class, Jewish, and leftist population of students and teachers during the 1930s. This informed many film exhibitions and production to have working-class and leftist themes—from showing Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* to highlighting working-class CCNY students’ activities in student organizations, athletics, political activities, and academic programs. Approaching this research by tracing developments across film collectives unveils previously unexplored intersections across groups, individuals, and movements.

International cinematic movements also shaped film history in the 1920s and 1930s. Film activities transformed alongside social and cultural upheavals in both decades. Modernist and avant-garde cinemas flourished during the interwar period in the US and Europe. Europe and the US became environments of experimentation in a moment when values, institutions, and borders were in flux.¹⁹ Comparatively, European art cinema developed more formal channels of

¹⁹ Méliès’s early experimentation with tricks, narrative, use of color, and strange sets and characters as part of what Tom Gunning calls the “cinema of attractions” became an inspiration for the interwar avant-garde. Brian Jacobson also shows how early filmmakers such as Melies, along with Edison and others, developed their own studios and exhibition spaces. Such practices of making independent institutions or spaces filtered into the avant-garde, as they often rejected the established cinematic networks. Fin-de-siècle little magazine movements across Europe and the United States also influenced interwar avant-garde practices with learning how to create literary cultures to support their art movements. For more information on early experimental cinema, see Brian R. Jacobson, *Studios Before the System: Architecture, Technology, And the Emergence of Cinematic Space* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

promoting art cinema than did the US. Experimentation with visual storytelling techniques in the 1920s included German Expressionism, French cinema vérité, Soviet Montage, and various documentary and news styles. European avant-gardes from the 1920s influenced American cinema, and the migration of filmmakers, such as F.W. Murnau and Fritz Lang, fleeing political unrest in Europe brought fresh perspectives to Hollywood in the 1920s and 1930s. While most US avant-garde movements were independent, larger institutions, such as the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures or Museum of Modern Art, also grew during this period. Horak also argues that American cinema did have a diverse avant-garde in 1919 through 1945—comprised of Hollywood experimentation and smaller radical independent film cultures.²⁰ American film collectives maintained cosmopolitan and experimental attitudes that were influenced by international avant-garde movements.

This, too, connects to the interplay between film studies and the labor movement. In the American film industry itself, labor organizing grew to better support film workers. Labor unions and workers became increasingly involved in collective bargaining and advocacy for fair working conditions as Hollywood studio systems grew to unprecedented power in the 1930s. MGM, Warner Bros., and Paramount dominated production, distribution, and exhibition.²¹ Film workers organized the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) and the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) to address the concerns of actors and film workers behind the

²⁰ Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage, 1976), 48; 64; Sir Herbert Tree, “The Worthy Cinema,” *New York Times* (Jan. 30, 1916): 8; Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture* (New York: Macmillan, 1915); Rudolph Arnheim, *Film as Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957) [1933]; Jacobson, *Studios Before the System*, 1-33.

²¹ Press itself became more diversified as images made more visible the labor movement, women, African Americans, and immigrant experiences. See Joshua Brown, *Beyond the Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded Age America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); William R. Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage, 2011), 43-46; Richard Abel, *The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900-1910* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

cameras. SAG, IATSE, among other smaller unions negotiated for better wages, working hours, and job security.²² New Deal policies in the 1930s, primarily The National Labor Relations Act of 1935 or Wagner Act, legislated the right to organize and collectively bargain, which influenced the growth of labor organizations in the arts. Labor unrest in the film industry during this period mirrored much of the labor unrest occurring in other industries, such as textiles, steel, railroads, and auto manufacturing.

New urban institutions also boomed during this period, including museums, libraries, artists associations, universities, and art cinemas. Progressive reformers and middle-class Americans became increasingly worried about leisure activities, including dance halls, parks, saloons, amusement parks, brothels, movies, and social clubs. In cities with proliferating local papers, advertising, and moviegoing, progressive reformers became increasingly wary about mass culture's effects on the public.²³ Genteel reformers found these spaces especially dangerous because of sexual interactions, immigrant and working-class participation, women and youth challenging respectability mores, and the general ability of more people to gather without controlled mediation.²⁴ Film also appealed to mass audiences through nickelodeons in working-

²² For additional information on film workers in Hollywood and the American film industry, see Dennis Broe, *Film Noir, American Workers, And Postwar Hollywood* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Mike Nielsen and Gene Mailes, *Hollywood's Other Blacklist: Union Struggles in The Studio System* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019); Steven J. Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998). For additional information on general labor histories during this period, see Reiner Tosstorff, *The Red International of Labour Unions (RILU) 1920–1937* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); Kim Moody, *American Workers, American Unions, 1920-1985* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Nelson Lichtenstein, *A Contest of Ideas: Capital, Politics, and Labor* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013); Robert M. Fogelson, *The Great Rent Wars: New York, 1917-1929* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); Bryan Palmer, *Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers' Strikes of 1934* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013); Toni Gilpin, *The Long Deep Grudge: A Story of Big Capital, Radical Labor, and Class War in the American Heartland* (New York: Routledge, 2007); David Bernstein, *The Lean Years: A History of the American Worker, 1920-1933* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Jacob A. Zumoff, *The Red Thread: The Passaic Textile Strike* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2021).

²³ Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Culture and the City: Philanthropy in Chicago from the 1880s to 1917* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1976), 205; Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 14. This period also witnessed a burgeoning of specialized museums, including natural history and art museums.

²⁴ Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

class and ethnic neighborhoods. Scholars such as Kasson, Peiss, and Leach have shown how working-class people increasingly mingled with other classes in city spaces.²⁵ Culture elites displayed a desire to control culture by managing audiences. Most fears about early mass media in the 1920s and 1930s were less about its standardization; they were mostly about its openings for democratic participation. Paula Fass, Lynn Dumenil, and Roderick Nash characterize the 1920s as an era of disruption—of social norms, cultural values, and political options. The 1930s carried this disruption forward. This marked an era of modernity that promised new pathways, which also sparked backlash from nativists, racists, and Americans fearful of social change. For example, Dumenil emphasizes that most unions in the 1920s were “conservative in tone” rather than militant.²⁶ Film collectives often avoided working with AFL-CIO groups or film industry unions for these reasons.

The democratization of culture and demographic shifts during the 1920s-1930s paired with the urban landscape provided the conditions for workers’ film activities to occur in NYC.²⁷ As much as cultural elites sought to regulate workers’ encounters with arts and education, many Americans leaned into experimentation and resistance. Ashcan School painters, for example, rejected much of what institutions and museums promoted as proper taste by depicting daily scenes of grungy urban life.²⁸ Sloan, Shinn, Bellows, and others believed artists should have direct experience with their subject. Viewing themselves as artist-reporters, they drew on print

²⁵ John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2011); Leach, *Land of Desire*, 12-15.

²⁶ Dumenil, *The Modern Temper*, 63; Paula Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Roderick Nash, *The Nervous Generation: American Thought, 1917-1930* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1990).

²⁷ Canonical texts in the European setting that shape how I assess this in the United States include Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 152-176; Carl Schorske, *Fin-De-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1980), 104.

²⁸ Ashcan School painters attended boxing matches and other events that they later painted. Rebecca Zurier, *Picturing the City: Urban Vision and the Ashcan School* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 243.

media and reporting tactics to capture the “facts” of daily life.²⁹ Film collectives expanded these rebellious aesthetics and politics in their documentaries and news productions. Americans during the interwar period attempted to make sense of their world after a devastating global war, revolutions, and rising conservative and fascist backlash to progressive change. Film collectives emerged in the thickets of such upheaval.

New York City: Transnational, National, Local

New York is perhaps a predictable choice for this study with its extensive cultural and political activity in the twentieth century, yet this city still has history to uncover. One reason for the focus on New York is because of the available, plentiful sources—many sources that still have not made their way into publications, presentations, or even processed areas of archives. Another chosen reason for focusing on New York is that it permits showing connections to other cities in the US as well as in Europe and the Soviet Union. New York was an international hub with vibrant immigrant, Jewish, and artistic populations.³⁰ New York City in the 1920s and 1930s stands as a focal point in the history of working-class film studies. New York City’s neighborhoods housed working-class communities from diverse ethnicities, cultures, and socio-

²⁹ Ibid., 5; Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 87.

³⁰ For more information on the history of immigrants, Jews, and cultural activity in New York, see Irwin Yellowitz, *Labor and the Progressive Movement in New York State, 1897-1916* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1965); R. Todd Laugen, *The Gospel of Progressivism: Moral Reform and Labor War in Colorado, 1900-1930* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2015); Christine Stansell, *New York Modern: The Arts and the City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Lawrence J. Epstein, *At the Edge of a Dream: The Story of Jewish Immigrants on New York’s Lower East Side: 1880–1920* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2007); Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005); *The Jewish Metropolis: New York City from the 17th to the 21st Century*, ed. Daniel Soyer (New York: Academic Press, 2021); Deborah Dash Moore, Jeffrey S. Gurock, Annie Polland, Howard B. Rock, Daniel Soyer, and Diana L. Linden, *Jewish New York: The Remarkable Story of a City and a People* (New York: NYU Press, 2017); Beth S. Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression: Uncertain Promise* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996); Jody Patterson, *Modernism for the Masses: Painters, Politics, and Public Murals in 1930s New York* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020); Helen Langa, *Radical Art: Printmaking and the Left in New York in the 1930s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Maria Cristina Fava, *Art Music Activism: Aesthetics and Politics in 1930s New York City* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2024).

economic backgrounds. The city also held various industries for workers to engage with as workers and consumers. New York City was a focal point of labor movements in the 1920s and 1930s as revolt against exploitation grew. Various industries, like the film industry, experienced strikes and protests that were often led by leftists and communists. Film collectives captured the spirit of labor activism in their works. They created a cinematic record of these historical struggles and educational opportunities for New Yorkers and other Americans to learn about these struggles. They showed images as they were happening to build immediate ideological and material support.

New York grew in the interwar period as a center of radical activity. In historian Tony Michels's phrase, "The Russian Revolution in New York" explains why New York is a critical center for this study.³¹ After the 1917 Russian Revolution, US labor organizations saw increasing value in foregrounding culture and arts, particularly film. Labor and artistic activities frequently crossed paths because groups were concentrated in Manhattan near one another. In her 2024 book *Art Music Activism: Aesthetics and Politics in 1930s New York City*, Maria Christina Fava discusses the provocative role of communist and leftist music and musical theater. She addresses how the Depression challenged many local theaters and composers. However, many who gravitated toward the left realized the potential of rethinking audiences and the purposes of music. She writes, "While the city's channels devoted to music and musical theater were in crisis, interest in radical politics and the growing importance of the labor movement intensified and offered composers new opportunities to bridge the gap with audiences and to write socially functional works."³² Fava focuses on federal and higher-level organizations only in the 1930s

³¹ Tony Michels, "The Russian Revolution in New York, 1917–19." *Journal of Contemporary History* vol. 52, no. 4 (2017): 959–79.

³² Fava, *Art Music Activism*, 2; 47. Fava unfortunately does not address the fascinating connections between theater and film during this period. Fava notes American comparisons to Soviet music collectives but does not explore the

rather than the grassroots projects and working-class-developed projects of this period, but her point stands that the crisis of the interwar period created space in New York for labor and radical politics to converge with modernist arts. The disillusionment with capitalism and exposure of American inequalities created desires for revitalization that communism and modernism in NYC offered to many. Moreover, “The common cause of artists and workers—the conception of the artist as useful and skilled laborer whose work was indispensable to a collective culture—was absolutely central to the art of the 1930s.”³³ Ideas about artists in New York during the interwar period magnified the radical artistic activity that occurred, as various artists groups collectivized for common social-political and cultural purposes.

From modern educational systems and infrastructures to growing film culture and places to share avant-garde arts, modernism flourished in New York. Arts education was prominent in New York dating back to the 1800s with several artists’ schools. More recently in 1910, the anarchist and socialist Modern School opened in New York before moving thirty miles away to Stelton, New Jersey in 1914. Harry Alan Potamkin engaged with the Ferrer Colony and studied their methods and approaches to education there. The Modern School focused on educating workers’ children and providing a breadth of subjects to study.³⁴ It is likely that Potamkin modeled his film education projects on similar ideas that drove the Modern School that made way into John Reed Clubs and Film and Photo Leagues. Educational growth and historic art schooling in the city also provided precedent for film collectives to establish experimental educational networks focused on training workers with working-class individuals as their

entangled histories of New York and Europe or Russia that created the foundations for immigration, Jewish culture, and working-class and social justice mentalities that contributed to ideas about arts as socially and politically powerful.

³³ Patterson, *Modernism for the Masses*, 11.

³⁴ Lousi Filler, “Play and Circumstance: A Reminiscence of Harry Alan Potamkin,” *The Midwest Journal* vol. 3 no. 2 (1951): 24-25.

teachers. Peter Wollen asserts that “New York is clearly the capital of the Co-op movement” in relation to the avant-garde in North America.³⁵ While focused in the 1970s, Wollen’s statement raises the idea about how New York became this capital, a question this project engages by examining 1920s-1930s film collectives. The activities of the interwar period in New York were instrumental in making the city a global center for art cinema, arts education, and political radicalism.

As a center of avant-garde culture, New York was teeming with little art cinemas throughout the 1920s and 1930s in addition to avant-garde art exhibitions and galleries, like Julian Levy or Edith Gregor Halpert’s galleries.³⁶ The definition of avant-garde I employ here builds on Adamson’s in *Embattled Avant-Gardes*. He notes his is a framework to understand “the set of practices that artists, individually or in groups, develop to challenge the ‘bourgeois’ institutionalization of art; to gain the attention of, and potentially expand, not only the audience for art but those who create it; to establish a greater presence for art within the public sphere...”³⁷ As Adamson explains, modernists who challenged commodification of art and fashioned their arts as political movements engaged in avant-garde practices, much like radical film collectives that positioned themselves against Hollywood and for-profit art industries. Malte Hagener’s “network of art” involved activities in and around filmmaking across systems that allows analyzing avant-garde film in its historical context within modernity and its own space and time as part of a broader film culture.³⁸ Avant-garde film was integral to a media network in

³⁵ Peter Wollen, “The Two Avant-Gardes,” *Studio International* vol. 190, no. 978 (Nov./Dec. 1974): 171-175.

³⁶ Lindsay Pollock, *The Girl with the Gallery: Edith Gregor Halpert and the Making of the Modern Art Market* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006).

³⁷ Walter Adamson, *Embattled Avant-Gardes: Modernism's Resistance to Commodity Culture in Europe* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), 17-18.

³⁸ Hagener, *Moving Forward, Looking Back*, 33.

the early twentieth century that experimented with technology, aesthetics, and values of arts. And film collectives were generative in contributing to avant-garde culture in New York and globally.

New York City served as a hub for intellectual and artistic networks where working-class filmmakers, intellectuals, and activists could collaborate and exchange ideas. The city's bohemian neighborhoods, such as Greenwich Village, became hubs for collective activity, as did areas surrounding the City College of New York and the Workers' International Relief headquarters. During the 1890s, the "little magazine movement" burgeoned in New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and Boston with new modernist forms and creative journalism. In the early nineteenth century, reading had already become more accessible to a greater number of Americans as literacy rates and presses increased.³⁹ Urbanization at the end of the century, however, opened new possibilities for artists and journalists to encounter new material to cover. New York's urban landscape of bustling streets, tenements, factories, and public spaces became integral elements of films. Places like Coney Island became recurring settings for Hollywood comedies and dramas as well as short documentaries or newsreel films. Cheap amusements became central to American consumption during this period, especially in New York.⁴⁰ Film collectives emerged amid growing mass, popular, and "uplift" cultures in New York. While places like Coney Island or Hollywood theater intended to inculcate certain national values amongst working-class attendees, film collectives taught participants to challenge the teachings of such spaces in New York.

³⁹ Isabelle Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page: Popular Print Media in Antebellum America*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 147; Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 192.

⁴⁰ William Leach, *Land of Desire*, 3; Kasson, *Amusing the Millions*, 26. Commercialization did not necessarily mean standardization or decline of democratic expression. Leach's concept "the cult of the new" binds various forms of modern American culture during the late nineteenth-early twentieth century: amusement parks, department stores, appliances, streetcars and automobiles, cinema, modern art, museums, schools, and advertising all employed techniques of shock value and innovation to draw audiences.

New York City represented new cultural and political possibilities for many Americans and immigrants. For leftists who sought new systems of living in the US, New York promised not just renewal or change, but radical restructuring of what both workers and modern arts could do. Revolutionaries involved in US film collectives primarily came from immigrant, socialist, Jewish, Eastern European, or Russian families. Many originally were born or settled in Philadelphia, Cleveland, Passaic, Davenport, Dayton, Denver, even California and Canada before ending up in New York City together. The culture of New York was such that film collectives benefited from a diverse mixture of foreign and US cultures that allowed groups to relate to and capture a variety of workers' perspectives. Extending from the East to West coast and from the Europe to the Soviet Union, movements of not just films, but ideas, people, and politics made these film collectives possible. Film, film equipment, magazines, and other materials flowed in and out of spaces. The diversification of media at the beginning of the twentieth century opened worlds of cultural production, while diversified content and target audiences made it possible for leftists interested in film to tap into these already growing knowledge and art networks to forge a specialized network of leftist working-class art and education.

In 1931, an author in a modernist little magazine *The Creative Arts* described this view of possibility: "New York is a city that progressively strips off her architectural [artistic] past as she grows. She does not pile the new on the old, as ancient cities did that buried their dead past. Rather, in placing the foundations of the new, our city digs through the old and utterly destroys it."⁴¹ The radical transformative spirit that many artists and workers identified in NYC, along with its bustling communist and modernist movements, presented film collectives with

⁴¹ H.L. Brock, "New York Today," *Creative Art* (Aug. 1931), 111.

inspiration to remake their local neighborhoods for working-class, Jewish, and immigrant Americans.

Zooming into this New York City space identifies the close-knit relationships within and around these collectives. As expansive as New York ties were, all locations within New York were in a ten-to-forty-minute walk of each other. Film organizations and their members were an integrated network in the radical artistic and intellectual scene as well as Russian immigrant, Jewish, and working-class neighborhoods.⁴² Their film knowledge and cultural production, however, always remained international and national in scope. Film collectives' members were attuned to economic, political, and cultural shifts occurring in their localities in relation to those in the Soviet Union and Europe. This offers an analysis of the interconnectedness of Modern US, European, and Soviet History through the lens of New York City film collectives during the 1920s-1930s. It also allows for a bottom-up approach to analyze film collectives' activities to build film studies "from below." Utilizing archives, oral histories, and films to reconstruct the history of film collectives during the 1920s-1930s all contribute to learning more about the impact of film education on individuals' lives and their motivations for participating. Methodologically, this helps to move away from relying on Depression-to-Blacklist narratives to instead follow the experiences of people involved in these collectives.

Communism, the Left, and Film

American communism's evolution in the United States frames this study by tracing it through film collectives tied to the Communist Party of the United States. Members of FSR, FPL, and FSS idolized Russia's transformation. Many like Leo Hurwitz and Bernard Gordon joined because the Communist Party was the only group doing work on a national and

⁴² Gergely Baics, Wright Kennedy, Rebecca Kobrin, Laura Kurgan, Leah Meisterlin, Dan Miller, Mae Ngai, *Mapping Historical New York: A Digital Atlas* (New York: Columbia University. 2021), <https://mappinghny.com>.

international scale to help workers, farmers, unemployed, evicted, and poor people.⁴³ CPUSA also supported and led several efforts to combat racism, antisemitism, nativism, and sexism throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Gordon, Hurwitz, and Leo Seltzer experienced unemployment and food insecurity themselves that drove them to participating in communist efforts. They, along with many film members, also witnessed daily struggles and discrimination in their neighborhoods as kids into adulthood. Such experiences informed the films groups made—such as FSR’s about relief for Soviet famine victims or FPL’s about the Scottsboro Boys—and their works aided the broader communist movements by supplying valuable information. International connections are important, but not without losing sight of the local, national choices that characterized film activities in New York City. Even if connected to the CPUSA, members’ choices to document Harlem or dock workers relied on filmmakers’ proximity and relationship to the areas and workers there.

Film was part of a matrix of radical cultural production tied to labor movements in the 1920s-1930s. Marxist workers’ groups in the US like John Reed Clubs, American Artists’ Union, and those focused on dance, theater, painting, and similar arts challenged traditionally elite and regimented arts production, exhibition, and instruction. They ultimately questioned the entire purpose of art to argue for its value as a social-political force that, through collective study and experimentation, could help liberate working-class people globally. The foremost concern of leftist art during the interwar period was that art should represent and influence American social-political life. A turn away from the apolitical *l’art pour l’art* of elite aesthetes precipitated the slogans “art for society’s sake” and “art as a weapon” as artist moved beyond the cultural

⁴³ Bernard Gordon, *The Gordon File: A Screenwriter Recalls Twenty Years of FBI Surveillance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 5-12; Leo Hurwitz, “The Last Interview,” interviewed by Tom Hurwitz and Ellen Fryer with audio and video, Reel 5, New York, NY, 1990, <https://leohurwitz.com/interview/hurwitzs-last-interview/>.

sphere.⁴⁴ Describing his ambition to create useful, fulfilling art, Social Surrealist Walter Quirt stated, “I hate painting just for the sake of painting.”⁴⁵ Quirt’s brash statement exemplifies artists’ sentiments and his own determination to have his art works radiate meaning and agitate social change. Social Realist painter Jack Levine expressed a widespread feeling among leftist artists during the 1930s: “[W]e had a feeling of confidence about our ability to do something about the world.”⁴⁶ These artists recognized the social power of art and its ability to affect both the individual and collective consciousness of viewers if executed properly.

Film collectives adopted and expanded these ideas to “film as a weapon.” Sam Brody, who worked on WIR films in the mid-1920s and helped found the John Reed Clubs and FPL, noted in 1930 that Hollywood and bourgeois media used movies to reinforce capitalism and harm working classes. This occurred through negative, antisemitic, and degrading images of workers as well as pro-capitalist and anti-labor messages, Brody argued. In a 1977 interview with radical media outlet *Jumpcut Magazine*, Brody rearticulated this by stating FPL and aligned cultural organizations embraced the slogan, “The camera as a weapon in the class-struggle!”⁴⁷ Instilling film with Marxist goals allowed leftist film collectives to craft a definition of film’s propaganda potential as dialectical—with Hollywood, capitalist industry on one end and independent workers’ communist cinema on the other end.

Beyond social realist styles as implemented by the Soviet Union and various communist organizations, film collectives in the US embraced avant-garde styles. Film collectives fused modernist practices to create avant-garde documentaries and newsreels that bend genres. As

⁴⁴ Henry Geldzahler, *American Painting in the 20th Century* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1965), 112.

⁴⁵ Walter Quirt qtd. in Roberts M. Coates, *Walter Quirt* (New York: The American Federation of Arts, 1960), 11.

⁴⁶ Jack Levine qtd. in Geldzahler, *American Painting in the 20th Century*, 112.

⁴⁷ Samuel Brody, “The Camera as a Weapon in the Class Struggle” transcribed interview with Tony Safford, *Jump Cut*, no. 14 (1977): 28-30; Samuel Brody (SB), “The Movies as a Weapon Against the Working Class,” *Daily Worker* (May 20, 1930): 4.

Hagener notes, the avant-garde “rebelled against prior historical styles, against the traditional networks and institutions of the art system; it attempted to do away with everything that came before it... [it was] a rebellion against the past.”⁴⁸ It is true that the avant-garde did rebel against bourgeois tradition; however, as historian Kaveh Askari shows, it did not entirely reject the past. The avant-garde, and art cinema more generally, drew on previous art forms, institutions, and ideas. Leftist avant-garde movements engaged with the past to present alternative ways of living and to preserve their own working-class histories.

Combining politics with aesthetics often resulted in experimentalism that subverted both cultural traditions and established social-political orders. Art Historian Edward Lucie-Smith categorized the 1930s as “The Age of Anxiety” in the arts because of the uneasy relationships between artists and their societies. For communists and others on the left, avant-gardism also presented challenges reconciling revolutionary art as a means of working-class and egalitarian change compared to avant-garde art’s use as a fascist political tool to promote violence, speed, and elite capitalism. Conservative strains of modernism were important in shaping ideas about art cinema. In viewing much of the avant-garde as rowdy and overly political, conservative modernists attempted to fashion a “respectable avant-garde.” Lisa Cartwright argues that a right-wing film-art movement emerged with James Sibley Watson, Jr., and Melville Webber in the US.⁴⁹ The “right-wing of art cinema” often claimed film should be apolitical, which engaged in age-old debates about whether any art should engage in the political sphere or remain “art for

⁴⁸ Hagener, *Moving Forward, Looking Back*, 11-12. Kaveh Askari, *Making Movies into Art: Picture Craft from the Magic Lantern to Early Hollywood* (London: British Film Institute, 2014), 5-12.

⁴⁹ For additional information on right-wing and fascist film modernities in the US and Europe, see Lisa Cartwright, “U.S. Modernism and The Emergence Of “The Right Wing of Film Art”: The Films of James Sibley Watson, Jr., And Melville Webber” In *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde, 1919-1945*, ed. Jan-Christopher Horak (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998): 156-179; Michael Cowan, *Walter Ruttmann and the Cinema of Multiplicity: Avant-Garde -Advertising -Modernity* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014); Walter Adamson, *Avant-Garde Florence: From Modernism to Fascism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

art's sake." Despite some attempts to create "film for film's sake," even conservatives made political statements with film and the very notion of the modernist as rebelling against traditional modes had politics at its core.⁵⁰ Lucie-Smith in 1985 reminded contemporary scholars studying this period to recall these complicated aesthetic-political relationships. He writes,

It has been conveniently forgotten that the political radicalism which attracted many modern artists in the years before 1914 was the radicalism of the right. Marinetti and his followers were typical examples of this, and so were the majority of the English Vorticists. It was the Russian Revolution of 1917, and the political convulsions that took place in defeated Germany immediately after World War I, that tended to cement the alliance between the avant-garde and the left.⁵¹

It is therefore important that when studying avant-garde film of the 1920s-1930s that it is not assumed film and the left were natural partners. But what it also helps us better understand is why members and organizers of film collectives were so persistent in solidifying the relationship between their film activities and Marxist principles. Their involvement in modernist art at a moment when definitions of modern and avant-garde were in flux allowed them to create their own definitions of avant-garde film that represented their ideas and actions as leftists.

The history of the European, Soviet, and American left is also essential to explaining developments of art cinema and the avant-garde across these spaces. Avant-garde movements such as Surrealism and Soviet montage cinema often aligned themselves with Marxist philosophies. In the US, leftist groups led several journals that routinely covered "proletarian" art and film, such as *FilmFront*, *New Masses*, *New Theater*, and *Daily Worker*. Many European filmmakers and writers contributed frequently to these as well and the journals reported mostly on Soviet films as the symbols of art cinema, especially Eisenstein and Pudovkin..⁵² Perhaps the

⁵⁰ For general texts on fascist and conservative modernism, see Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 24; 100; Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 4-10.

⁵¹ Edward Lucie-Smith, *Art of the 1930s: The Age of Anxiety* (New York: Rizzoli, 1985), 10-11.

⁵² Chris Rob  , *Left of Hollywood: Cinema, Modernism, and the Emergence of US Film Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 42-47; 192; Sklar, *Movie Made America*, 2. Despite attention to labor's relationship to art

most basic definition of the avant-garde documentaries and newsreels is to see “art as laboratory” in which these artists experimented with new ways of making film, showing it, studying it, and preserving it.⁵³ Inspired by Dziga Vertov’s ideas about “film laboratories” and creative factual representation, American film collectives crafted their own versions in the US. Hurwitz often referred to avant-garde film in relation to “freedom” and “truth.”⁵⁴ But Hurwitz, nor his comrades, understood this as “pure” truth without deliberate and creative assemblage of images and ideas. This is precisely where the experimental impulse found its stride. Workers learned from abstract movements like surrealism, narrative structures of montage, and realism of documentaries and newsreels. As Bill Nichols has argued the partnership of modernism and documentary was stronger than separate, this project engages this argument to describe film collectives’ works as an avant-garde documentary style.⁵⁵ As such, a goal of the following pages is to provoke new ways of reading film genres as it relates to communist and leftist film groups—to move beyond documentary, social realism, and modernism as separate styles to see instead the hybridity for these groups.

cinema, one aspect of these institutions that has received little attention is the history of movie workers, or those who worked for cinemas. These were people who collected money, gave tickets, serviced food and drink, and surveyed theaters to keep everything running. Yet, they are completely invisible to film history. Sklar mentions movie workers as part of the infrastructure that developed American film culture but does not discuss them in depth.⁵³ Hagener, *Moving Forward, Looking Back*, 13. Some scholars, such as P. Adams Sitney, emphasize the avant-garde’s break from traditional narrative structures and its commitment to challenging the norms of filmmaking. Others, like David James, argue that avant-garde cinema should be understood in relation to broader cultural and artistic movements, emphasizing its connection to modernism and other avant-garde arts. Kristin Thompson argues that modernist cinema is influenced by, and influences, larger modernist movements in literature, visual arts, and philosophy. Critics like Peter Wollen suggest that modernism in cinema is rooted in responses to the cultural upheavals of the early 20th century. Historical events, technological advancements, and societal changes shape modernist techniques. Also see *The Emergence of Film Culture: Knowledge Production, Institution Building, and the Fate of the Avant-Garde in Europe, 1919-1945*, ed. Malte Hagener (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014).

⁵⁴ Leo Hurwitz, “The Last Interview,” interviewed by Tom Hurwitz and Ellen Fryer with audio and video, Reel 6, New York, NY, 1990. <https://leohurwitz.com/interview/hurwitzs-last-interview/>. (hereafter cited as Hurwitz, “The Last Interview,” Reel #, 1990).

⁵⁵ Bill Nichols, “Documentary Film and the Modernist Avant-Garde,” *Critical Inquiry* vol. 27 (2001): 580 - 610.

Another element of this approach to writing a communist cultural history is trying to avoid fixating on members and groups as “blacklist victim[s].”⁵⁶ Shadows of collectives’ collapse, financial ruin, political compromise, and victimhood during the Cold War often cloud images of 1920s-1930s activities with somber failure.⁵⁷ Poet and friend of Leo Hurwitz Vijay Seshadri provides an apt metaphor: Scholars should be careful of “tripping over the epistemological uncertainties of the blacklist era—an era that resembles a crime scene rendered unintelligible not only by the impassioned struggles of those involved but also by a long procession of tourists who have trampled through the police tape, obscured the places where the bodies fell, and made souvenirs of the material evidence.”⁵⁸ Historian Paul Buhle has also made this argument, which is why his work focuses on oral histories and documents from radicals themselves.

Radicals’ suffering should not be ignored or minimized. William Kruse was tried and convicted in 1918-1919 for his anti-WWI stance and Socialist leadership after the Department of Justice charged him and several others of violating the Espionage Act. Kruse’s “Palmer Raid” treatment mirrored what happened to those of *The Masses* group, including John Reed. In the 1940s-1950s, Hurwitz, Gordon, and other FPL and FSS members faced extensive FBI surveillance with pages of government documentation that eventually resulted in their Blacklisting. Government repression destroyed careers and left lasting trauma as part of many radicals’ lives.

⁵⁶ Seshadri Vijay, “Which Side Are You On, Boys?” *The American Scholar* vol. 70, no. 2 (2001): 50.

⁵⁷ Scholars William Alexander, Russel Campbell, Chris Robé, Barnaby Haran, Michael Denning, and select others have avoided “tripping over” the blacklist as a framing for writing a history of radical cultural activity. Alexander, *Film on the Left*; Campbell, *Cinema Strikes Back*; Robé, *Left of Hollywood*; Barnaby Haran, *Watching the Red Dawn: The American Avant-Garde and the Soviet Union* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016); Denning, *The Cultural Front*; Francis Booth, *Comrades in Art: Revolutionary Art in America 1926-1938* (New York: Independently Published, Lulu.com, 2017).

⁵⁸ Vijay, “Which Side are You on, Boys?” 50.

But while many works cover this history of repression, very few focus on the lively, varied ways film provided an avenue to practice creativity and freedom while circumventing exclusionary institutions and systems. Communism is often treated as a teleological history, characterized as ending in misery. Instead of the 1920s-1930s as a period that concluded with vibrant left-wing workers' hope and creativity collapsing, here I focus on the persistence of their values and work even when forced to reshape their work and ideas throughout repression. Bringing to life the hope and creativity film collectives harnessed offers a lens to view this period as one of immense possibility and imagination—one that honors the ways various figures in this study remembered their activities during the 1920s-1930s and the evidence left behind.

Willard Van Dyke of FPL, for example, reflected on his experiences in the late 1920s and throughout the Depression as a series of experiences that facilitated community and solidarity. During an interview in 1973, he stated,

You know I think one of the things that must be extremely difficult for anyone who didn't live through them is to understand the spirit that the artists had during the thirties [...] there was a great sense of togetherness, a great sense of everybody in the same soup and willing to help anybody else out. It must be much the same as a commune today [...] it was a time of suffering but also a time I'm very grateful for having lived through; it was very stirring and very important. The friendships that you made there, are for a lifetime...⁵⁹

While being embroiled in political intensity and economic hardship, to do the work these folks did required an immense dedication to social justice and hope. It additionally involved a deep love for humanity and its potential to create systems of equality, inclusion, and creativity. And to still remember those activities fondly after the damage caused by anti-radicalism in the US is not a small feat. A reason this project focuses on collectivity and community is because the people

⁵⁹ Willard Van Dyke, audio and transcribed interview with James Blue, New York, NY, August 2, 1973, K223, Thomas Brandon Collection, Film Study Center, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY (hereafter cited as Van Dyke, Thomas Brandon Collection, 1973); Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* (New York: Verso Books, 2020).

who joined film collectives sought community as a survival mechanism, but also a political and cultural strategy to collectivize artists, workers, and intellectuals for the sake of social transformation and aesthetic experimentation. The trifecta of education, film, and labor offered distinct opportunities to build community as much as it offered creative ways to expose both oppression and hope.⁶⁰

I do not intend to glorify this era of crisis, nor do I desire to assert that communist film collectives were utopias of undivided, homogeneous tranquility. Great suffering occurred from police brutality to poverty to censorship. Schisms emerged within groups and clashes characterized some individuals' relationships or even certain groups' perceptions of one another. William F. Kruse was a Lovestone supporter in the factional split of communist groups in the 1920s. By 1929, he had been expelled from the Communist Party and although he continued peripherally in these circles for several decades, Kruse largely exited the world of communist and left-wing workers' politics to focus on Bell and Howell film technology and instructional film. Nykino splitting from the Film and Photo League around 1934 is a crucial example of how documentary modernism and labor politics could divide members just as easily as they could unite them. As Leo Hurwitz, Paul Strand, and others sought more opportunities to shoot political dramas and fictionalized representations of labor and antifascist themes, original FPL members maintained a hardline theory and practice of documentary realism and factual newsreels. Sam Brody, for example, became an outspoken critic of Nykino and later Frontier Film's efforts to

⁶⁰ This framework is inspired by pedagogies of hope, love, and learning and unlearning while entangled in oppression. See Ira Shor and Paulo Freire, *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education* (New York: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1987); Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: 30th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000); bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Kristin Comeforo and Mala L. Matacin, *Bell Hooks' Engaged Pedagogy for the 21st Century Classroom: Radical Spaces of Possibility* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023); bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

create satirical shorts and feature films.⁶¹ There were also moments when Bernard Gordon, who began the Film and Sprockets Society at CCNY, questioned the political strategies of the FPL or felt coerced into their political actions in order to access filmmaking equipment and education.⁶² Moreover, it is true that some turned on one another during WWII and throughout the 1950s to distance themselves from communism and their previous radical communities.

Nevertheless, as Seshadri and Van Dyke emphasizes, focusing on the suffering and divisions of communism and the Depression can obfuscate the drives to create and sustain community while working toward shared goals, even if strategies or beliefs differed. This line of analysis also helps to challenge the recurrent proposition that these collectives failed and vanished. While financial issues, political shifts, and aesthetic arguments contributed to widespread challenges in each collective, this did not inevitably spell the end for their projects. In this study, it becomes clearer how a revival, extension, or reinterpretation of working-class film, education, and politics occurred multiple times between the Bolshevik 1917 Revolution and the beginning of World War II. Even if the Friends of Soviet Russia, Film and Photo League, Film and Sprockets Society, and others collapsed as independent groups, analyzing them together challenges the notion of their demise. While conducting her own research on American activists, oral historian Lana Dee Povitz remarked that “American Communism was foremost an education, a training, a springboard into a lifetime of grassroots organizing.”⁶³ Film collective members engaged communism as a mode of learning, which often led to lifetimes of dedicated activism based on egalitarian principles. Rather than seeing these groups as destroyed,

⁶¹ Brody, interview with Judy Pomer, 1987.

⁶² Bernard Gordon, *Hollywood in Exile, or How I Learned to Love the Blacklist* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 3-32.

⁶³ Lana Dee Povitz, “Warm Distance: Grappling with Vivian Gornick’s *The Romance of American Communism*,” *The Oral History Review* vol. 48, no. 2 (2021): 180–95.

highlighting their shared visions and responses to crises during their respective moments through film educational projects invites us to remember the creativity and hope these groups embraced to transform American culture, social relations, and labor politics.

“Quotidian Intellectuals”

While this study examines the big, sometimes abstract, ideas of film collectives regarding communism, modernism, and revolution, it does so by looking at the daily activities and thoughts of working-class members. Borrowing from Tiffany Florvil’s *Mobilizing Black Germany*, I regard members of film collectives as “quotidian intellectuals.” Florvil’s version refers to ordinary Black Germans “who thought, theorized, wrote, performed, and circulated their ideas” in a variety of modern mediums. They “imparted knowledge” while using everyday experiences to “destabilize the power of dominant knowledge and representation.”⁶⁴ Members of film collectives engaged in similar activities to construct communities of radical culture that could fuse dense intellectual ideas with ordinary working experiences. Their art was “agitational and educational” with “participatory, amateur, and folk qualities.”⁶⁵ Tobias Higbie has described an approach to examining the history of “working-class intellectual life” and Jonathan Rose as studying “the intellectual life of the working-class.”⁶⁶ This study builds on their frameworks to center film in the intellectual and political lives of working-class people—mainly young Jews and immigrants—in New York City. Film collectives’ members’ intellectual lives were rooted in shared experiences. As intellectuals and artists at the grassroots, they developed concepts of modernism and communism that reflected and helped make sense of their daily lives.

⁶⁴ Tiffany Florvil, *Mobilizing Black Germany: Afro-German Women and the Making of a Transnational Movement* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2020), 6-7; 55.

⁶⁵ Fava, *Art Music Activism*, 42-43; 24. The Composers’ Collective of New York organized in 1932 and engaged music as a pedagogical instrument to form “proletarian music.”

⁶⁶ Tobias Higbie, *Labor’s Mind: A History of Working-Class Intellectual Life* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019); Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001). These texts have majorly shaped my approach to charting working-class educational and intellectual life.

Their intellectualism rarely originated from university lectures or classic texts, but rather from their daily interactions with media and relationships to one another. As Hurwitz reflected on his experiences in the Film and Photo League, he stated, “We believed talking together would help us learn and grow.”⁶⁷ Though a simple statement, Hurwitz provides a complex view of how collectives operated as collaborative units invested in ordinary experiences. Vivian Gornick emphasizes the “ordinariness” of communists’ daily activities: “For thousands of Communists, being a Communist meant years of selling the *Daily Worker*; running off mimeographed leaflets, speaking on streetcorners, canvassing door-to-door for local and national votes, organizing neighborhood groups for tenants’ rights or welfare rights or unemployment benefits, raising money for the Party or for legal defenses or bail bonds or union struggles.”⁶⁸ This project is about the radicals who captured these activities—the ordinary daily lives and the extraordinary mass demonstrations.

Members of film collectives enjoyed studying and producing film. It was at once a rigorous intellectual pursuit, a job, and a leisurely activity. Rethinking the distinctions between labor, leisure, and education presents what I refer to here as “working-class film studies.” Centering independent organizations that participated in creating film education, I emphasize contributions by Jews, first-or-second- generation immigrants, and working people in New York City. In the introduction to Jacques Rancière’s *Nights of Labor*, Donald Reid purports that “The true threat to the existing order comes when the cultural event challenges the boundaries between labor and leisure, producer and consumer, worker and bourgeois.”⁶⁹ Armed with “the dream of another kind of work,” film collectives challenged these exact boundaries to contest educational,

⁶⁷ Marita Sturken, “A Profile of Leo Hurwitz: For Every Film There is a Season,” *The Independent* (1982): 11.

⁶⁸ Vivian Gornick, *The Romance of American Communism* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 110.

⁶⁹ Donald Reid in Jacques Rancière, *Nights of Labour/Proletarian Nights: The Workers’ Dream in Nineteenth-Century France* (London: Verso Books, 2012), xxviii.

political, and artistic hierarchies.⁷⁰ Scholars Haidee Wasson, Lee Grieveson, Charles Acland, and Dana Polan have written about the development of film studies in the US, primarily emerging courses at Columbia University and other elite universities, or institutional histories of film study and libraries at the Museum of Modern Art.⁷¹ Tobias Higbie's *Labor's Mind* analyzes working-class intellectual life to showcase the diverse, vibrant learning activities of workers and their families. While scholars discuss working-class press foremost with painting, music, literature as well, "working-class film studies" receives much less attention. Scholarship on labor films tends to focus on depictions of laborers or fiction films about labor. Sometimes studies discuss workers in the film industry, such as screenwriters, equipment technicians, and set designers. But here the phrase "working-class film studies" means to capture both my writing of this film history from workers' perspectives and the construction of film education by and for working people during this period. Working-class film studies consisted of workers creating courses, schools, and production training that provided accessible learning opportunities for workers to grow intellectually, artistically, and politically.

To understand "working-class film studies," as that presented here, requires zooming our camera lens out from the lecture halls to reframe the shot to include streets, workplaces, homes, union halls, film clubs, members' meetings, cinemas, journals, daily social interactions, and other areas. Experiential learning often drove the ambitions of folks to pursue film activities, leftist politics, and avant-garde art. Radical cinema was central to developing film education in the US rather than peripheral.⁷² Into the twentieth century, intellectuals increasingly met their publics

⁷⁰ Rancière, *Nights of Labour*, 8.

⁷¹ Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); *Inventing Film Studies*, ed. Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson (Duke University Press, 2008); *Useful Cinema*, ed. Charles R. Acland and Haidee Wasson (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2011); Dana Polan, *Scenes of Instruction: The Beginnings of the U.S. Study of Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Tobias Higbie, *Labor's Mind*.

⁷² Urbanization and industrialization reshaped the relationship between intellectuals and the public throughout the

through mass cultural forms. During the Russian Revolution, theater, science fiction, and parades were sites of popular entertainment but also edification.⁷³ Movies, radio, and television became new contested terrains of knowledge production and consumption. As the public became more diverse and participatory, intellectuals' didactic authority came under threat, making many anxious about their positions in society.⁷⁴ This led to many intellectuals with power dominating narratives about who in society creates ideas and have been integral to historical development.

While scholars often study working people as subjects of films, scholars rarely highlight them as producers of films or intellectuals of film. One reason is because scholars have traditionally focused on intellectuals as unique individuals or distinct schools of thought. In intellectual and cultural history before the 1990s, historians trended toward analyzing a few key elite thinkers. Either the masses had no interest or ability to comprehend abstract ideas or they were easily manipulated by elite propaganda through institutions like schools and media.⁷⁵ By the 1980s-90s with the rise in social history, combined with the turn toward everyday culture and ordinary people, studies on mass culture became more prominent.⁷⁶ Film collectives participated in dynamic streams of collaborative thought—from Party organizations to their core friends. Though film collective members were not professionally educated, they were highly motivated to train themselves and each other. Self-study and collective study allowed these workers to become both trained and skilled, equipped with knowledge and practices to educate others.

19th century. Much of this culminated in the 1890s with critical changes in mass culture and burgeoning cities across Europe and the US.

⁷³ Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 5-12.

⁷⁴ Stuart H. Hughes, *Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought, 1890-1930* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 407; Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (New York: Norton, 1961), 26.

⁷⁵ John Mackenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion, 1880-1960* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 25.

⁷⁶ John Phillip Short, *Magic Lantern Empire: Colonialism and Society in Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 1-12. Masses' public opinion thus became more central to intellectuals' conception of culture, as the masses also engaged more in politics.

Members' intellectual lives were collaborative in essence. Workers created shared histories in real time as they coordinated with each other to make sense of their worlds and conceive of solutions to society's inequalities. Their persistence in documenting their own activities and placing them within American and global cinema history is key to how we even have archives and ways of analyzing the history of film during the 1920s and 1930s. But one of the more remarkable aspects of people like Lewis Jacobs or Leo Hurwitz or William Kruse is that they created or pursued film as working-class individuals without constant desire to justify their status as workers and intellectuals.⁷⁷ That they were part of collectives that already recognized them as artists and educators meant they had space to explore film alongside political and intellectual ideas. Resisting the capitalist and elitist urge to bifurcate higher learning and shop floors, folks in these collectives consistently reflected on their educational journeys in connection with their jobs, cinemagoing, political demonstrations, daily engagement with media, people they saw in their neighborhoods, and more.

Practices of collaborative intellectual, artistic, and political activities is why this study labels groups in this era in the US as "collectives," as opposed to interwar cine-clubs, film societies, or film clubs. Part of this choice stems from "collective action" as a term and practice aligned with the labor movement historically. Collectively theorizing experiential knowledge was a way to build solidarity and make meaning of social issues. A large part of intellectual activity for workers occurred in their workplaces, around the city, and in labor actions. For example, the 1913 Patterson, New Jersey strike influenced revolutionary artist and journalist

⁷⁷ James Rosenow, "Forming an American Modernism: The Rise of the Experimental Filmmaker 1927-1939," PhD diss. (University of Chicago, 2018), 12-20. It is also a reminder that so much valuable scholarship exists outside of university walls. Just because many are not permitted or accepted inside these walls does not mean their intellectual or artistic abilities, accomplishments, or aspirations are any less exceptional. Film scholar James Rosenow has written about the important ways those in the Film and Photo League embraced or rejected self-descriptors such as "amateur" or "professional."

John Reed based on his own participation and observation of the demonstrations. At these protests, “He learned for himself the things books and talk could not teach.”⁷⁸ Reed also notably witnessed the Russian Revolution in 1917. Stites positions the culture and politics of the Russian Revolution as “laboratory of revolution” that mobilized utopian ideas into “experiments in the remaking of culture and everyday life.”⁷⁹ Revolutionaries attempted to build “ideal society” defined by “human liberation” as a utopian future-focused project. This experience radically transformed Reed’s activism and the strategies he brought back to the US to collaborate with other communists, artists, workers, and intellectuals. As a sort of “laboratory” for political and cultural experimentation, “The revolution was the kind of school in which John Reed could learn quickly.”⁸⁰ Communist intellectual and artistic communities frequently grew out of shared experiences that connected workers across the globe.

Using the term “collective” derives, in part, from the members themselves. For one, groups emphasized collective authorship rather than individual.⁸¹ Labeling films as FSR, FPL, or FSS-made, for example, indicates the dedication to seeing themselves collectively as authors. Those involved in film engaged in multiple production methods and shared the creative labor of projects. Sam Brody also referred to the FPL’s decision-making practices as “always collective” regarding what films or print they would produce and exhibit.⁸² When demonstrations or projects

⁷⁸ John Stuart, “Introduction,” in *The Education of John Reed: Selected Writing* (New York: International Publishers, 1972), 18.

⁷⁹ Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 8; 17.

⁸⁰ Robert A. Rosenstone, *Romantic Revolutionary: A Biography of John Reed* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 112; 363; 29. The US government targeted FSR member William Kruse in the same Palmer Raids they did John Reed in 1918 and onward. Middle-class, conservative Americans labeled modernists and those at the 1913 Armory Show “immoral,” but Reed was impressed by the Armory Show and saw that America “felt threatened by modernism” and therefore embraced it. Reed saw artistic experimentation and freedom attached to social and political experimentation and change Reed met with Lunacharsky in 1919-20 to see various artists and evening seminars for workers, which he then brought ideas into his American communist, cultural, and pedagogical endeavors.

⁸¹ Fava, “The Composers’ Collective of New York, 1932-1936,” 301-343; Maria Ochoa, “Creative Collectives: Chicana Painters Working in Community, Mujeres Muralistas in 1970s San Francisco and Co-Madres Artistas in 1990s Sacramento Valley,” *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies* vol. 31, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 105-128.

⁸² Brody, interview with Judy Pomer, 1987.

arose, members could choose which to take on. Members could also help prioritize projects when several accumulated at once. For example, members made collective decisions to capture the Scottsboro protests and Hunger Marches to divvy up responsibilities and equipment. The FPL pledged to “work collectively” towards the ultimate goal of “conquer[ing] the film’ for the working class.”⁸³ Collaborative and communal work generated an intellectual community in New York that allowed collectives to connect to other networks nationally and internationally.

Film collectives actively chose to create working-class film education projects and spaces. On top of the inaccessibility of higher education—financially and socially—the education that did exist was typically insufficient or unappealing to many folks. Ralph Steiner recalled, for example, that courses he took at Clarence White’s School of Photograph in NYC and those he took at Dartmouth were focused on “rigid rules and formulae.”⁸⁴ Photography and film courses at such institutions typically followed traditional academic models of arts education in which experimentation or openness to exploring newer modernist theories and practices were discouraged. Classes often followed imitation models of instruction. Moreover, it was not standard practice for such institutions to teach art based on one’s subjective or collective experience or to support social-political art. Having independent education outside of traditional academies instead allowed working-class artists and students to study film as connected to their lived, collective experiences. It also provided space to explore film learning as part of a working-class political education. Many of those who participated desired space for political, aesthetic, and pedagogical experimentation. Members of film collectives crafted theories and histories that

⁸³ Leo Hurwitz cited in Sturken, *The Independent* (May 1982), 11. In the 1930s, other Marxist cultural groups adopted names such as A Composers’ Collective of New York that operated between 1932 and 1936.

⁸⁴ Ralph Steiner, *A Point of View* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1978), 27.

other workers could relate to as shared experiences—whether they were factory workers or farmers.

Methodology

An interdisciplinary history allows innovative approaches to studying lost films and scattered archival materials. It, too, allows scholars to confront the unique difficulties faced by independent filmmakers in preserving films throughout history, especially those encountered by film collectives like FSR, FPL, and FSS. Drawing from Cultural, Social, Intellectual, Oral, and Film History methodologies as well as American Studies frameworks, this dissertation makes a couple important interventions. Firstly, to study radicals and revolutionaries in American history, especially communists and those affiliated with the Soviet Union, it foregrounds the emergence of film education facilitated by labor film collectives. While indebted to previous analyses that center collectives' aesthetic and political concerns, mine emphasizes their educational drives. Secondly, an interdisciplinary framework foregrounds many figures and groups often absent from historical narratives. The pages that follow include the first sustained secondary histories of both the Film and Sprockets Society and FSR's Motion Picture Department.

Philosophy, Social Theory, Media, and Journalism History also inform this research. Various theories of cultural production, mass and popular culture, and knowledge production have most pointedly. Marxist social theory, Frankfurt School, art and politics, media, modernism, avant-garde, documentary, realism, and art institutions and movements all find resonance here. Employing Marxist and critical theories provides a theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between class and cinema. This includes examining how films may reinforce or challenge dominant ideologies, capitalist structures, and power dynamics. Drawing on critical

pedagogy helps assess the participatory nature of the programs, the role of dialogue and discussion, and how educators facilitated critical thinking about social issues through film.

Alysson Nadia Field is perhaps of greatest inspiration and intellectual influence here. *Uplift Cinema* shifted how I understand cinema studies. From a historical standpoint, Field shows how African American filmmakers and audiences engaged with early Black “uplift” cinema to contradict stereotypes and provide or view self-representation in film. Such a framework for analyzing race informs my approach to analyzing class and Jewish, immigrant, and communist political identities. Partaking in what Field calls “extrafilmic research” when films themselves are considered lost “requires us to look for the presence in the absence,” as “absence is the archive.”⁸⁵ This dissertation is part of an extended project starting in the late 1970s by film historians turning toward archival, or more recent archaeological, research of film. Moreover, this work converges on a trail of historians turning to art objects and visual culture as archival material to explain historical phenomena. Archival manuscripts and non-filmic materials as the basis of film analysis reframed how I conceived of approaching a project where a minuscule amount of the overall films these collectives produced remained, with hundreds of films completely lost. Interviews, memoirs, and testimonies contribute information otherwise lost due to lack of manuscript or filmic preservation. What this study offers is a potential model for excavating working-class film studies. Laura Marcus in *The Tenth Muse* has also provided useful theoretical framework for how early motion picture writers learned to capture motion in print. Though her study has more to do with the initial stages of film criticism and analysis, Marcus showcases the historical relationship between moving images and writing about moving

⁸⁵ Allyson Nadia Field, *Uplift Cinema: The Emergence of African American Film and the Possibility of Black Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 24-25.

images.⁸⁶ This is valuable to a contemporary film historian because it gives a reference point for how people have attempted to analyze films and present them in writing to readers who likely had not seen the film yet, or perhaps could not attend a cinema in their area to see particular films. For those who could not physically access some films, print and other options provided alternative ways of “viewing” films. In the case of this project, I am having to interpret and reconstruct many films based on only writing or oral interviews, and in more limited cases, still images. To then relay this to a reading audience thus requires thinking deeply about this relationship between writing and moving images as well as what it means to reconstruct a history of film in which the physical films are lost. and the historical figures involved have been marginalized or erased from most accounts.

No FSR or FSS films knowingly remain, only three New York FPL films remain watchable, and all but one reel of *Passaic Textile Strike* survives. In his 1996 book *Lost Films*, Frank Thompson notes that likely over half of more than 21,000 “features and shorts” created before 1950 are lost. Though focused on studio productions and destructions of films, his points about the flammable and impermanent nitrate used to create films is important. Studios frequently burned old nitrate films once they had runs in theatres and did not have space to store them or money to transfer them onto better stock later, which was similar for movie houses with ownership of films. Anthony Slide similar traces the loss or damage of films due to nitrate stock.⁸⁷ If this is true of major studios during the silent era and before 1950, this was even more difficult for independent filmmakers such as the FSR, FPL, and FSS. With often pawned or

⁸⁶ Laura Marcus, *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4-11. Audience reception studies involves studying how working-class films are received, interpreted, and consumed. This approach considers how different audiences, including working-class communities, engage with and respond to cinematic representations of their lived experiences.

⁸⁷ Frank Thompson, *Lost Films: Important Movies That Disappeared* (Secaucus: Carol Pub. Group. 1996), ix; xi; Anthony Slide, *Nitrate Won't Wait: A History of Film Preservation in the United States* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 1992), 5-13.

scrapped materials to create their original films in the first place, they quickly edited and screened films, which likely increased the wear on the negatives and prints. Many films were also screened with improvised equipment such as car batteries in mines or on farms that could cause increased exposure damage from outside environments. Transporting their films around the city and the US without the same funds as studio systems to protect them likely caused damage to films as well. This makes the “extrafilmic” research and oral histories here even more valuable because they provide descriptions of lost films and context behind collectives’ activities.

Paul Buhle is the foremost scholar of oral histories of the left in the United States. He and his circle critically challenged the absence of archives about the American left throughout the 1960s-1980s. Buhle’s *Marxism in the United States*, *Tender Comrades*, *Blacklisted*, and several other of his major works engage oral histories as innovative and necessary to tell histories of the American left, communist culture, and government repression of radical groups.⁸⁸ In the 1960s-1970s, most histories of American communism drew from memoirs, magazine articles, art criticism, and works of art. Historian Lilia Topouzova collected oral histories from survivors of Bulgarian gulags.⁸⁹ She speaks about how governments often destroy archives and current items related to dissidents and evidence of the government’s violence against dissidents. This features as avenue to erase their histories and public memory. Historians have developed creative strategies to deal with archival silences. Engaging creative writing, theory, material objects, historical fiction, and oral histories are such ways. Jackie Stewart applies fictional literature from Richard Wright, for example, to analyze African American spectatorship in the early twentieth

⁸⁸ Paul Buhle and Robin D. G. Kelley, “The Oral History of the Left in the United States: A Survey and Interpretation,” *The Journal of American History* vol. 76, no. 2 (1989): 537–50. For information on the origins of the Oral History of the American Left at New York University Archives, see Paul Buhle, “Historians and American Communism: An Agenda,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* no. 20 (1981): 38–45.

⁸⁹ Lilia Topouzova, “On Silence and History,” *The American Historical Review* vol. 126, no. 2 (June 2021): 685–699.

century.⁹⁰ In the absence of archival materials or film objects, this dissertation applies a variety of strategies to grasp the content of collectives' films and their daily lives.

While I believe this is a strength of this research, it can also present limitations when getting so close to historical figures, daily lives, and emotions. Oral historian Lana Dee Povitz directs historians to remember that “No matter who arrests our hearts or what captures our imaginations, we are not to be driven by the story. Certainly, it may be in the car with us, a loud, savvy, charismatic passenger, but it stays in the back seat, not up front where the evidence rides shotgun.” A “critical distance” allows us to reflect on our own emotions and experiences to identify why we are drawn to our subjects, but to also make us conscious of the space we must place between our emotional fascination and the evidence at hand.⁹¹ Povitz draws her analysis from talks with Vivian Gornick and the possible pitfalls of oral history and activism. In her 1977 book *The Romance of American Communism*, Vivian Gornick emphasizes, “For thirty years now people have been writing about the Communists with an oppressive distance between themselves and their subject, a distance that often masquerades as objectivity but in fact conveys only an emotional and intellectual atmosphere of “otherness”—as though something not quite recognizable, something vaguely nonhuman was being described.”⁹² A methodological choice I have made here is to find a middle ground between “an oppressive distance” and being “driven by the story.”

Marginalized scholars frequently argue for the value of proximity to subjects as well as the emotional intelligence to narrate lived experiences to actively pursue social change. This

⁹⁰ Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 93-111; Hayden White, “Introduction: Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality,” *Rethinking History* 9, no. 2/3 (June/September 2005): 149.

⁹¹ Povitz, “Warm Distance: Grappling with Vivian Gornick’s *The Romance of American Communism*,” 180–95.

⁹² Gornick, *The Romance of American Communism*, 18.

dissertation builds on critical work by scholars of Black, Chicano/a, Indigenous, Asian American, LGBTQ+, disabled, homeless community art and film collectives.⁹³ Their stories highlight the transformative power of art as a tool for resistance, identity affirmation, and social change. My work also draws on individuals' and groups' experiences within these community-based projects. Marginalized community art collectives have been instrumental in reshaping cultural narratives, fostering solidarity, and challenging systemic injustices. Film collectives as part of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement, Indigenous activist groups, and Asian American organizations have foregrounded cinema's ability to preserve culture and revise historical representations and stereotypes in media. LGBTQ+ film collectives, like Blue Light Collective, and queer cinema have been pivotal in advocating for LGBTQ+ rights and showing the ordinary lives of queer people, while disability film collectives have contested ableist representations. These works highlight the importance of community-driven filmmaking, distribution, exhibition, and education.⁹⁴ By spotlighting the systemic flaws of American society that orchestrates exclusion and inequality, film collectives from diverse groups have historically and presently combatted erasure while using art and film as means to transform power structures and daily life. This work

⁹³ Barbara Ransby, *Making All Black Lives Matter: Reimagining Freedom in the Twenty-First Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018); Charlene Villaseñor Black, *Chicano Art! ProtestArte* (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 1999); Emma Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Catherine Lord and Richard Meyer, *Art and Queer Culture* (London: Phaidon Press, 2013).

⁹⁴ *The Art of Indigenous Resistance and Resurgence*, ed. Pamela Palmater (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2019); *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature*, ed. Qwo-Li Driskill, Chris Finley, Brian Joseph Gilley, and Scott Lauria Morgensen (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011); Paul Gilroy, *Beyond 'The Black Atlantic'* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Erica Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015); George Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Ani DiFranco, *No Walls and the Recurring Dream* (New York: Viking, 2019); Kenny Fries, *Body, Remember: A Memoir* (New York: Dutton, 2019); Susan D. Anderson, *The Homeless Chorus Speaks* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2017); *The Routledge Companion to Latina/o Media*, ed. Maria Cepeda and Dolores Inés Casillas (New York: Routledge, 2017); M. Elise Marubbio, *Native Americans on Film* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2013); Lori Kido Lopez, *Asian American Media Activism* (New York: NYU Press, 2016); *Queer Cinema: The Film Reader*, ed. Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin (New York: Routledge, 2004); Beth A. Haller, *Disability, Representation, and the Body in the Media* (London: Routledge, 2017); Allyson Nadia Field, *To Embrace the Unfamiliar* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

therefore draws inspiration from both contemporary and historical grassroots organizers and workers. The collection of influences and driving inspirations here speaks to the collective project that is scholarship. This includes not only university scholarship, but community scholarship and ideas conceptualized amongst everyday people.

Another important contribution of this dissertation is to again reevaluate analytical categories used in cultural and social histories. Markers of “high” culture and “popular” or “mass” culture have typically segmented types of culture but also social classes.⁹⁵ This has often been a trend in intellectual history to distinguish between “intellectuals” and “workers.” With the rise of labor and social history in the 1970s-80s mixed with the cultural turn of the 1990s, more historians asked questions about working-class production and audiences. Social approaches to cultural history drew on labor, racial and ethnic, and gender histories. This was in addition to legitimizing studying popular culture such as amusement parks, dime novels, film, radio, television, and nightlife. Historian Warren Susman, for example, claimed that cultural history “seeks to discover the forms in which people have experienced the world,” and therefore needed to include figures like Mickey Mouse and Walt Disney as much (or even more so than) it did Mark Twain and Walt Whitman.⁹⁶ Historians have more recently studied working-class and mass culture as creative rather than complacent, and in Denning’s assertion about the Popular Front, even integral to mainstream culture.⁹⁷ What this dissertation does is rather than categorize workers in film collectives, to instead see the values film, communist and leftist politics, and intellectual study had for them in their everyday lives. Film collectives and camera workers

⁹⁵ Herbert Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 4-7.

⁹⁶ Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 185.

⁹⁷ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 15-22.

challenged “traditional barriers separating high art from everyday life, artist from audience, formalism from politics, the avant-gardes from mass culture...” to create new relationships between these categories.⁹⁸ Instead of looking to popular culture like Disney or Hollywood, this research charts a radical subculture connected by the belief in working-class film as revolutionary and working-class people as intellectual leaders.

In doing so, it invites scholars to reconsider the origins of film studies—not as elite university activities, but as grassroots intellectual activities. In the 1960s-90s, more universities opened disciplinary departments more open to studies of film and mass media. Texts by Vachel Lindsay, Arnheim, Kracauer, and other middle-to-upper-class intellectuals became canonized in the academy. Such historical interpretations of film—even those by Paul Rotha and John Grierson—frequently missed the pockets of radical film activities as major contributors to the development of American avant-garde and documentary cinema.⁹⁹ More recent scholars have argued that film history as an academic discipline began much earlier in the twentieth century even if it did not solidify until the 1960s. Dana Polan, Lee Grieveson, and Haidee Wasson chart the beginnings of film history starting in the 1910s. *Inventing Film Studies*, *Useful Cinema*, and *Scenes of Instruction* highlight the pedagogical uses of film as well as film’s positions in developing academic institutions in the US. Collectively, they argue that early-twentieth-century

⁹⁸ Walter Kalaidjian, *American Culture Between the Wars: Revisionary Modernism and Postmodern Critique* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 31.

⁹⁹ Lauren Rabinovitz, *For the Love of Pleasure: Women, Movies, and Culture in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Steven Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Liz Cohen, “Encountering Mass Culture,” in *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 99-157; Liz Cohen, “Encountering Mass Culture at the Grassroots: The Experience of Chicago Workers in the 1920s,” *American Quarterly* vol. 41, no. 1 (1989): 6-33; Greg Waller, *Main Street Amusements: Movies and Commercial Entertainment in a Southern City, 1896-1930* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995); Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993 [1985]).

universities, museums, and other educational institutions viewed film as a pedagogical tool as well as necessary of study and preservation.

As core texts to this research, the following pages offer a slight reorientation of the evolution of film studies. Evidence supports that communist grassroots organizations and working-class Americans creatively developed film education that not only presented important general narratives of film history, theory, and technique, but strategically crafted a working-class film studies that placed workers at the center of avant-garde art, education, and leftist politics.

Tracing Collectives' Diverse Activities

This dissertation comprises of six chapters, each one discussing a central way film education evolved within grassroots, self-created collectives. Chapter 1 examines teaching as a collective project to highlight why many leftists and progressives turned to forming independent collectives as alternatives to established institutions such as museums or libraries. Their non-professionalized learning and teaching philosophies and practices were core to ongoing projects. Working-class, Jewish, immigrant backgrounds of those involved shaped their educational approaches involving collectivity, film, and politics. Chapter 2 centers documentary, realism, and self-production outside studio or academic training within collectives. The documentary style or impulse of this period was largely built from grassroots, communist collectives. Debates over whether theatrical, enacted forms and abstract styles or “pure documentary” and realism were better communicative forms grew in this period. This chapter also works to understand what documentary meant at this time, ranging from historical films to protest footage. Production methods and documentary allowed collectives to create an alternative news circuit operated by themselves with self-representation. This chapter showcases how social documentary emerged in

1920s-1930s America as leader in experimenting with documentary as an avant-garde style for working-class politics and education.

The third chapter (Chapter 3) applies these conversations about social documentary to delve into the contents of films collectives produced. While analyzing the films underscores the ideas individuals had about the educational importance of films, it also provides the opportunities to reconstruct films that are lost, destroyed, or fragmented. Through newspaper and journal clippings, former members' oral histories or archived words, and secondary sources, footage is puzzled together to offer some of the first glimpses of films that have not appeared in secondary research or not analyzed as part of a broader history of working-class history and film.

Chapter 4 argues that exhibitions, both nontheatrical and theatrical, planned and impromptu, allowed working-class and elite modernists to mix in learning spaces to provide more opportunities than formal higher education at the time. Flexible exhibition patterns could reach audiences of both workers and elites' schools, unions, mobile and stationary screening setups. These were alternative classrooms where modernist and working-class aesthetics and politics merged. Exhibitions were not simply displays, but rather featured lectures or discussions alongside works and were often organized to teach audiences particular narratives. Chapter 5 investigates how developing scholarship emerged in journals, magazines, and newspapers. Many collectives or individuals within created their own journals, while art and film writing themselves crafted spaces for people to engage with theories, practices, politics, aesthetics, and encounter advertisements for where they could pursue more education. This also involved recalibrating an understanding of "news," particularly from a working-class perspective. Film writing therefore created an alternative intellectual history of film that highlighted translated works, Soviet theories and histories, and working-class film. These materials promoted self-study, but with

curated information that guided learning. Unlike the learning from films, print materials had wider distribution routes that brought people into these collectives to study in other cities or come to NYC for further study such as Jay Leyda from Ohio to NYC.

Chapter 6 looks at collectives' experimentation with schools and curriculums at grassroots levels. Schools such as the John Reed Club School of Art or Harry Alan Potamkin Film School trialed courses taught by artists and self-taught teachers that intended to open education and creation to more Americans. In centering their leftist, modernist politics and aesthetics, they challenged the rigidity, depoliticization, and exclusivity of art and academic spaces. Schooling projects created courses that prepared students for action-based filmmaking and responded directly to contemporary working-class concerns rather than established curriculum.

The Conclusion addresses the several ways collectives fell apart or were targeted with government surveillance by the early 1940s and how this was a tension point since many members professionalized their labor to enter academic institutions while building academic programs in NYC. The Conclusion also addresses recovering American working-class and communist film histories. Tom Brandon, former Director of the Film and Photo League's Harry Alan Potamkin Film School (HAPFS), referred to "a missing chapter in American film history," that of communist and leftist film activities during the 1922-1930s, during his lecture and exhibition tours in the 1970s.¹⁰⁰ Brandon, who was a distributor, teacher, and writer himself, encouraged scholars to study the FPL and other film collectives to restore public memory of their work. As pieces of a "missing chapter in American film history," the following pages analyze the

¹⁰⁰ Ruby Rich, "The Missing Chapter in American Cinema" as part of a lecture and screening series in 1970s, Chicago Film Center at the Chicago Art Institute, March 27, 1974, Thomas Brandon Collection, K223, Film Study Center, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY. (hereafter cited as Rich, "The Missing Chapter in American Cinema," Thomas Brandon Collection).

educational ingenuity, radical activities, and deep promise of these workers' film collectives. A history of the working class, not in terms of audiences and spectatorship, but in terms of active creators and intellectuals, opens the study of American class, labor, nonfiction, noncommercial, and educational cinema to embrace workers' intellectual and artistic contributions.

CHAPTER 1: COLLECTIVE FILM TEACHING AND LEARNING: “A TENDENCY TOWARD ORGANIZATION”

In the April 1926 edition of *Workers Monthly*, Bertram D. Wolfe noted that workers’ education should also include cultural action and arts—in and beyond classrooms. *Workers Monthly* was published in Chicago but affiliated with *Daily Worker* and the Workers’ International Relief units in New York. Wolfe was born in Brooklyn to an American mother and German-Jewish immigrant father. Growing up poor, he was the first in his family to attend high school while working as a postal clerk and later attended college at the City College of New York. Starting out as a socialist during college, he then became a founding member of the American Communist Party and its first journal *Communist World* in 1919. Wolfe later directed the Communist Party New York Workers School from 1923-1929 where he often taught.¹⁰¹ Wolfe articulated an educational philosophy that was foundational to communist and leftist efforts across art and film organizations in the 1920s-1930s:

Workers education is of course much broader than the limits of the classroom...indeed education is acquired much more out of the classroom than in it. Workers’ education is at least as broad as the labor movement itself and often must seek its lessons even outside of the labor movement. Learning to work together in co-operatives, learning to struggle together in unions and parties of the workers, is itself education, for it develops that understanding, that feeling and that which the workers need for carrying out their aims.¹⁰²

This is important for two reasons. One, Wolfe highlights that education was expansive. It was not limited to classroom learning, nor was it restricted to only labor activities. Two, this education was collective and cooperative. Learning happened through studying together but also participating in actions together. This definition of education undergirds this project’s framing of film education as part of working-class history. Participatory education involves learning in

¹⁰¹ Donald W. Treadgold, “Bertram D. Wolfe: A Life in Two Centuries,” *Studies in Soviet Thought* vol. 20, no. 4 (1979): 336–341.

¹⁰² Bertram Wolfe, “What is Workers’ Education?” *Workers’ Monthly* (April 1926): 276.

community. Additionally, much of this teaching and learning happened during a variety of activities, many of which were not formal schooling. Relying on other film collective members to educate created a collective base that allowed film collectives and other labor organizations to form multimedia and multinational networks.

Art collectives were political, personal, and social points of knowledge exchange and sharing film materials. Jewish and immigrant backgrounds of many of those in collectives shaped how members constructed and maintained cooperative units as well as their perceptions of social justice. Social justice involved a combination of identities and experiences beyond white, Christian, native-born working-class men. FPL title cards, for example, often announced collective solidarity with “native, foreign-born, men, women, white” and African American workers.¹⁰³ Collectivity in this sense meant not just those within film collectives, but a broader societal community of people working toward collective freedoms and rights. Education thus came from within and around film groups. Collectivity is an important concept and historical adjective because of cross-interactions with organizations. In other words, collaboration was not just within a group, but also connected to other groups. Many studies have siloed groups like FPL, focused on inter-group relations, or shown conflicts among FPL, Nykino, Frontier Films, and the Photo League as the elongated “collapse” of radical film projects. However, this study centers cross-group dynamics to show connections across time, space, background, and historical context. Rather than separate 1920s FSR and WIR film projects from 1930s FPL and FSS activities, here the emphasis is on them as connected working-class educational projects across the two decades.

¹⁰³ *Hunger: The National Hunger March to Washington 1932*, Prod. Workers Film and Photo League of New York with WIR, Photography and Editing by Sam Brody, Robert Del Duca, Leo Hurwitz, Leo Seltzer, C.O. Nelson, Norman Warren, 1932. Restored by Leo Seltzer, 1982, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=teqB2x5nPfU>.

First, this chapter places workers' film education within growing workers' education movements in the early 20th century. For one, film collectives drew on Jewish educational traditions that privileged learning and studying as both religious and secular principles. More specific to their surroundings, radical education projects in New York grew from the anarchist Modern School in the 1910s to the New York Workers' School in the 1920s. Though most workers' schools had broad courses in politics, economics, history, and theory, they increasingly included sporadic classes on literature, drama, and other arts. Smaller communist organizations such as the John Reed Clubs also began to run classes or even open schools in the early 1930s. JRC schools focused on art training, as did aligned group schools dedicated to creating "proletarian art" in America. All workers' education programs, regardless of their foci, had goals to open education to workers to train them to participate in labor movements and become informed on issues facing the American working-class.¹⁰⁴ Workers' art education also trained

¹⁰⁴ For more on labor colleges and radical experimental education in the US, see: Richard J. Altenbaugh, *Education for Struggle: The American Labor Colleges of the 1920s and 1930s* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 23-46; Richard J. Altenbaugh, "Proletarian Drama: An Educational Tool of the American Labor College Movement," *Theatre Journal* vol. 34, no. 2 (1982): 197-210; Richard J. Altenbaugh, "'The Children and the Instruments of a Militant Labor Progressivism: Brookwood Labor College and the American Labor College Movement of the 1920s and 1930s,'" *History of Education Quarterly* vol. 23, no. 4 (1983): 295-411; William H. Cobb, *Radical Education in the Rural South: Commonwealth College, 1922-1940* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000); Karyn L. Hollis, *Liberating Voices: Writing at the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004); Charles F. Howlett, *Brookwood Labor College and the Struggle for Peace and Social Justice in America* (Lewiston: E. Mellen Press, 1993); Malcolm Shepherd Knowles, *The Adult Education Movement in the United States* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1962); Raymond Koch and Charlotte Koch, *Educational Commune: The Story of Commonwealth College* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972); Fran Lehr, *Organized Labor and the Workers' Education Movement: The Commonwealth College Experience* (New York: Independent, 1987); Rolland G. Paulson and Richard J. Altenbaugh, "The American Labor College Movement," in *Other Dreams, Other Schools: Folk Colleges in Social and Ethnic Movements* (Pittsburgh: University Center for International Studies, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980); Rachel Cutler Schwartz, *The Rand School of Social Science, 1906-1924: A Study of Worker Education in the Socialist Era* (Buffalo: State University of New York at Buffalo Press, 1984); Kenneth Teitelbaum, *Schooling for "Good Rebels": Socialist Education for Children in the United States, 1900-1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); Frank C. Adams and Myles Horton, *Unearthing Seeds of Fire: The Idea of Highlander* (New York: Blair, 1975); Richard J. Altenbaugh, *Workers' Education As Counter Hegemony: The Educational Process At Work People's College, 1907-1941*, *Breaking New Ground: The Development of Adult and Workers' Education in North America*, ed. Rae Wahl Rohfeld (Syracuse: Syracuse University and Syracuse Kellogg Project, 1990), <https://roghiemstra.com/breaking.html>; Helen Molesworth and E.J. Koch, *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933-1957* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015); Eva Diaz, *The Experimenters: Chance and Design at Black Mountain College* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Martin Douberman, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (Chicago:

workers to become artists or at least learn to appreciate socially-engaged art as distinguished from capitalist works. Though arts became more firmly engrained in workers' education by the 1920s-1930s, film education was more peripheral.

Film was often fringe to the workers' movement and leftist art organizations, although still very much connected, which created some difficulties in the broader labor movement. But those invested in film were bound together by a devotion to the medium and its importance for labor organizing. William Kruse centered the collective work needed for filmwork and documenting workers' struggles with FSR in the 1920s. However, he recognized some resistance to film and why this newer medium required deliberate education for it to help labor and workers. In his 1925 *Workers Monthly* article "Workers Conquest of the Film," Kruse noted,

Motion picture work is hard, involves an unending burden of tedious detail work. Its importance is not as yet recognized by the movement, hence it is difficult to attract the required interest and co-operation of able comrades. It is new to the movement and, while it borrows much from our experience with old media of propaganda, it requires the learning of some new lessons that are hard to our settled workers.¹⁰⁵

Kruse emphasizes a key point that learning how film operated and could aid labor was important for it to be effective. Strategies of teaching art and film to workers was a major concern for leftist collectives throughout the early twentieth century. Film presented new challenges of interpreting moving images, especially those considered documentaries and newsreels—mainly learning to distinguish reality and truth from fallacies.

A primary way to develop comprehensive educational strategies for film's place in advancing labor was to form collectives. A "tendency toward organization," in Jay Leyda's words, led to increasing efforts to build workers' film distribution, production, exhibition groups

Northwestern University Press, 2009); *Anarchist Education and the Modern School: A Francisco Ferrer Reader*, ed. Mark Bray and Robert H. Haworth (Binghamton: PM Press, 2018); *The Modern School of Stelton: A Sketch*, ed. Joseph J. Cohen & Alexis C. Ferm (Stelton: Southpaw Culture, Factory School, 2006).

¹⁰⁵ William F. Kruse, "Workers Conquest of the Film," *The Workers Monthly* (Sept. 1925): 502.

that engaged in these practices as well as writing about film and creating classes or schools to train workers in film. This social and political world of film is the focus of this chapter. The 1917 Bolshevik Revolution sparked intense interest in media's role in revolution that accelerated during the 1920s and leftist organizing against fascism, antisemitism, racism, anticommunism, and growing class chasms. The 1929 Crash politically radicalized many while film's aesthetics matured to entice those involved in the arts to experiment further. During the Depression, labor organizing accelerated, as did artists' collectives interested in advancing both labor rights and modernist arts in America. At the 1934 National Film and Photo League Conference, Jay Leyda noted that the increased organization of film collectives coincided with the growing labor movement and the labor movement's own "change in development from sporadic, scattered actions to more consecutive and more consolidated struggles."¹⁰⁶ This "tendency toward organization" united industrial, farm, and art and film workers. It resulted in coordinated film production, exhibition, distribution, and journalism. Above all, it resulted in more collaborative and synchronized education across film, art, politics, and labor.

Arts, mainly film, became increasingly integral to workers' education and labor movements in the US (and internationally) during the interwar period. Film collectives emerged from a broader landscape of workers' art and education projects, which took on a greater role in labor organizing. International-national connections to New York were also crucial to building labor film groups. Contextualizing New York's film collectives within connected European, Soviet, and American film and labor activities in the 1920s-1930s illuminates growing importance of film as a cornerstone of workers' education. Examining the origins of the Friends

¹⁰⁶ Film and Photo League National Conference with Jay Leyda's history of leftist cinema in the United States, 1934, TAM. 083: 82501, Box 22, Folder 7, Jay and Si-Lan Chen Leyda Papers, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University Special Collections, New York, NY.

of Soviet Russia, Film and Photo League, and Film and Sprockets Society addresses why film collectives became a main avenue for this educational and political work. Many individuals in these collectives who lived in New York came from similar backgrounds: working-class, Jewish, and immigrants themselves or from first or second-generation immigrant families. They were also young—some teenagers into their early thirties, but many in their early-to-mid-twenties at the peak of their work. The importance of their identities is the subject of the first section to contextualize the development of film collectives rooted in members' lived experiences.

This chapter unpacks the origins and founding principles of the Workers International Relief and Friends of Soviet Russia, Film and Photo League, and Film and Sprockets Society. It will also address why film was central to their formation and development during the interwar years. Core to their principles was that aesthetics, politics, and education were inextricably linked—esthetic choices were political and educational ones, just as much as any permutation of the three. This chapter explores the educators involved in these collectives and the collectives themselves, while the other chapters will explore their activities. Before diving into what they did, we must examine who collectives were and what motivated their creation as well as what motivated individuals to join them. This opens understandings of their pedagogical, theoretical, and practical influences.

Section one is about the individuals involved in the collectives—zeroing in on their shared Jewish, immigrant, working-class, and youth identities. Section two explores workers' education models and cultural organizational models that contextualize the emergence of radical film collectives in the US. Communism and leftist politics were core elements that shaped film collectives' understanding of community. In section three, the focus turns to the development of FSR, FPL, and FSS in the 1920s-1930s within the scope of international cultural developments.

The fourth section delves deeper into the guiding principles and actions of these collectives to unearth how collectivity operated in these organizations. The chapter weaves together the global developments of workers' cultural education and the American individuals who made radical film collectives in the US possible. Members' identities anchored their ideas and practices of collectivity, community, workers' education, art, and education, while their relationships to international revolutionary culture influenced their guiding principles as collectives.

Shared Identities and Backgrounds: Working-Class, Jewish, Immigrant, and Young

During the 1880s-1920s, a wave of Jewish immigrants, escaping persecution and economic hardships in Europe, arrived in New York, transforming the city into a vibrant hub of Jewish culture. Eastern European Jewish immigrants typically settled in Lower East Side, Brownsville, and Williamsburg, Brooklyn in addition to neighborhoods in the Bronx and Harlem. Jewish identities ranged across Orthodox, Ashkenazi, Secular, Sephardic, and other denominational or ancestral groups. Though Jews' political views varied, many gravitated toward the left, particularly socialist and communist organizations. Much of this developed from their engagements with European radical circles before coming to the US, but also "filth, cold, poverty, and early death" characterized many immigrants' lives in New York in the early twentieth century. This did not differ much from fled conditions in Eastern Europe, and it shaped their politics to support and participate in groups that worked to ameliorate social inequalities.¹⁰⁷ But Jews participated in a variety of political organizations and those who gravitated toward communism also ranged from Jews in New York to Populist farmers in the Midwest.

While some middle-class Jews owned businesses or worked in trades and professions, many Jews worked in one of New York's primary industries: the garment industry as tailors,

¹⁰⁷ Gornick, *Romance of American Communism*, 30.

seamstresses, related textile jobs. The sweatshop conditions they encountered—long hours, low wages, and unsafe working environments—led to widespread discontent. Jews comprised more than half of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union's (ILGWU) membership. Jews, including leader Sidney Hilman, also formed a major portion of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA) to fight for rights in the men's garment industry. Jews participated in the ILGWU's 1926 cloakmakers' strike to gain increased wages, workplace safety policies, and labor security. They later led the ILGWU's 1933 dressmakers' strike and founded the Jewish Labor Committee in 1934. As fascism swept Europe and the US, Jewish labor organization increasingly took on public leadership in combating fascism and anti-Semitism both in the United States and abroad. Yiddish newspapers like the *Forverts* (Forward) covered labor actions to educate and mobilize workers, while facilitating sharing of mutual aid across Jewish communities. The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), and American Jewish Congress helped provide aid to European and American Jews with fundraising, protests, and lobbying for more liberal immigration policies. New York's Jews therefore played crucial roles in the burgeoning labor movement and working-class culture. The tumultuous economic climate of the 1930s, marked by the Great Depression, intensified these challenges, leading to increased solidarity and collaboration within the Jewish working-class communities.

The Lower East Side became a main area for Yiddish theaters, kosher markets, and synagogues. Yiddish newspapers, such as the *Jewish Daily Forward*, flourished, contributing to a rich cultural and intellectual milieu. Maurice Schwartz and Sholem Asch began the Yiddish Art Theatre and helped build “Yiddish Broadway” on Second Avenue in the Lower East Side in tandem with Yiddish newspapers. Independent film studios created Yiddish cinema produced for

a primarily Jewish audience. Several films depicted Jewish immigrant experiences that viewers could relate to. *Uncle Moses* (1932), for example, emphasized tensions between traditional values and modernity for American Jews. *Hungry Hearts* (1922) showed the tensions of dreams and tribulations amongst Jewish immigrants in New York's Lower East Side. Sidney M. Goldin directed *East and West* (1923) about differences between traditional Jewish life in Eastern Europe and modern American society.¹⁰⁸

Scholars in History and Film Studies have published a multitude of studies about Jews in Hollywood throughout the twentieth century. Adolph Zukor founded Paramount Pictures, Carl Laemmle established Universal Pictures, William Fox created Fox Film Corporation, and Harry, Albert, Sam, and Jack Warner founded Warner Bros. Zukor, Fox, and Marcus Loew all grew up in New York as young Jewish immigrants. Directors who became German Jewish exiles like Ernst Lubitsch successfully navigated Hollywood to contribute to its global entertainment industry and styles. Nevertheless, Jewish filmmakers and producers faced anti-Semitism and the pressure to assimilate into American culture.¹⁰⁹ In Hollywood, Jews carefully navigated creating films foregrounding Jewish experiences and broad American themes. However, in film collectives, members could explore their identities more freely due to their independent production of film materials not beholden to studio rules or norms.

Moreover, this study refocuses the history of cinema and Jewish involvement in New York. Rob Koszarski argues for shifting our image of “American cinema” away from Hollywood and back to its origins on the East Coast, primarily in and around New York City. Especially in

¹⁰⁸ Judith Thissen, “Film and Vaudeville on New York’s Lower East Side,” In *The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times*, ed. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Jonathan Karp, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 42– 56; Thissen, “Jewish Immigrant Audiences in New York City, 1905–1914,” In *American Movie Audiences: From the Turn of the Century to the Early Sound Era*, ed. Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby (London: BFI, 1999), 25-28.

¹⁰⁹ Deborah Dash Moore, Jeffrey S. Gurock, Annie Polland, Howard B. Rock, Daniel Soyer, and Diana L. Linden, *Jewish New York: The Remarkable Story of a City and a People* (New York: NYU Press, 2017), 250.

the interwar period, he claims, New York film production boomed, but not through traditional studio systems and corporate distribution circuits. He describes several pockets of New Yorkers and European or Hollywood exiles who embraced “back lot” or independent film practices. Groups like the Film and Photo League were part of this matrix in the interwar period, connected with others in New York who were “unable to accept mass production as the only legitimate vehicle for American cinema.”¹¹⁰ Many also connected with the bustling Yiddish theater and Jewish art and intellectual scenes in New York that allowed independent film to flourish.

This interplay of cultural traditions, socio-economic status, and artistic expression shaped the formation of radical film collectives and their activities. Their multilayered identities also made them receptive to the shared, but also different experiences of “Negro and white, men and women, native and foreign-born” workers, as FPL film title slides often stated.¹¹¹ Film collectives provided a platform for the expression of members’ diverse cultural identities. Their activities reflected the nuances of immigrant life. By using films as tools for worker empowerment, solidarity, and education on labor issues, film collectives deepened the connection between working-class identities and film studies.

Most folks involved in film collectives—FSR, FPL, and FSS—were from working-class families, who were also Jewish-immigrant or immigrant families living in New York City. Notable members Bernard Gordon, Harry Potamkin, and others were children of immigrants. Others, like David Platt and Lester Balog, were first-generation immigrants who arrived in the US with their parents from countries such as Ukraine or Hungary, respectively. Members’ Soviet ties were not just political but due to family histories. Harry Potamkin, Bernard Gordan,

¹¹⁰ Richard Koszarski, *Hollywood on the Hudson: Film and Television in New York from Griffith to Sarnoff* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 1-13. 355-358. 96; 248.

¹¹¹ *Workers Newsreel Vol., no. 10 The National Hunger March for Unemployment Insurance*, 1931-32, Prod. Workers’ Film and Photo League, 1932, title card.

Abraham Polonsky, and several others' parents immigrated from Russia during the tsarist era. Others came to the US from Ukraine, Germany, Denmark, Lithuania, Poland, and other primarily Eastern European areas. Several had escaped violent pogroms. Others fled from antisemitic governments or fellow countryfolk. Sam Brody's family left Russia to live in London and then Paris, before immigrating to the Bronx in the US due to the rampant antisemitism they faced in Europe.¹¹² These were all complicated identities in themselves due to the Russian Empire, German Empire, independence rebellions, and changing borders and political systems in Europe in the late 1800s-early 1900s. This then layered onto their experiences in America when navigating shifting socio-cultural and demographic changes between generations of immigrants, Jewish assimilation, and growing fascist politics globally. Because of their Jewish identities, they knew all too well the violence and exclusion of antisemitism.

Often in their early twenties—sometimes late teens upon starting out—members comprised a revolutionary generation of working-class artists and intellectuals in the 1920s-1930s. They had grown up as children or teens during the onset of the Russian Revolution and throughout the beginning decades of the Soviet Union. Tony Michels labels “the Russian Revolution in New York” in 1917-1919 and Matthias Neumann analyzes the “generations” of youth involved in the Russian Revolution between 1917 and 1932—both of which highlight the intensity of revolutionary drive of many not directly involved in the Russian Revolution itself.¹¹³ Much of this fervor originated from both the excitement of possibilities from the Russian Revolution and American workers' own experiences with poverty, unemployment, houselessness, and other forms of socio-political inequality.

¹¹² David Brody, “Sam Brody's Life in Brief,” *Sam Brody*, 2023, <https://www.sambrody.com/>.

¹¹³ Matthias Neumann, “‘Youth, It's Your Turn!': Generations and the Fate of the Russian Revolution (1917-1932),” *Journal of Social History* vol. 46, no. 2 (2012): 273–304.

Families' working-class, Jewish, and immigrant identities also influenced the political and educational lives their children grew up in. Experiences from both Europe or Russia and their immigrant lives in New York frequently radicalized them. Immigrant, Jewish, and working-class experiences shaped political choices to gravitate toward groups that actively combatted persecution and pursued grassroots mutual aid. Several had families who were involved in socialist, anarchist, or radical left-wing politics. Leo Hurwitz recalled that his father arrived in New York in 1898 and his mother in 1900 with their four children. Hurwitz's "family moved to different streets in the crowded slum of the Lower East Side of Manhattan, and then across the bridges to the newer, still poor neighborhoods of Brooklyn where Leo was born, on Keap Street." His father was a "son of a miller" who taught Hebrew and other subjects in Russia, while his grandfather on his mother's side was a northern Ukrainian intellectual who brought Leo's father from Kyiv to teach in the village. Hurwitz's father became involved in radical—anarchist and socialist—Jewish groups in Russia "seeking new forms of learning." He wanted his children and himself to have opportunities to study, which influenced the family's decision to leave Russia to prevent their children from having to go to the army. In New York, Leo's father worked as a pushcart peddler and garment factory worker while both his parents participated in unions and leftist political groups.¹¹⁴ Combinations of leftist and Jewish traditions made education major factors in their lives. Although families varied in religiosity and practice, Jewish traditional emphasis on education also instilled in many people like Leo Hurwitz a drive for learning and seeing education's applicability to their larger lived experiences and character.

As kids and teens, members, like Kruse and Hurwitz, grew up working alongside their parents who were shop owners, tailors, or bakers. While living in NYC, William F. Kruse was

¹¹⁴ Leo Hurwitz, interviewed by Barbara Hogenson, "Reminiscences of Leo Hurwitz," 1982, Individual Interviews Oral History Collections, Columbia Center for Oral History, Columbia University Libraries, New York, NY.

son of a son of German-Danish Jewish immigrant parents, who began working with the Workers' Party in forming the Friends of Soviet Russia. Founder of the Film Arts Guild in 1925, Symon Gould's father was a tailor on the Lower East Side of NYC.¹¹⁵ Sam Brody's father was also a journeyman tailor who then became a union official in New York.¹¹⁶ The working-class experience was a formative part of their lives, deeply ingrained in the fabric of their family life and personal experiences. Bernard Gordon's parents, for example, were Russian Jewish immigrants and Gordon often helped his father working at a hardware store in New York City. Gordon recalled how the economic crises of the late 1920s and onset of the Depression was a pivotal turning point in his life because he saw the financial and emotional devastation it caused working families. He experienced his father struggling to keep the family afloat through poverty and hunger. Hurwitz, Brody, and others similarly noted that seeing breadlines, homelessness, and discrimination in their own New York neighborhoods influenced their decisions to capture these experiences and make sure Americans could not look away but must work to remedy these conditions.

Parents and children were acutely aware of Jewish persecution in Europe and in the US that informed their often left-leaning political choices and adamant antiauthoritarianism. American-government sanctioned Palmer Raids in 1919, Red Scare culture, and immigration restrictions and deportations that targeted Jews also influenced how many New York Jews organized for self and community preservation. Kruse, who was born in early 1890s to Jewish German and Danish immigrant parents, was targeted by the Palmer Raids for his leadership in

¹¹⁵ "Symon Gould, Ran for President on Vegetarian Ticket in 1960," *New York Times* (Nov. 25th, 1963): 18. This article incorrectly lists the start of the Film Arts Guild as 1930.

¹¹⁶ Brody, "Sam Brody's Life in Brief," 2023; Sam Brody, Interviewed by Tom Brandon, Venice, California, c. late 1970s, Thomas Brandon Collection, 1164, Film Study Center, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY. (hereafter cited as Brody, interviewed by Tom Brandon, Thomas Brandon Collection).

the Young People's Socialist League throughout the 1910s and membership in the Socialist Party, which he joined in 1912. Kruse lectured with the Young People's Socialist League in 1916 and onward. He and three others were convicted by the Espionage Act in 1918 and found guilty. They, however, were released on bail and eventually had their conviction overturned. Figures such as Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman often appear as symbols for how the 1917 Immigration Act targeted radicals, but also Eastern European Jews. Kruse's experience as an American-born Jew emphasizes how these raids were not extraordinary or isolated to only the immediate years after the Russian Revolution or the post-WWII McCarthyist era.¹¹⁷ The 1917 Espionage Act and 1918 Sedition Act crushed racial, labor, and radical political organizations alike, while government and average Americans labeled radicals associated with labor and communism as "un-American."¹¹⁸ Potamkin also noted antisemitism in movies, as there was a rise in antisemitism and anticommunism following the Bolshevik Revolution. In *Eyes of the Movie*, he described how most American pictures depict Jews as "a clown or a sentimentalized scarecrow" with stereotyped physical features.¹¹⁹ Combinations of antisemitism and anticommunism in American culture made it a difficult environment to thrive in industries.

Working-class Jews also faced limited access to higher education in the US due to antisemitism, nativism, and classism. Because the US government had established quotas on how many Jews could enter the US as immigrants, university leadership enacted quota policies for Jewish admittances.¹²⁰ However, the City College of New York provided access to education for

¹¹⁷ The 1917 Immigration Act also targeted "mentally and physically defective," "persons with psychopathic inferiority," prostitutes, vagrants, and polygamists. Richard Pell *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003); Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 15.

¹¹⁸ Patricia Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 188.

¹¹⁹ Harry Alan Potamkin, *Eyes of the Movie* (New York: International Publishers with Film and Photo League), 10.

¹²⁰ Susan H. Greenberg, "Intellectuals at the Gate," *Inside Higher Ed* (Sept. 21, 2022),

working-class people due to its free tuition model and it also became a haven for Jews and radicals.¹²¹ Buhle and Wagner highlight the City College as a major educational institution for those on the left. Abraham Polonsky, who was involved in FSS, attended CCNY between 1928 and 1932 after graduating from DeWitt Clinton High School. Historian Paul Buhle writes that Polonsky attended CCNY because it was affordable. He “could pay a mere \$2.75 bursar’s fee, have his books provided free, and live at home”¹²² His family owned a drugstore where Abraham worked “sweeping and washing the floors, learning the trade of deciphering formulas, measuring powders, reading scales, and making pills.” He also delivered food from his family’s general store. While Polonsky helped found FSS on campus, he also participated in anti-war, anti-ROTC, and pro-union rallies at the City College throughout the 1930s and frequented the New York Public Library. The City University noted Gordon, Polonsky, and Zimet as key first members of FSS when they celebrated the opening of Cinema and Sanctuary in 2019.¹²³ Polonsky noted he engaged with CCNY teachers, Anti-Fascist League members, before he joined the Communist Party.¹²⁴ He became a member of the Communist Party in 1935-1936. As a law school student at

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/09/22/how-ivy-leagues-jewish-quotas-shaped-higher-education>; Serena Jampel and Yasmeen A. Kahn, “‘The White Man’s College’: How Antisemitism Shaped Harvard’s Legacy Admissions,” *The Harvard Crimson* (Nov. 9, 2023), <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2023/11/9/legacy-admissions-scrut/>; Harold S. Wechsler, “The Rationale for Restriction: Ethnicity and College Admission in America, 1910-1980,” *American Quarterly* vol. 36, no. 5 (1984): 643–667; *Quotas: The “Jewish Question” and Higher Education in Central Europe, 1880-1945*, eds. Michael L. Miller and Judith Sapor (New York: Berghahn Press, 2024). These authors all show that it was not just institutional or government leadership that enforced these exclusions, but also the students and community members on a daily basis.

¹²¹ Sherry Gorelick, *City College and the Jewish Poor: Education in New York, 1880-1924* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1981); Daniel A. Sherwood, “Civic Struggles: Jews, Blacks, and the Question of Inclusion at The City College of New York, 1930–1975,” PhD diss. New School, 2015; “Free Speech at CCNY, 1931-1942,” *CUNY Digital History Archive* (New York: American Social History Project/Center for Media and Learning, 2024), <https://cdha.cuny.edu/collections/show/182>.

¹²² Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner, *Abraham Lincoln Polonsky and the Hollywood Left: A Very Dangerous Citizen* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 23-28.

¹²³ Jay Mwamba, “City College Declares ‘Year of Film,’ Celebrates Hans Richter & CCNY Hollywood Legacy,” *City University of New York* (March 5, 2019), <https://www1.cuny.edu/mu/forum/2019/03/05/city-college-declares-year-of-film-celebrates-hans-richter-ccny-hollywood-legacy/>

¹²⁴ Abraham Polonsky, interview with Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner, “Interview with Abraham Polonsky,” in *Abraham Polonsky Interviews*, ed. Andrew Dickos (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 177.

Columbia, he taught at CCNY from 1932 until 1939, specifically English lit and composition starting in 1935.¹²⁵ Gordon graduated from the City College in 1937 with a degree in English, also having studied film through the FSS he created.

The formation of a collective “worker” identity became increasingly important as unifier in the 1920s and 1930s, while also acknowledging the wide-ranging experiences of Black Americans, Jews, women, immigrants, and diverse workers—from farmers to dock workers to deli owners. These identities influenced how many families understood themselves as “American” and fueled their drive to improve social conditions for diverse groups of workers. These complex identities, shaped by the turbulent political and social conditions in America, Russia, and Europe during the late 1800s and early 1900s, significantly influenced their worldviews and creative outputs.

The beginning of the WIR that served as a common foundation for FSR, FPL, and FSS was spurred by Willi Münzenberg’s own working-class background. His parents “ran a small bakery” in Germany in the 1800s and then Willi worked with his father at a pub later on. Münzenberg had little or at least disjointed education in German villages as his family moved often for work and because of family dysfunction. When Münzenberg entered a job at a shoe factory, then 15 years old, “Willi and a colleague were offered free tickets for a performance at the local theatre. It would be the first time in his life that he had been inside a theatre. The play they were to see was *Iphigenia in Tauris* by Goethe. Inside the theatre, their excitement was soon dissipated, though. They were unable to understand anything of what was happening on stage...”¹²⁶ The lack of connection with the art he witnessed and its intelligibility to someone of

¹²⁵ Abraham Polonsky, interview with William S. Pechter, “Conversations with Abraham Polonsky, in *Abraham Polonsky Interviews*, ed. Andrew Dickos (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 37.

¹²⁶ John Green, *Willi Münzenberg, Fighter Against Fascism and Stalinism* (London: Routledge, 2020), 12-13.

his background became a driver to support arts that working-class people could engage with. Without any intellectual, political, or cultural life at home, Willi gained education through joining labor and Social democratic organizations, such as the Propaganda Club, and studying at the local library after factory shifts.¹²⁷ Communist and labor organizations provided opportunities for Münzenberg to learn, but also find community with people having shared experiences. Green summarizes Münzenberg's trajectory that led him to leading WIR cultural projects:

Underlying so many of his endeavors in the publishing, film, and propaganda worlds, Münzenberg was keenly aware that 'man does not live by bread alone,' and even though changing the economic system was central to bettering working people's lives, the cultural sphere could not be ignored. He was very conscious of his own culturally deprived upbringing, so was acutely aware of the nourishing role culture could and should play in working people's lives. Throughout the 1920s, *IAH* became deeply involved in promoting cultural activity as an essential element of its solidarity work, from organizing large entertainment events, supporting amateur dramatics, putting on art exhibitions, and encouraging worker photographers. It became extremely successful in providing workers with a cultural world outside their homes and workplaces and very different to the largely escapist ones offered by the establishment. Access to cultural activities that helped transport them beyond their own otherwise circumscribed lives played a key role in the development of many working-class boys and girls. The *IAH* offered them film showings, organized public meetings and seminars on current affairs, and, from 1929 onwards, organized an annual international day of solidarity.¹²⁸

This description reveals the genuine grassroots origins of working-class cultural projects in the 1920s-1930s. Münzenberg hoped the organization of Association of Worker Photographers and magazine *The Worker Photographer* "would provide further education and training."¹²⁹ Film collectives in Europe and US incorporated these same ideas into filmmaking, writing, exhibiting, and educating as their guiding principles.

In New York, grassroots cultural projects emerged from similar experiences. Jewish

¹²⁷ Ibid., 14.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 173.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 175.

cultural institutions, community centers, and film societies became hubs for intellectual exchange, where immigrants and working-class individuals could access films, lectures, and discussions. Jewish cultural and political clubs grew in the 1920s-1930s in New York. Tony Michels's *A Fire in Their Hearts* details several Yiddish socialist art and intellectual groups that formed important Jewish community in New York. Building on Russian-speaking intellectual movements from the 1880s, Yiddish socialist groups cultivated lecture circuits, workers' education, press, and arts events that united Jewish communities. Michels argues that Yiddish socialist movements in New York developed a transnational Yiddish socialist culture that provided important resources for local Jews and influenced movements in Russia. A main feature of these Yiddish groups was how they created cultural-political collectives tailored to their neighborhood needs and city conditions.¹³⁰ They also did so to narrate their own histories to preserve cultural heritage.

Communities and backgrounds informed their self-conception as individual artists and connections to one another. A study about homeless people in an art collective analyzed "how an empowering collective identity is formed among members with individual identities that are traditionally considered stigmatized in larger society." Kristen McCollum concluded that "identity formation is an essential part of collective action involving stigmatized identities..."¹³¹

¹³⁰ Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialism in New York* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 69-124.

¹³¹ Kristen McCollum, "The Art of Collective Identity," *Journal for Undergraduate Ethnography* (2013): 1, 15; Scott A. Hunt, Robert D. Benford, and David A. Snow, "Identity Fields: Framing Processes and the Social Construction of Movement Identities," in *New Social Movements: From Ideology to Identity*, ed. Enrique Laraña, Hank Johnston, and Joseph R. Gusfield (New York: Routledge, 1994), 185-208; James Jasper, "The Emotions of Protest: Affective and Reactive Emotions In and Around Social Movements," *Sociological Forum* vol. 13, no. 3 (1997): 397-424; Hank Johnston, Enrique Laraña, and Joseph R. Gusfield, "Identities, Grievances, and New Social Movements," in *New Social Movements: From Ideology to Identity*, ed. Enrique Laraña, Hank Johnston, and Joseph R. Gusfield (New York: Routledge, 1994), 3-35; Francesca Polletta and James M. Jasper, "Collective Identity and Social Movements," *Annual Review of Sociology* vol. 27 (2001): 283-305. Roy, William G. 2010. "How Social Movements Do Culture," *International Journal of Politics, Culture & Society* vol. 23 (2009): 85-98. Stephen Valocchi, "The Importance of being "We": Collective Identity and the Mobilizing Work of Progressive Activists in Hartford, Connecticut," *Mobilization* vol. 12, no. 1 (2009): 65-84; Carla Leshne, "The Film & Photo League of San

The intersection of Jewish and working-class identities gave rise to narratives that explored social issues, economic disparities, and the challenges faced by immigrant communities. Films became a medium through which collective members could articulate their perspectives on labor, social justice, and community resilience. Existing radical cultural and labor traditions in New York, along with proximity to people with shared identities and institutions with shared ideologies, supported the creation of a film studies “from below” in their own New York communities. Film collectives created works that had a “heightened sense of solidarity among specific subcultures and minority groups.”¹³² Creative New Yorkers who were Jews, immigrants, and leftists found community and connection in film collectives they created independently to carve out space for themselves in American society.

Workers’ Education and Clubs: Collective Educational Models

Collectivity became a principle derived from Jewish traditions of community as well as the nature of collective action as leftists. Film itself was a collaborative medium requiring various skills and people to complete a given work. The choice to focus on film collectives, their connections, and work to create just communities is inspired by several scholars and disciplinary frameworks. Michael Chanan’s *The Politics of Documentary*, for example, delves into the political dimensions of collective film production. His discussion about how collaborative efforts within collectives serve as a platform for political expression, activism, and resistance is particularly salient. Henry Jenkins in *Convergence Culture* builds on this analysis to explain how film collectives embody the principles of participatory culture. Collectives thus fostered a more inclusive and democratic approach to cultural production. *Community-Based Media: A Handbook for Public Health and Development* by Kevin Moloney and Susan McHale explores

Francisco," *Film History* vol. 18, no. 4 (2006): 361.

¹³² Nichols, “Documentary Film and the Avant-Garde,” 608.

how the role of collectives as catalysts for community development, activism, and the amplification of marginalized voices. These works tie in with historical scholarship about Soviet and American art collectives, such as *Building the Collective: Soviet Graphic Design 1917-1937* that catalogues how Soviets imagined a new collective society through art and labor. Scott Macdonald's histories of American film collectives Cinema 16 and Canyon Cinema also linger in the background of understanding formations and evolutions of film collectives in the twentieth century.¹³³

These perspectives emphasize the active involvement of community members in shaping their own narratives, much like members of FRS, FPL, and FSS were keen to do in the face of capitalist media's distortions of working people. Stuart Hall's "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse" is an essential approach for examining how media, including films produced by collectives, plays a role in shaping cultural identities and resisting dominant discourses.¹³⁴ In the case of film collectives, they produced and supported media that aided their agency in understanding Jewish, immigrant, communist, and working-class identities against the derogatory capitalist media images imposed on them. Patricia Mellencamp's *Fine Romance: Five Ages of Film Feminism* explores how feminist collectives in cinema challenge patriarchal structures, while Hamid Naficy's *An Accented Cinema* discusses how film collectives, particularly those situated in diasporic communities, contribute to the development of an "accented cinema" that challenges hegemonic narratives and represents diverse cultural

¹³³ Leah Dickerman, *Building the Collective: Soviet Graphic Design 1917-1937, Selections from the Merrill C. Berman Collection* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997); Scott Macdonald, *Canyon Cinema: The Life and Times of an Independent Film Distributor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Scott Macdonald, *Cinema 16: Documents Toward a History of the Film Society by Scott MacDonald* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005).

¹³⁴ The rise of digital media and networked collectives and the role of decentralized networks in fostering creativity is explored in Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

experiences. Media, therefore, can cultivate alternative narratives that reflect diverse voices and experiences. Film's role in "workers' education" for collectives was to construct narratives but also to build participatory political and artistic engagement.

Late-nineteenth-century Progressivist theories of participatory arts education combined with growing efforts to build labor organizing through educating workers in the social sciences, humanities, and arts in early twentieth century America. For film collectives, Progressivist ideas, along with growing concern over workers' education, connected to developing educational practices in the new Soviet Union. Ukrainian Historian Matthew Pauly emphasizes the importance of education for the Communist Party and Soviet state throughout the early twentieth century. He states, "Russia's October Revolution set off a period of violence and disorder, but it also created opportunity for significant intellectual, scientific, and artistic experimentation."¹³⁵ This experimentation did not stop in Eastern Europe and Russia. Pauly discusses how Soviet pedagogues in the 1920s sought to shift away from tsarist traditions toward experimental education. One impressive shift was that "The Soviet state offered free education for amateur artists and musicians, providing them with the necessary musical instruments and artistic tools at the Houses of Culture."¹³⁶ Clubs or collectives became increasingly important for sculpting young intellects and artistic talents as well as providing unique spaces for lower classes to access information and supplies. Scholar Ali Igmen's astute work on Kyrgyzstan remarks, "Nadezhda Krupskaya, a Bolshevik leader and the wife of Lenin, identified three essential functions of clubs: improving amateur talents, teaching Marxist ideology, and collectivizing the institution."¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Matthew Pauly, *Breaking the Tongue: Language, Education, and Power in Soviet Ukraine, 1923-1934* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022), 44.

¹³⁶ B. Shin, "Book Review: Reviewed work(s): *Speaking Soviet with an Accent: Culture and Power in Kyrgyzstan*," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* vol. 7, no. 1 (2016): 106-107.

¹³⁷ Ali F. Igmen, *Speaking Soviet with an Accent: Culture and Power in Kyrgyzstan* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012).

Krupskaia argued, “It is imperative to turn the clubs into collectives to promote amateur talents.”¹³⁸ The Russian Revolution inspired a collective mentality amongst radicals and made forming collectives to support arts, education, and labor seem most reliable to make change.

A similar transformative movement was underway in the US, particularly in metropolitan cities like New York and Chicago. Artists and intellectuals turned toward examining everyday life and conditions of the working classes. Moreover, overall ideas about education began shifting from authoritative models of students receiving information from an expert to cultivating the knowledge and creative production of learners themselves. Pauly notes that Ukrainian and Russian educators studied American models of educational reform, such as John Dewey’s experiential theory of pedagogy and Ellen Parkhurst’s individualized plan for children’s learning.¹³⁹ Just as much, the Soviet Union provided several models for the possibilities of communal, participatory American education. John Dewey was impressed with the Soviet Union’s educational and cultural systems when he visited in mid-1928.¹⁴⁰ Attempts to create a “new labour intelligentsia” were core to American film collectives just as they were to Soviet educational transformations in the 1920s-1930s.¹⁴¹ A reciprocal, multidirectional exchange of ideas characterized the rise of workers’ education globally.

Working-class labor schools emerged during the social and political movements of the

¹³⁸ Ibid. For more on the political, social, and cultural roles of education in the Soviet Union, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union 1921-1934* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); John Richardson, "The Origin of Soviet Education for Librarianship: The Role of Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya (1869–1939), Lyubov' Borisovna Khavkina-Hamburger (1871–1949) and Genrietta K. Abele-Derman (1882–1954)," *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* vol. 41 (Spring 2000): 115-117; Boris Raymond, *The Contribution of N. K. Krupskaya to the Development of Soviet Russian Librarianship: 1917–1939* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1978); Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment: Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts Under Lunacharsky, October 1917–1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Nadezhda Krupskaya, “*Chto dolzhny sdelat' kluby rabochikh?*” and “*Chto takoe klub,*” in *On Education: Selected Articles and Speeches* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1957).

¹³⁹ Pauly, *Breaking the Tongue*, 45-46.

¹⁴⁰ John Dewey, *Impressions of Soviet Russia and the Revolutionary World: Mexico, China, Turkey* (New York: New Republic, Inc., 1929), 21-45.

¹⁴¹ Pauly, *Breaking the Tongue*, 57.

nineteenth century, but grew mainly during the first decades of the twentieth century in the US. Initiatives like the Mechanics' Institutes emerged in nineteenth-century Britain, offering practical education to working-class adults. Socialist and progressive movements had firm commitments to reforming education in the early twentieth century. The Workers' Education Bureau of America (WEBA) emerged in 1921 in alliance with ideals of social justice, equality, and worker empowerment. These, however, were run by industrialists or union leaders. During the early 20th century, trade unions played a crucial role in establishing and supporting labor schools. Many unions recognized the importance of an educated and informed workforce. Unions established schools to provide workers with knowledge about their rights, but also to learn about labor history and cultivate practical skills relevant to their professions. While academic education was central, these schools often also emphasized vocational training tailored to the needs of specific industries. Labor schools expanded during the interwar period. Labor schools like the New York Workers School, Rand, and others served as intellectual and political hubs, allowing workers to build community.¹⁴² With growing industrialization, workers began organizing for better working conditions, higher wages, and improved quality of life. Workers' groups identified access and inequality issues across different schools, especially as it related to affluent, white areas and working-class multicultural areas of New York and other American cities.

In New York City, communists, socialists, and anarchists developed experimental

¹⁴² The Workers' Education Association (WEA) in the United Kingdom, for instance, aimed to provide affordable education to working-class adults, covering subjects ranging from literature to economics. The post-World War II era witnessed a renewed focus on adult education and worker training. Government policies, such as the G.I. Bill in the United States, facilitated access to education for veterans, contributing to the growth of working-class education institutions. Additionally, the civil rights movement emphasized educational equality, leading to the establishment of schools focused on empowering minority and marginalized communities. Jonathan Rose, "The Workers in the Workers' Educational Association, 1903-1950," *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* vol. 21, no. 4 (1989): 591-608.

schools for cultural and political education. The Modern School in NYC opened in 1909 and moved to New Jersey in 1914, lasting until 1953 as part of the Ferrer Movement that accrued “several hundred adult members” in the 1910s.¹⁴³ The Ferrer Center became home to many “Russian, Jewish, and Italian immigrants” and “moved into a working-class Jewish community on 107th Street near Central Park West” in October 1912 until 1915.¹⁴⁴ Formed on anarchist values, the Ferrer Movement also became a haven for a variety of leftists to experiment and engage with alternative forms of education. One appealing quality was that the Modern Schools were “schools for children of workers and directed by the workers themselves.”¹⁴⁵ They were based on cooperation and freedom of learning to “create not only a new type of school but also a new culture, a new life, a new world.”¹⁴⁶ Tager notes that although the school’s content did not focus mainly on working-class topics, but rather on fine arts and broad social sciences and humanities, the school did teach many working-class themes and “involved working-class parents in the education of their children.”¹⁴⁷ What makes this Modern School movement so crucial to this study is not for its direct links to film collectives, but the pedagogical values derived from working-class leftist politics. “The Ferrer movement tried to link cultural and educational radicalism with a spirit of militant class consciousness,” Veysey notes, and “For a long time it ran the only progressive school in America which deliberately sought a working-class clientele.”¹⁴⁸

Minor connections had rippling influences across radical circles in New York in the early

¹⁴³ Laurence R. Veysey, *The Communal Experience: Anarchist and Mystical Counter-cultures in America* (United Kingdom: Harper & Row, 1973), 79.

¹⁴⁴ Florence Tager, “Politics and Culture in Anarchist Education: The Modern School of New York and Stelton, 1911-1915,” *Curriculum Inquiry* vol. 16, no. 4 (1986): 399-401.

¹⁴⁵ Paul Avrich, “Preface,” *The Modern School Movement: Anarchism and Education in The United States* (Chico: AK Press, 2005), 1.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, xii.

¹⁴⁷ Tager, “Politics and Culture in Anarchist Education,” 411.

¹⁴⁸ Veysey, *The Communal Experience*, 78.

twentieth century. From 1909-1914 in New York and 1914-1953 in New Jersey, many radicals interacted with the Modern School. One such person was Harry Alan Potamkin. He was intrigued by the schooling practices to educated working-class people politically, aesthetically, and other subjects.¹⁴⁹ Because of Potamkin's connections, it is likely other film radicals knew of or interacted with the Modern School. Potamkin also participated in educational development in the John Reed Club, along with Sam Brody and others involved in the FPL. John Reed Clubs were centered in New York but scattered in urban cities around the US. Clubs frequently held lectures for members, mainly on Sunday afternoons or evenings. The Chicago club, for example, proclaimed "an interest in subjects which will increase our knowledge and prepare us for the work we are undertaking." "Work" here refers to the JRC project of gathering revolutionary Marxists artists to establish proletarian mass culture in the US.¹⁵⁰ In a city where numerous people invested in creating working-class education across the arts and other subjects, film collectives emerged within an environment budding with working-class leftist politics and creative educational approaches.

In addition, Jewish education also deeply shaped film collective members' approaches to film education. Members lived amongst several Jewish day schools and *yeshivot* (religious schools) in New York City. These schools taught Hebrew, Torah study, Talmud, and Jewish history, customs, and secular subjects. In 1928, Yeshiva University, which evolved from the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, combined secular and religious education. For working-class Jewish families, day schools often fell outside their budget. In lieu of these

¹⁴⁹ Filler, "Play and Circumstance," 24.

¹⁵⁰ John Reed Club to Melville J. Herskovits, Nov. 19, 1932, Box 20, Folder 2, "John Reed Club" in General Files: 1906-1942, Melville J. Herskovits (1895-1963) Papers, 1906-1963, Africana Manuscripts 6, Series 35/6, Northwestern University Archives, Evanston, IL; M. Lynn Weiss, *Gertrude Stein and Richard Wright: The Poetics and Politics of Modernism*, (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 6. Richard Wright, as secretary of the Chicago branch, invited lecturers. Weiss references Wright meeting anthropologist Melville Herskovits as a lecturer at the Chicago club.

institutions, lower-class Jewish families typically attended Talmud Torahs and afternoon Hebrew schools. Secular Yiddish schools, often affiliated with labor and socialist movements, included adult education with the Workmen's Circle (Arbeiter Ring) and Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute as core organizations. As the Depression ravaged New York families, Jewish communities rallied to support the Hebrew Free School Association to provide children with financial assistance to continue school. Other institutions emerged to help American Jews preserve and learn their Eastern European culture, while the Jewish People's University opened to offer courses on Jewish history, philosophy, and current events.¹⁵¹ Jewish educational traditions combined with emerging workers' schooling in the US.

Communist and workers' institutions often organized collective education in opposition to what they called capitalist schools. Capitalist schools, they argued, taught self-advancement and individual gain through competition. Ben Davidson, a co-director of the Communist New York Workers School, described the guiding mission as such in 1927, "The class is rather a cooperative enterprise, each learning as much as possible from the other[s], everyone contributing with an objective common to all—a better and stronger organization of the US working class."¹⁵² As Wolfe and Davidson reveal, education was community-based rather than school-based. That is, communal learning and participation were necessary for workers' and progressive arts education to succeed. Such a philosophy of cooperation and collectivity drove

¹⁵¹ Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 179-216; The Workman's Circle, *The Workmen's Circle: Its History, Ideals, Organization, and Institutions* (New York: The Workmen's Circle, 1936); Judah J. Shapiro, *The Friendly Society: A History of the Workmen's Circle*. (New York: Media Judaica, 1970).

¹⁵² D. Benjamin (pseudonym), "Capitalist Schools and Workers Schools," *The Student-Worker* vol. 1, no. 1 (Feb. 1927): 10; Marvin Gettleman, "The Lost World of United States Labor Education: Curricula at East and West Coast Communist Schools, 1944–1957," *American Labor and the Cold War: Grassroots Politics and Postwar Political Culture*, ed. Robert Cherny, William Issel, and Kiernan Walsh Taylor (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004): 205-215; Marvin Gettleman, "'No Varsity Teams': New York's Jefferson School of Social Science, 1943–1956," *Science & Society* vol. 66, no. 3 (2002): 336–59; J. Hunt, "Communists and the Classroom: Radicals in U.S. Education, 1930-1960," *Composition Studies* vol. 43, no. 2 (2015): 22-42.

the creation of aesthetic, political, and educational projects on the left. These examples provide ways to understand why folks believed collectives were the best mode of organizing film production, exhibition, schooling, and writing. As modes of teaching, these practices were firmly entrenched in collectivist principles that centered an expansive definition of education rooted in community teaching and learning. Workers and artists taught each other how to create stronger local, national, and global cooperation, and did so in a variety of locations in the city.

Collectives provided a platform for working-class individuals, including laborers and artists, to amplify their voices. Unions and workers' organizations collaborated with filmmakers to create narratives reflective of working-class lives and experiment with cultural expression. Workers' film collectives organized screenings, discussions, and educational programs to inform and mobilize their communities around labor issues and social justice. Film collectives' self-produced films served as a counterforce to mainstream narratives, but their various activities also contrasted capitalist film industries and individualist arts creation. As film collectives actively participated in political movements, they often collaborated with labor unions. The ethos of workers coming together to tell their stories and advocate for their rights drove educational projects across FSR, FPL, and FSS. These networks extended beyond geographical boundaries, creating a sense of interconnectedness among workers and activists on a national and, at times, international scale.

Learning to make films or understanding workers' experiences could immediately translate into providing relief or joining a demonstration within the same week. Self-study and guided methods of instructions became popular strategies. For instance, an ad in the 1923 *Soviet Russia Pictorial* encouraged students to "to devote a few hours of their spare time" to reading the paper as a learning opportunity for information on the Soviet Union, but also labor activities in

the US and political, economic, and cultural subjects.”¹⁵³ Images, they argued, were important to educating readers. Merging traditional academic studying with expansive opportunities to learn became crucial to developing film studies and working-class intellectual communities throughout the 1920s-1930s.

Transnational and National Collective Film Networks

Art, intellectual, film, and workers’ collectives arose across the US during the interwar period. While the focus here is on the US—mainly in New York—and collectives’ networks with those in the Soviet Union and European countries, it is imperative to keep in view the transnational emergence and growth of collectives across all continents. From Mexico to Canada and China to South Africa, film societies, experimental cinema, and educational film scholarship expanded to exchange aesthetic and political ideas. Film gained traction as a tool against colonialism and capitalism. It also gained use as a revolutionary medium for representation, justice, power, and structural change.¹⁵⁴ In the US, collectives formed out of these principles to leverage collaborative film activities for workers’ rights.

Two important workers’ cultural organizations that operated in the 1910s were the Soviet Proletkult and the American *Masses* group. *The Masses* was a prominent American socialist monthly magazine with core members who assembled in 1911 until the magazine’s end in 1917. The group was based primarily in New York but also had smaller groups in major cities across

¹⁵³ “Students” advertisement, *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (May 1923): 107.

¹⁵⁴ Wasson and Grieveson, *Useful Cinema*; Ryall, *Britain and American Cinema*, 8.; Stephanie J. Smith, “Envisioning the Revolution: Art and the Creation of Mexico’s Communist Party,” *Journal of Labor and Society* (published online ahead of print, 2023); Stephanie J. Smith, “Art and the Creation of Mexico’s Communist Party, 1919–1930,” *The Power and Politics of Art in Postrevolutionary Mexico* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Scholarship Online, May 2018); Cui Zhou, “Scenes of The Turbulent Days: On The 1930s Chinese Leftist Film Movement,” PhD diss. (University of California Santa Barbara, 2016); Malek Khouri, *Filming Politics: Communism and the Portrayal of the Working Class at the National Film Board of Canada, 1939-46* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2007); Femi Okiremuete Sbaka, “Instructional Cinema in Colonial Africa: An Historical Reappraisal,” *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* (1999): 27-47; Macdonald, *Canyon Cinema*; “Jacopo Galimberti,” *Individuals Against Individualism: Art Collectives in Western Europe (1956-1969)* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017).

the US. Max Eastman, Crystal Eastman, John Reed, Art Young, and Floyd Dell were among the radical artists and intellectuals who founded the group to support a platform for writers, artists, and political activists to address labor rights, women's suffrage, anti-war, and anti-imperialism. Their dedication to literature, art, and criticism's abilities to mobilize readers toward progressive causes combined with their devotion to literary and avant-garde artistic experimentation. *The Masses'* writers and artists covered strikes, protests, and labor struggles to produce writings and images in the magazines in support of American workers. As WWI evolved, the magazine became increasingly vocal about anti-imperialism and anti-war principles, publishing several anti-war pieces in *The Masses*. Members published similar work in other magazines, such as *The Seven Arts*. In 1917, when the US government invoked the Espionage Act, the New York group faced several violent raids by government officials that destroyed their offices, printing tools, and inspired great fear amongst socialists and leftists across the US. The government charged the magazine's editors for obstructing military recruitment and forcibly suspended *The Masses* in 1917. This was at the same moment that William Kruse and three others were tried by this same Act for their involvement in the Socialist Party. Such repression, however, further reinforced to leftist artists and intellectuals that disseminating their art and information was indeed a powerful tool against capitalist states like the US. *The Masses'* radical ideas and artistic expressions along with the agitation they created within the US government inspired American art and film collectives to develop these propaganda projects further with new strategies rather than stop.

Proletkult, meaning "Proletarian Culture," emerged in 1917 alongside the revolution in the Soviet Union as a movement to develop a distinct proletarian culture representative of the working class instead of inheriting bourgeois culture of the tsarist eras. In *Culture of the Future*, historian Lynn Mally notes in the section "Culture by the Proletariat," the earlier origins of

Proletkult with growing workers' organizations after the 1905 Revolution. This period witnessed the growth of "workers' clubs and educational societies closely tied to the labor movement." Moreover, many names of these organizations were "Enlightenment," "Education," and "Knowledge," which Mally notes highlights "workers' desire for education and entertainment."¹⁵⁵ Proletkult in Petrograd and Moscow prepared art journals such as *Create!* And *Furnace* in the early 1920s that included images, poetry, theater, criticism, and advertisements for upcoming programming and information about labor events.¹⁵⁶ Mally states that many labeled Proletkult an "educational society" and that "By far the most common activity in Proletkult cultural sectors, however, was to offer training and education in Russia's prerevolutionary cultural heritage."¹⁵⁷ Based on Marxist ideas, Proletkult understood art and culture as integral to class struggle. American workers' schools and film groups mirrored this strategy to rethink the origins of the US and the class-based system that shaped most American institutions.

As this education helped workers understand their history, it also showed what Proletkult members could do differently to change traditional models and cultural norms. Rather than teaching reliance on "masters," the group instead taught "creative autonomy" and "independent action."¹⁵⁸ For example, Proletkult teachers and students participated in "workshops run collectively by the students" with curriculum mixing arts instruction and social science.¹⁵⁹ One author in 1919 observed that, "In Proletkult studios [literary studios] a new, comradely, unified artistic environment is taking shape and precisely such an environment...usually is the soil that

¹⁵⁵ Lynn Mally, *Culture of the Future: The Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 16.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 118-122.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 123-125.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 238.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 127.

nurtures the sprouts of a new, young art.”¹⁶⁰ Collaborative and practices, therefore, became synonymous with innovation because it offered new ways of learning and doing arts. Exchanging ideas freely without the need to be an “expert” or having space to try new concepts without the risks of failing a class or reprimand from an authoritative teacher cultivated curiosity. Workshop environments supported problem solving and skill development in experiential ways.

Proletkult’s ideas and practices are important for understanding American film collectives because of the group’s desire to break away from traditional artistic norms and elitist cultural institutions, emphasizing the active participation of workers in the creation of art, literature, and film. As Mally notes,

Artistic workshops were not supposed to rely on professional teachers or to follow the lead of professional artistic schools. Ideally, they would incorporate the real problems of daily life in works created by and for the participants themselves. Discussion groups and classes were intended to address issues directly concerning the members, rather than following rigid course outlines.¹⁶¹

Relating studying to students’ daily lives challenged artists to see how art could be a force in education and politics. Proletkult recognized the transformative potential of film as a medium for mass communication and as an educational tool to disseminate revolutionary ideas. Teaching students to apply concepts to producing art and labor action fostered workshop environments that created a reciprocal flow of information and art from inside the workshops and in participants’ daily lives. Proletkult advocated for film education programs to empower workers as producers, audiences, and students of cinema. Film, as a collective art form, supported mass organizing, especially with agitprop cinema. Agitprop, as its name implies, intended to agitate established systems and propagandize revolutionary ideas. Such films involved direct and persuasive styles,

¹⁶⁰ M.T., “V Moskovskom Proletkul’te,” *Narodnoe prosveshchenie*, no. 32 (1919): 20, in Mally, *Culture of the Future*, 127.

¹⁶¹ Mally, *Culture of the Future*, 238- 249.

usually with simple narratives to convey political messages. While sometimes films could be didactic, Proletkult also supported experimental and avant-garde approaches to filmmaking. Like film collectives in the US and communist artists groups like Social Surrealists, Proletkult members believed artistic innovation could serve the revolutionary cause. Sergei Eisenstein, for example, spent 1920-1924 as a leader in the Proletkult Theater, which profoundly influenced his subsequent film work throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

Initially, Proletkult operated somewhat autonomously but in support of the Soviet state. As the Soviet government sought greater control over cultural institutions throughout the 1920s and workers' institutions began criticizing state actions, however, the state dissolved Proletkult in the mid-1920s. In 1932, the Communist Party and Soviet government demanded the end of all cultural institutions not directly run by the Party or state. Proletkult's internal and external issues with professionalization, financial support, and stylistic and content of "workers' art" also contributed to its instability that made a united front against dissolution ineffective. Despite its collapse, Proletkult's emphasis on the active participation of the working class in cultural production and film as a political force became core principles of later workers' film and art collectives in the US, Europe, and Soviet Union. While Proletkult's direct influence on American film may be limited, Proletkult's agitational culture and grassroots artistic creation resonated with workers' artistic and intellectual currents in the US. One woman worker of the Kostroma Proletkult in 1919 announced: "Now in our club we workers study subjects that were once unknown to us."¹⁶² Workers' collectives broadened access to education and supplies to create meaningful learning experiences for workers. This political spirit and celebration of knowledge acquisition became a model for workers' educational and artistic programs in the US, Europe,

¹⁶² Ibid., 137.

and Soviet Union throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

Proletkult's successes and reach inspired plans to build international cultural groups. In 1920, the Workers' International Relief (WIR) formed. This organization began after the Bolshevik Revolution as a relief organization for Soviet workers, farmers, orphans, and others facing hardships due to both WWI and civil wars. A major impetus for WIR's creation was to support Soviets affected by famine. Another core reason was to raise global support for Soviet and communist leadership in hopes of inspiring similar revolutionary movements in other countries. Based in Germany, Willi Münzenberg led the cultural wing of the WIR to orchestrate communist cultural activities, focusing on film as a propaganda and educational tool. The Workers' International Relief (WIR) film unit played a significant role in the history of working-class film production, particularly during the tumultuous times of the 1920s and 1930s. As an integral part of the broader international workers' movement, the WIR film unit aimed to use cinema as a powerful tool for advocacy, education, and solidarity. The WIR film unit recognized the educational potential of cinema and used it for political education. Films produced by the unit were often accompanied by discussions, study guides, and screenings in workers' educational settings. The goal was to empower workers with knowledge about their rights, the history of labor movements, and the global struggles for social and economic justice.

When the Friends of Soviet Russia formed in New York City as the US arm of the WIR on August 9, 1921, active Socialist and later Communist-Party leader William Kruse headed the film unit to produce and exhibit workers' films. Kruse was a sheet metal worker in New York who became increasingly enamored by film. With financial support of the WIR, he traveled to the Soviet Union on several occasions to assemble Soviet newsreels and shoot his own footage to create at least five known multi-reel documentaries shown in the US. Teaching himself and

likely learning from Soviets during his trips, Kruse had no formal training in filmmaking, nor did any film schooling in the US exist he or others could attend. Kruse did interact with the Soviet proletarian film group Proletkino, which operated in 1922-1926 and connected with US groups to distribute workers' and Soviet films. A film strip for *Beauty and the Bolshevik: A Red Army Romance*, produced by Proletkino in the Soviet Union, states that Kruse "titled and adapted" *Beauty and the Bolshevik* for American, English-speaking audiences. One frame details that "Proletkino is a film company owned and operated by a group of Russian Trade Unions, Co-operatives, and other labor organizations."¹⁶³ Kruse edited English versions of *Polikushka* and *Combrig Ivanov*, among others.¹⁶⁴ While Kruse's involvement with the Communist Party significantly waned by the end of the 1920s due to factional tensions, his film activities with the FSR reveals a lineage of self-fashioned film education on the American left.

FSR began originally to provide relief for famine in Soviet Russia.¹⁶⁵ Named the *Povolzhye* famine, it peaked in 1921-1922. Poor rail and country transportation systems, the Bolshevik Revolution, civil war, WWI, and internal government economic conditions caused the *Povolzhye* famine. Destroyed agricultural production as well as wartime seizures of food for soldiers ravaged Volga and Ural areas caused mass starvation, poverty, orphaning, desperation, and revolt. While fatality data ranges widely, two million to five million is the typical range cited in textbooks and amongst historians.¹⁶⁶

Hoover and the American government formed the American Relief Administration

¹⁶³ *Beauty and the Bolshevik* film negative of title cards, 1924, Box 1, William F. Kruse papers [manuscript], ca. 1915-1940s, Chicago History Museum Archives, Chicago, IL.

¹⁶⁴ "Films Edited, Produced, or Narrated by Wm. F. Kruse," 2, n.d., Box 1, William F. Kruse papers [manuscript], ca. 1915-1940s, Chicago History Museum Archives, Chicago, IL.

¹⁶⁵ FSR headquarters moved from NYC to Chicago in October 1923. Branches in New York remained and in several urban locations in the US.

¹⁶⁶ Bertrand M. Patenaude, Joan Nabseth Stevenson, *Bread + Medicine: American Famine Relief in Soviet Russia, 1921-1923* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press and Stanford University, 2023).

(ARA) in 1919 to provide relief, but it was difficult to gather mass American support for the newly communist state, particularly because of fearful anti-communist laws and sentiments. Moreover, Hoover and US government motives for providing Soviet famine relief and relief to Poland, Belgium, and other countries were primarily to exhibit capitalist and US national power. Many US state officials hoped that creating relief reliance would keep the Soviet state weak and confine Bolshevism's influence.¹⁶⁷ Rather than the public perception that famine relief was the main humanitarian mission, Hoover and his officials privately discussed the driving idea that "Fighting Bolshevism was humanitarian."¹⁶⁸ While FSR supported any relief efforts due to the dire conditions, the organization refocused its relief on supporting Soviet workers and strengthening the communist state. FSR published several articles praising "Russian cooperatives" in their outlet *Soviet Russia Pictorial*. Articles highlighted clubs in factories that included lectures, literary circles, and artist societies as well as theoretical discussions about developing "working class culture" from Soviet leaders such as Bukharin.¹⁶⁹ FSR recognized that most mainstream images of Soviets depicted their struggles as the fault of communist politics and economics with backwards culture that American capitalism could rescue. FSR therefore turned to presenting images of Soviets as resiliently rebuilding their new nation in solidarity with communism to get more Americans interested in the possibilities of revolution.

Kepley states that in the US, the WIR was "dormant" in the late 1920s. However, a more accurate analysis is that WIR activities shifted to other avenues as the FSR waned and WIR partners in America turned their attention to ongoing labor efforts and social inequalities in the

¹⁶⁷ Benjamin M. Weissman, "Herbert Hoover and the Famine in Soviet Russia, 1921-23" in *Herbert Hoover Reassessed*, ed. Mark Hatfield (Washington, D.C.: USPGO, 1981), 390–396.

¹⁶⁸ Bertrand M. Patenaude "Race against Anarchy," *Hoover Institution* (April 20, 2020): 200, www.hoover.org/research/race-against-anarchy.

¹⁶⁹ JG Ohsol, "The Russian Co-operatives," *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (Jan 1923): 7; "Bukharin on Working Class Culture" *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (Feb 1923): 18.

US rather than focusing on bringing those abroad to American audiences. In the 1920s in New York, WIR helped build the Workers' Camera Club and then the I.L.D. Photo Group, both of which led into the FPL.¹⁷⁰ Before the FPL formed, however, Leo Hurwitz, Potamkin, and Brody were involved with the WIR and "met frequently at WIR's offices to screen and discuss films. The group secured foreign, especially Soviet, films from Weltfilm and by 1931 was distributing 45 titles..."¹⁷¹ These were key experiences for people like Hurwitz, Potamkin, and Brody to watch and study these films. WIR members realized the increasing need for a collective focused on film and photography. Hurwitz recalled his reasons for participating in WIR activities and joining the FPL as based on shifting understandings of society and inequality from individualist to collective mentalities on the left. "[We] saw that their [struggling Americans] lives were interlocked with others, that social forces played a vital role in the destinies of individuals," Hurwitz emphasized. "It was not necessary, or even possible, to steer away from the obvious truths the streets were telling us."¹⁷² These truths were the homelessness, unemployment, antisemitism, poverty, racism, sexism, and a capitalist system that continuously failed the majority of society. A powerful turn happened with the efforts of individuals joining groups to make these issues and viable solutions known. Hurwitz stated, "What happened in the 1930s was that repressed voices became manifest; passivity was transformed into militancy; isolated individuals became congregations of powerful ideas. Social structures were affected."¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰ "Pre-Conference Discussion" for the Film and Photo League National Conference with Jay Leyda's history of leftist cinema and the FPL in the United States so far, 1934, TAM. 083: 82501, Box 22, Folder 7, Jay and Si-Lan Chen Leyda Papers, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University Special Collections, New York, NY; Kepley, however, is focused on the WIR as central to the European left with American operations as simply another spot for filmwork to occur. Vance Kepley, Jr., "The Workers' International Relief and the Cinema of the Left 1921-1935," *Cinema Journal* vol. 23, no. 1 (1983): 7-23; 18.

¹⁷¹ Kepley, "The Workers' International Relief and the Cinema of the Left," 18.

¹⁷² The Museum of Modern Art Department of Film: A Tribute to the Film and Photo League program notes for exhibition with Leo Hurwitz's prepared discussion to accompany the screening, Feb. 1, 1990, Box 41, Folder 34, Leo Hurwitz Collection, Moving Images Department, George Eastman Museum, Rochester, NY. (hereafter cited as Tribute to the Film and Photo League, 1990, George Eastman Museum).

¹⁷³ Ibid.

Collectives brought power to ideas to transform them into actions. Participating in collectives meant connecting with others to pursue shared goals—in this case, a more egalitarian society.

It was by the end of the 1920s when a more organized cinema group emerged in the Film and Photo League. The WIR established the FPL in New York in 1929-1930 to form a dedicated film and photo unit of the Communist Party that would grow and streamline many of the political, cultural, and intellectual efforts Kruse and FSR had initiated in the early 1920s. The FPL pledged to “work collectively in an independent organization pledged to ‘conquer the film’ for the working class.” Kepley notes how most histories of the 1920s center Hollywood developments, but how histories of collectives who “resist the dominant trend and establish alternative cinema organizations” are necessary to understand this era.¹⁷⁴ Comprised of young Jews and immigrants, members deeply believed in the social and intellectual value of film, especially documentary and avant-garde styles, to build solidarity amongst American workers and project images that could change socio-political conditions. Members of the FPL frequently designed educational programs oriented toward workers to learn and teach about film.

The Film and Sprockets Society began in 1934 after Bernard Gordon and Julian Zimet became inspired to create a film group at City College after attending Film and Photo League events. FSS was a “film-appreciation group” in the phrase of Ellen Gordon, Bernard’s wife.¹⁷⁵ Though documents on the Film and Sprockets Society are sparse before 1936 to locate an exact date of origin, an article in *The Campus* from January 1937 notes that “after more than a year of experimentation,” a FSS program would occur at CCNY.¹⁷⁶ Zimet and Gordon attended FPL meetings regularly and used FPL and WIR film equipment. They also participated in FPL actions

¹⁷⁴ Kepley, “The Workers’ International Relief and the Cinema of the Left,” 7.

¹⁷⁵ Valerie J. Nelson, “Bernard Gordon, 88; Blacklisted Screenwriter Led ’99 Kazan Protest,” *Los Angeles Times* (May 12, 2007), <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2007-may-12-me-gordon12-story.html>.

¹⁷⁶ Bernard Gordon, “Film -Sprockets Club Plans to Trace Movies’ History,” *The Campus* (Jan. 5, 1937): 4.

against fascist and antisemitic films, such as those against *SA Mann* in 1934-1935. Irving Lerner attended Film and Sprockets screenings, as CCNY's student paper *The Campus* reported.¹⁷⁷ In 1954-1955, Irving Lerner and Julien Zimet corresponded on possible projects together, which shows the long-standing bond of members across collectives.¹⁷⁸ Members of FSS were invested in both distinguishing film as a modern art and promoting the serious study of film. Trialing as early as 1934 with showing films through the Art Department, FSS developed into an established organization by late 1935 and started running consistent film series by 1936.¹⁷⁹

Collectives were not always coordinated with one another, nor were they always within. Kruse left the WIR in 1928 after being "expelled from the Communist Party in 1928 over an ideological dispute."¹⁸⁰ WIR ended in 1935 to turn towards Popular Front activities. Bernard Gordon mentions in his memoir that while he supported most FPL activities, he and Zimet were not always as interested in the politics as they were in being able to use FPL and WIR film equipment and attend meetings where they could learn more about film. One purpose of this study is to illustrate that despite internal and external tensions, members across multiple collectives in the 1920s-1930s maintained a shared commitment to values of community as

¹⁷⁷ "Film Sprockets Has Aroused Series Opens Tonight; Has Aroused Interest of Movie World," *The Campus* (March 19, 1937): 1.

¹⁷⁸ Script written by Bernard Gordon and Julien Zimet called *Bimini Run*, 1950, Collection 112, Box 7, Folder 4, Lerner Collection Irving Lerner papers, 1935-1978, Performing Arts Special Collections, Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles, CA; Script written by Bernard Gordon called *Goodbye California*, n.d., Collection 112, Box 7, Folder 7, Lerner Collection Irving Lerner papers, 1935-1978, Performing Arts Special Collections, Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles, CA; Script written by Bernard Gordon and Arnaud d'Usseau called *How to Become President of the United States*, Dad, 1968, Collection 112, Box 7, Folder 5, Lerner Collection Irving Lerner papers, 1935-1978, Performing Arts Special Collections, Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles, CA; Script written by Bernard Gordon and Julian Halevy called *Land of the Giant Women*, 1972, Collection 112, Box 7, Folder 6, Lerner Collection Irving Lerner papers, 1935-1978, Performing Arts Special Collections, Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles, CA.

¹⁷⁹ Gordon, *The Gordon Files*, 27. Bernard Gordon also recalled, "A few friends and I organized the Film and Sprockets Society, which was one of the very first efforts to introduce series film study at an American college." Gordon, *Hollywood Exile*, 2.

¹⁸⁰ William F. Kruse, interview by Russell Merritt and Vance Kepley, 1975, in Vance Kepley, Jr., "The Workers' International Relief and the Cinema of the Left 1921-1935," *Cinema Journal* vol. 23, no. 1 (1983): 7-23; 18.

necessary to advancing workers' rights and access to education.

Cultural Collaboration: Values of Collectivity in Organizations

Culture and the arts became increasingly integrated into left-wing labor organizing efforts in the early twentieth century. Starting in 1905, Wobblies in the International Workers of the World (IWW) joined in song, led by Joe Hill, to share ideas about workers' rights. Themes such as eight-hour workdays, organizing unskilled laborers, and creating a massive union to break free from poverty and starvation featured in IWW songs. Agitational at their core, IWW's songs riled up workers to be more militant in direct actions and ideologies to overthrow capitalism. Specific labor cultural groups also formed in the first decades of the twentieth century and grew in the 1930s. Especially in New York, workers' theaters, dance, music, painting, and literature groups emerged to promote culture and arts as key political tools to overthrow capitalism and create workers' culture. Many groups affiliated themselves with communism or even CPUSA. As workers' presses like *The Daily Worker* and *New Masses* increased publication, each edition included ads throughout the volume for meetings, schools, exhibitions, or events across all these workers' clubs. While groups often specialized in different art forms, collaborating across forms was essential to their functionality and ability to educate and interest a variety of Americans.

One way collectivity operated with film collectives is their connections forged with various other communist and leftist groups in the US and abroad. Many figures were involved in other workers' projects and groups. Lester Balog, for example, who worked on *Passaic* in the 1920s and FPL films in the 1930s was a member of a Communist workers' soccer league in the 1920s. The CPUSA created the Labor Sports Union in the 1920s that later became the Workers' Sports Association. Balog immigrated from Hungary to NYC and played with New York City's

Hungarian Workers soccer league at seventeen years old.¹⁸¹ Michael Denning has masterfully detailed the many cultural organizations and projects during the Depression.

Beyond other art collectives, film groups importantly collaborated with larger labor organizations or operated as a unit within organizations such as the FSR or WIR. In 1934, *New Theater* reported that “The FPL worked in active cooperation with other Communist front organizations producing films for the Workers International Relief, the International Labor Defense, the League Against War and Fascism, the League of Struggle for Negro Rights, Consumers Union, and the revolutionary unions.”¹⁸² Labor outlets also increasingly shared updates on film collectives’ activities around the US. Advertisements for Russian-Soviet movies and film reviews appeared more frequently in *The Daily Worker* and *New Masses* throughout the 1920s-1930s. Readers could learn about a Seattle milk workers’ strike next to an article about how unions can rent and screen *Passaic Textile Strike* or plans for an antifascist action alongside an ad for FPL’s upcoming exhibition at the New School. Though it is sometimes implied, the connections between the John Reed Clubs and Workers’ Film and Photo League are closer than typically recorded.

Film educational networks grew across collectives. Founder of the Film and Sprockets Society Bernard Gordon and Julian Zimet attended Film and Photo League meetings, protests,

¹⁸¹ The Workers’ Music League, Workers’ Laboratory Theater, Workers’ Dance Group all existed in New York and were part of the WIR. Gabe Logan, “C’m on, You Reds: The U.S. Communist Party’s Workers’ Soccer Association, 1927–35,” *Journal of Sport History* Vol. 44, no. 3 (Fall 2017), 388; Fava, “The Composers’ Collective of New York,” 332; “Workers Laboratory Theater,” *New York Herald Tribune* (May 13, 1934): D6. “Workers Theatre to Present a New Play: ‘Newsboy’ Will Be Offered at the Local ‘Y’ in Early December,” *The New York Amsterdam News* (Dec. 1, 1934): 10. The play happened in Harlem at the YMCA where they also called for African American actors to join for an upcoming production. Raphael Samuel and Tom Thomas, “‘Black is Only a Color’ Documents and Texts from the Workers’ Theatre Movement (1928-1936),” *History Workshop* no. 4 (Autumn 1977): 102-142; Douglass McDermott, *Agitprop: Production Practice in the Workers’ Theatre, 1932–1942* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt, “Centre Stage: Radical Theatre in America, 1925-1934,” *RACAR: revue d’art canadienne / Canadian Art Review* vol. 19, no. 1/2 (1992): 112-122.

¹⁸² Leo Hurwitz, “Survey of Workers Films: A Report to the National Film Conference,” *New Theater* (Oct. 1934): 28.

and used their facilities. Experimental Cinema editor and FPL member Lewis Jacobs attended Film and Sprockets exhibitions. The “collectivity” of these groups moves beyond the individual, internal organization and extends to the collective work in New York City across film groups and leftist organizations. It was a collective project of building workers collectives and cooperation across collectives, even though conflicts did cause schisms and challenges. *The New Yorker* also advertised Film Arts Guild exhibitions of Soviet Films throughout the late 1920s, while *NYT* advertised FPL exhibitions across NYC. Movie magazines also included several mentions about leftist cinema, including activities of FSR, FPL, and FSS.

Ideas of collective education and artistry frequently challenged individualistic myths in American society. Collectivity in film groups served aesthetic, pedagogical, and political purposes. For film, collective education was especially poignant. Making film requires collaboration from photographing, editing, writing, direction, intertitle creation, and other activities. Painting and other art forms are not solo endeavors either. They frequently require collaboration in studios, networks to get supplies, and exhibition or market connections. Film, however, tends to more readily welcome and recognize collaboration as core to its creation. Moreover, organizing education was imperative because there were few opportunities to study film in the US, especially non-Hollywood cinema.

Teaching and learning were collective in that individuals within groups and across groups united in their belief in film and activities surrounding film as instructional and important to the labor movement. They also brought together exhibitions, distribution networks, labor and protest actions, journal-making, schooling, and filmmaking to form a collective educational project requiring each of these to function. Compared to some educational and cultural movements that upheld values of objectivity or education for education’s sake, film collectives employed

“engaged, activist education” as historian Marvin Gettleman calls it.¹⁸³ While many who participated, like Hurwitz, Potamkin, and others enjoyed learning as an activity, their involvement in film collectives was to learn film techniques, aesthetics, and politics to apply to labor movement activities, strikes, political change, and everyday betterment.

Learning was also a process integral to daily life experiences. It was not dependent on attending a classroom at an elite school. For workers’ film collectives, this idea was particularly important because it supported their projects to document ordinary people and activities that helped educate about how to make their daily lives more livable. John Dewey’s *Art as Experience*, published in 1934, analyzes how humans have aesthetic experiences in everyday life—both immediate and learned experiences. Dewey challenges conventional notions of art as a mere object or final product, instead emphasizing the role of engagement with art and the processes of creation. While museums or galleries may house important, beautiful art, art can also involve ordinary experiences such as cooking or walking down the street. Dewey asserts that an experiential approach to aesthetics involves having emotional, sensory, and intellectual engagement with the environment. Much like workers’ collectives argued, Dewey argued that art and aesthetic experiences are inseparable from human existence. Dewey proposed a similar argument in *Experience and Education* in 1938. Here, Dewey focuses on interactive and experiential learning approaches that are part of everyday life rather than a separate or isolated activity in the classroom. Dewey emphasized that hands-on experiences and “learning by doing” could develop deeper understandings of subjects and allow students to form connections across

¹⁸³ Marvin Gettleman, “The Lost World of United States Labor Education: Curricula at East and West Coast Communist Schools, 1944–1957,” *American Labor and the Cold War: Grassroots Politics and Postwar Political Culture*, ed. Robert Cherny, William Issel, and Kiernan Walsh Taylor (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004): 205–215; Marvin Gettleman, “‘No Varsity Teams’: New York’s Jefferson School of Social Science, 1943–1956,” *Science & Society* vol. 66, no. 3 (2002): 336–59.

experiences and existing knowledge.¹⁸⁴ Participatory education therefore requires a collaborative approach amongst students, their fellow learners, and teachers. It also involves working with one's environment to analyze real-world issues and apply concepts in practical settings that are meaningful to their daily lives.

Bringing Dewey into the conversation here is an attempt to illustrate the multidirectional flows of ideas about participatory progressive education during the early twentieth century. This study of film collectives presents a different angle to understand how grassroots organizations could form pedagogical theories and practices. It is not clear whether film collectives actively read Dewey's works or actively attended his lectures. However, a 1936 FPL ad for their sponsored screening of *Road to Life* includes a generous quote from Dewey promoting the film. And *The New Masses* supported his 1936 book *Liberalism and Social Action*.¹⁸⁵ Some communist organizations that remained stubbornly invested in the Soviet Union despite Stalin turned to denouncing Dewey by 1938-1940 for his critiques of the Soviet state as totalitarian, which also points to a fragile dynamic amongst liberal thinkers and communist organizations. The important idea here is that Dewey's ideas are illustrative of the shifts in pedagogy during the 1920s-1930s from top-down hierarchical education to participatory horizontal relational learning. Even if Dewey's *School and Society*, *Art as Experience*, *Experience and Education* or other works were not directly influential to film collectives, their educational approaches overlap in several areas. Dewey's ideas about experiential learning and collaboration with other humans and one's environment can help better understand film collectives' pedagogical approaches just as much as film collectives can illustrate the importance of such ideas for working-class

¹⁸⁴ John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997 [1938]); John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Berkeley Publishing Group, 2005 [1934]).

¹⁸⁵ Corliss Lamont, "John Dewey, Marxism and the United Front (Review of *Liberalism and Social Action*, by John Dewey)," *The New Masses* (March 3, 1936): 22.

Americans. While these pedagogical ideas circulated across continents and classes, film collectives tailored collaborative participatory educational methods to needs of working-class people.

In grassroots organizations, participatory education was not always perfect, and tensions certainly arose as to whether teaching and learning were truly non-hierarchical or not. Tensions frequently arose in large labor organizations such as the AFL, CPUSA, and even John Reed Clubs. Factional splits arose in film collectives, particularly in the Film and Photo League toward the mid-1930s. However, members of FSR, FPL, and FSS expressed their creative freedoms and grassroots decision-making processes. Members collaboratively decided trajectories of their projects and organizations. That collectives in the US were member and grassroots-driven rather than Comintern or CPUSA-driven is key to understanding the operations of these groups. Decisions about what to film, how to train members, what films to exhibit, and how to create journals were collectively made. Members at the time and in interviews since frequently remarked that they did not run on central orders from the Communist Party or institutional oversight. The relative freedom members had within collectives was cited as both a creative joy as well as a difficulty for keeping the collectives running. Sam Brody noted,

I cannot remember a single instance where we were told what to do and how to do it by political people by communists or others. We were on our own and we thought we knew what we were doing. The communist party had no hand in what we were doing. There were communists among us, technocrats, liberal democrats. Decisions were always collective. We had meetings where we voted on what to do and things were proposed.¹⁸⁶

Teaching and studying were avenues of community building for people who saw working-class issues and film as connected. Much of this education was also collective in that it addressed concerns for foreign-born Americans, Jewish Americans, African Americans, women, and

¹⁸⁶ Brody, interview with Judy Pomer, 1987.

colonized peoples.¹⁸⁷ As Gettleman notes, effective teaching in workers education was typically based on connecting to workers and captivating attention to train rather than transmit “party line” doctrines.¹⁸⁸ Film collectives did undoubtedly share party ideas, but members’ creative skills often presented that information uniquely with multiple perspectives and their decentralized structures allowed them to tailor film activities to their local issues or issues membership decided were most meaningful at the time.

Part of this structure also involved valuing non-professional skills and ideas. An important draw to film collectives was their focus on amateurism and grassroots practices. Amateurism was crucial to collaboration and bringing people into film collectives. Because these activities were collective and contingent, individuals cycled into multiple different areas. Jumping into an activity or learning on the fly characterized many projects of groups. Even with planned events, many individuals involved took up new skills or environments. Being “amateurs” signaled strength and innovation rather than weakness or deficits. Not being professionalized was a main identifier for groups like the FSR and FPL, as they directly challenged Hollywood professionalism and capitalist specialization or separation of labor. By constantly experimenting with new mixes of content, camera workers, and locations, each film, writing, exhibition, and course brought fresh perspective even if the overall messages of anti-capitalism, antifascism, and systemic social change remained relatively consistent. Folks were producers of films—from directing to photographing to screenwriting to editing—while also being audiences to the films they showed, teachers and students of this material, emerging film

¹⁸⁷ Marvin E. Gettleman, "The New York Workers School, 1923-1944: Communist Education in American Society," in *New Studies in the Politics and Culture of U.S. Communism*, ed. Michael E. Brown et. al. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1993), 266-67.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 272; Marvin Gettleman, "Communists in Higher Education: C.C.N.Y. and Brooklyn College on the Eve of the Rapp-Coudert Investigation, 1935-1939," paper presented at the 70th Annual Meeting of the Organization of American Historians, Atlanta, GA., 1977.

critics, theorists, historians, and exhibition-distribution facilitators. Collectives fostered this kind of delegated labor. This also allowed people to learn a wide variety of skills and quickly teach them to others.

It is worth noting that these groups emerged at a similar time that amateur filmmaking was popular in New York and across the US. This culture of amateur filmmaking and encouraging home moviemaking allowed for the availability of businesses selling cameras, pawn shops having older models of camera equipment, and a general curiosity about making one's own movies. Film study also happened within homes. The Amateur Cinema League started in 1926 in New York City. The ACL published *Movie Makers* magazine from 1926-27 and began competitions to decide top films. Amateur filmmakers could enter their films in this competition, one distinct from professionalized studio-based organizations. Dwight Swanson notes that there was a "subculture" of amateur, experimental filmmaking in the 1920s and a general culture of experimental, do-it-yourself institution-building in the early 1900s. The ACL, for example, also created film exchanges and movie clubs where people could meet to discuss films and techniques.¹⁸⁹

The ACL remained current in arts education, especially championing the use of film in one's learning. The magazine frequently published articles detailing how to build film libraries, movie clubs, read "intellectual films," and shared opportunities to access production and editing equipment.¹⁹⁰ *Movie Makers* also shared news on developing film studies programs, such as the DeVry Summer School of Visual Education in Chicago in 1925 to train educators in how to

¹⁸⁹ Frederick James Smith, "Amateur Movies: *Photoplay's* \$2,000 Contest Films to be Used in First Complete Study of Amateur Movie Movement," *Photoplay* (Dec. 1927): 64; "A Challenge and Opportunity for Every Amateur Movie Maker," *Amateur Movie Makers* (Nov. 1927): 8.

¹⁹⁰ "Cine Education for Educators: The Story of The De Vry Summer School of Visual Education," *Movie Makers* (March 1927:). 11, 40-41.

utilize films in classrooms and aid universities with incorporating teaching with and about film. This focused on business of cinema, “mechanics” of production and exhibition, and how to teach with visual materials. ACL noted Harvard Business School’s 1927 film course to “train businessmen in the industry,” including lectures by DeMille, Fox, Will Hays, and Zukor.¹⁹¹

Despite highlighting many of these emerging courses at major schools, ACL increasingly leaned away from professionalized schooling to advocate for self-study and education in daily life. In “Education and the Amateur,” Herbert C. McKay critiqued the conservatism of schoolteachers and the mere factual use of films rather than in-depth use for education. McKay emphasized that more intentional use of film for teaching in schools would make it “easier...to acquire more education at a later period” outside of schools. Due to these challenges in formal schools, ACL and other groups turned toward alternative education methods. McKay believed that “Education is not simply a matter of schools. In fact only a small part of our education is gained in the school-room.”¹⁹² In 1928, ACL began “home study courses” that were self-proclaimed to be “one of the great advances in educational procedure of modern times...” The ACL linked with the Neighborhood Motion Picture, Inc. and in their statement claimed, “home motion picture school as a great national institution supplementing and enriching the regular school systems.” People could subscribe to the courses to receive “one reel of 400 feet each week, together with coordinated study guides” and they could also rent projectors. The ACL made homes into schools and encouraged studying one’s “hobby.”¹⁹³ Such amateur creation and

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 11.

¹⁹² Herbert C. McKay, “Education and the Amateur,” *Movie Makers* (April 1927): 28; Charles Tepperman, *Amateur Cinema: The Rise of North American Moviemaking, 1923-1960* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

¹⁹³ An Undated Statement from the Amateur Cinema League Announcing That Home Study Courses on Film Are Now Available -- the First Deals with Nature Study, 1928, 35, MPPDA Record ID: 2081, MPPDA Digital Archive, General Correspondence files of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, Inc. Records, Flinders University, Adelaide, South Africa, https://flinders.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/61FUL_INST/110vnsd/alma997362172201771.

self-schooling via guided programs with the ACL mirrored trends in amateur filmmaking and art.

Radical groups were therefore operating within a larger culture of amateur creativity but at the margins because of political affiliations. Principles of sharing information to encourage self-study reverberated across amateur and radical organizations. A significant difference existed, however, in the intentions of amateur organizations like the ACL and those invested in labor activism. ACL members typically trained to make private home movies or to develop skills for the film industry or to build more refined middle-class movie audiences and creators.

Much of the equipment folks used was the same marketed to amateur and home-movie makers. Film equipment became more accessible with cheaper options as newer models emerged. In 1923, Kodak 16mm film became a cheap option for amateur filmmakers. Historian Barnouw notes that 35mm film then became cheaper and more readily available by the early 1930s with the transition to sound.¹⁹⁴ Sept cameras were common amateur equipment. Kruse used a Sept camera for FSR films in the 1920s.¹⁹⁵ Leo Hurwitz first borrowed a camera from an uncle and then got a sept camera from a pawn shop to film the subway and NYC. IMO and Filmo cameras were also marketed as home movie and personal use cameras in the 1920s-30s that these figures found at pawn shops and cheap sellers in the city. IMO, Filmo cameras and Moviola editing machines were advertised in amateur cinema journals, marketed as portable and easy to use for home or amateur movies. Moviematic cameras advertised as cameras “anyone can use.”¹⁹⁶ Moviola editing machines were also crucial developments—especially for these groups who often filmed, edited, and screened footage within a few days. FSS borrowed scraps

¹⁹⁴ Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 112.

¹⁹⁵ Note by Thomas Brandon on William Kruse’s untitled and unpublished manuscript Book Two, Chapter 1, D 43 1-70, 1978, Personality Files: William F. Kruse, Folder 1189, Thomas Brandon Collection, Film Study Center, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; Excerpts appear in Schwartz, “A Selection of Documents,” 31-32.

¹⁹⁶ “Moviematic” advertisement, *New Masses* (June 1, 1937): 32.

of equipment and stock from FPL and that in the Art Department at CCNY. It is not clear where FSR obtained materials, but they exchanged materials internationally giving camera equipment to Soviet Russia and likely receiving support from the WIR to obtain materials for their own activities.¹⁹⁷ Most members learned to film, edit, and run equipment to view films. Most films had multiple camerapeople and editors, with little indication of who did what parts.

Throughout the 1920s, Münzenberg frequently spoke about connecting amateur and professional talents to form film units. He drew much of his inspiration from Soviet amateur film clubs and workshops.¹⁹⁸ Amateurism was an important concept because it allowed workers to join in cultural activities without needing years of formal training. It also promoted a culture of experimentation distinct from traditional values of art, taste, and expertise. Those with strong political convictions and a desire to learn art skills could join in a field that was typically reserved for wealthy individuals and companies. In the US, Americans labeled FPL as a “Red-directed amateur film group.”¹⁹⁹ Film collectives did not define amateurism as unskilled or inept, but rather viewed it as a positive quality. The FPL announced itself in 1932 as “an organization of amateurs and professionals.”²⁰⁰ Like the ACL and other independent film groups, leftist film collectives leveraged amateurism as a creative tool for experimentation and challenging professional training to become a powerful artist. Members’ ability to self-study and self-teach allowed dynamic informational exchange within and across collectives. Edification practices also reflected their Jewish and working-class backgrounds rooted in self-improvement and curiosity

¹⁹⁷ *Soviet Russia Pictorial* includes financial reports and information about these exchanges from 1922-1924.

¹⁹⁸ Patricia R. Zimmermann, “The Amateur, The Avant-Garde, And Ideologies of Art,” *Journal of Film and Video* vol. 38, no. 3/4 (1986): 63–85; Maria Vinogradova, “Between the State and the *Kino*: Amateur Film Workshops in the Soviet Union,” *Studies in European Cinema* vol. 8, no. 3 (2012): 211-225.

¹⁹⁹ “US Justice Department Studies Reds’ Boycott and Picket Drive,” *Motion Picture Herald* (Sept. 7, 1935): 28.

²⁰⁰ Film and Photo League organizational plan and outline of the group’s programs with section to fill out to subscribe to become an associate member, c. 1931. New York Film and Photo League, Box CC, Folder 1041-1 (A), Film and Photo League, Film Study Center, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY.

and creativity to seek out alternative resources when traditional paths were unavailable. Not tethered to professional codes or elite models, amateurs had freedom to pick up cameras and educational materials to generate works from their experiences in connection with class issues.

Conclusion

Collectives, especially artists' collectives, are political in the sense that they challenge individualized commercial and authorial practices. Forming artistic film groups was rebellious against Hollywood's fictional features and commercial newsreel industries that prioritized economic gain, entertainment, and reinforcing ruling class politics and culture. Additionally, film collectives FSR, FPL, and FSS also operated as labor organizing units.²⁰¹ They shared labor by self-studying and teaching each other how to do every aspect of film: directing, producing, screenwriting, photographing, cutting, editing, and surrounding activities such as film writing, exhibiting, and educating. Workers International Relief for FSR and FPL and the City College for FSS were institutional supports for film collectives. However, membership self-formed amongst working-class artists, Jews, and immigrants in New York who were politically invested in film as an artistic medium to incite revolutionary change in the US. Members actively chose to join these groups to support labor organizing, workers' film production, and education.

Collectives originated out of shared social-political goals as well as shared socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Beginning as acquaintances, these relationships grew into friendships or connections. Even if not always amicable due to political or aesthetic differences, their shared identities often remained a branch of solidarity that allowed people to work in

²⁰¹ Collectives throughout the 20th century across the globe have embraced the value of art and film, including the Spanish Revolution that encouraged a need to spread education via culture to peasants, workers, and children with film and other arts. Gaston Leval, *Collectives in the Spanish Revolution* (Binghamton: PM Press, 2018); *Sensing Collectives Aesthetic and Political Practices Intertwined*, eds. Jan-Peter Voß, Nora Rigamonti, Marcela Suárez, Jacob Watson (Wetzlar: Majuskel Medienproduktion, 2023).

similar directions with varying strategies. The values of collectivity, paired with their identities and their investment in working-class politics, inspired members to create production units and films that would reflect their own identities on screen and behind the camera.

The Photo League, which was a photography unit that emerged after the FPL folded by 1936, inherited many photographers and attributes of its communist and more radical predecessor. Historian Deborah Dash Moore and curators at the Jewish Museum in New York have featured stories about the Photo League and its Jewish members. Moore refers to the “gritty, American Jewish working-class milieu” between the World Wars and into the 1950s. Jewish photographers had the ability to transform “ordinary people into both ethnographic evidence and works of art” as they reflected on their own identities and those of their New-York neighbors. Moore does also indicate a shift in the Photo League from a “collective responsibility” in producing images of the city to a more individualized meditation on personal interactions with fellow New Yorkers by the end of the thirties in comparison with its predecessor, The Film and Photo League.²⁰² Noting this shift reiterates the important role of collectivity in 1920s-1930s radical film collectives, as it became less central in other organizations thereafter.

The confluence of Jewish, immigrant, and working-class identities created a unique inclusive approach to cinema that recognized the diversity of experiences, fostered a sense of belonging and cultural pride among marginalized communities in the US—Europe and Russia, too. Tom Hurwitz noted his father Leo, member of the Film and Photo League, was “a poor kid

²⁰² Deborah Dash Moore, “On Common Ground: The New York Photo League, Jews, and Urban Photography, 1936–1951,” *AJS Perspectives* (2022), <http://perspectives.ajsnet.org/the-peoples-issue/on-common-ground-the-new-york-photo-league-jews-and-urban-photography-1936-1951/>; “The Radical Camera: New York’s Photo League, 1936-1951 Opens at The Jewish Museum on November 4th,” *The Jewish Museum* (Sept. 21, 2011), <https://thejewishmuseum.org/press/press-release/photo-league-release>.

from Brooklyn who was a really good student.”²⁰³ Despite his poverty, he still had great ambition to learn with skills to succeed. For most members of film collectives, participation represented opportunities to study film at a high level in a space where it did not matter whether one was poor, or it was actively welcomed. The interwar period witnessed a democratization of cinematic knowledge, with an emphasis on the empowerment of marginalized communities through the medium of film. Moreover, it mattered to put one’s experiences into a larger understanding of how interlocked humans and systems are. One communist in the 1930 recalled their shift in thinking about the Depression. Moving from an individualist mindset of failure, through studying communist ideas, she realized, “Here you were hungry and unemployed, and *it wasn’t your fault*.”²⁰⁴ Taking the blame off oneself allowed radical artists and workers to dig at the roots of social ills to rebuild a more collaborative society.

The “political emotion” and idealism embedded in Communism moved people to join organizations where they felt their identities were welcomed and experiences valued. For Jews, immigrants, and young working people who largely felt alienated from mainstream American society, communism felt connective: “It was all one, all feeding the same source, the same electric sense of life, the same live flow of politics, society, and art streaming together in an intensity of the world that was coming.”²⁰⁵ This collaborative and connected spirit flowed into the formation and evolution of film collectives throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Especially once the Great Depression hit many of their neighborhoods and families, members turned to leftist politics for solutions. “For better or for worse, radical politics—full of sorrow and glory—embodies the stirring spectacle of human beings engaged, alive to the beauty and rawness of self-

²⁰³ Tom Hurwitz, interviewed in *To Tell the Truth: Working for Change*, Dir. Calvin Skaggs, Icarus Films, 2012.

²⁰⁴ Gornick, *The Romance of American Communism*, 159.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 136; 242.

creation,” as Vivian Gornick wrote in *the Romance of American Communism* to explain the draw of this ethos in the US.²⁰⁶ Studying film allowed eager young individuals to create a sense of self and as an American during this turbulent time. Opportunities to act collectively via film groups often allowed many members to build communities where they were central within a country that often viewed them as peripheral.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 265.

CHAPTER 2: THE MEN AND WOMEN WITH THE MOVIE CAMERAS: LEARNING TO DOCUMENT

At the age of twenty-three, Leo Hurwitz joined the New York Film and Photo League in 1930 with other “enthusiastic but poor young people.”²⁰⁷ Their collective goal was to produce workers’ films—footage that captured images of workers’ activities and narrated experiences from a worker’s point of view. Hurwitz’s first major project was in 1931-1932 to help make a film about the March on Washington for hunger and unemployment relief. From 1930-1934, over 700 hunger marches occurred in multiple US cities, with over 150 in New York alone.²⁰⁸ Led by Communists and other leftists, the FPL asked for volunteers to march to Washington D.C. and capture this event in 1932. Provided with a camera and film stock from the League, Hurwitz left New York to go “with marchers from Boston to D.C.” He noted, “Several folks came from different directions, met on the road, exchanged notes, collectively edited the film. [It was] edited in 4 days and 4 nights with 1-2 hours of sleep [and then] shown at a big theater at 26th street in Broadway. [We] learned films from inside out...That was my school.”²⁰⁹ This production method was characteristic of the quick, participatory learning practices of workers’ newsreel and documentary films. Film collective members often learned to document by studying those around them to then apply skills in immediate real time to make their own productions.

FPL’s goal, like other radical film collectives, was to provide a workers’ perspective that would counter the mainstream press’s distortions or omissions. *The New York Times* in 1931, for

²⁰⁷ Leo Hurwitz, “On Time, Art, Love, and Trees...--A Meeting with Leo T. Hurwitz,” interviewed by Ingela Romare with audio and video, New York, NY, 1980, <https://leohurwitz.com/interview/on-time-art-love-and-trees-a-meeting-with-leo-t-hurwitz/> (hereafter cited as Hurwitz, “On Time, Art, Love, and Trees,” 1980).

²⁰⁸ “Unemployed Protests, 1930,” *Mapping American Social Movements Project*, Civil Rights and Labor History Consortium, University of Washington, 2023, https://depts.washington.edu/moves/unemployed_map.shtml.

²⁰⁹ Hurwitz, “On Time, Art, Love, and Trees,” 1980.

example, headlined a piece noting communists were mass agitators behind these demonstrations. More menacingly, the article notes four times how members of the protests had been arrested and planned to use stones to defend their group. A reader comes away knowing little about the marchers or the causes, but instead with a distinct impression of their criminality and violence.²¹⁰ A year later, *The New York Times* ran an article describing those in attendance as “‘Hunger Marchers’ who are neither hungry nor marching.” The author calls the protesters “fed and warmly clothed” while emphasizing the attendance of a “high-stepping Georgia Negro” and communists who the police treated kindly, despite the marchers’ rowdiness.²¹¹ A November 1932 article from *The Associated Press* features an image of New England and New York marchers receiving a free meal in New Jersey, implying them being freeloaders.²¹² Major papers highlighted the presence of African Americans, communists, arrested marchers, and potentially violent tactics to discredit what they believed were exaggerated demands. Using racist and nativist tropes, reporters alluded to protests as merely opportunistic communist infiltration “camouflaged” as a hunger march.

Popular newsreels that circulated in New York visually portrayed similar perspectives. For instance, British Pathé produced a one-minute newsreel about American “hunger marchers” they title as “invading” the Capitol to demand help from the US government.²¹³ Similar to newspaper descriptions, they place hunger marchers in quotation marks, which serves to delegitimize marchers’ authenticity as real poor, unemployed, starving people and their genuine means to rectify these issues in America. The American Universal Newspaper Newsreel

²¹⁰ “Communists Behind The ‘Hunger March’ Moving on Capital: Secret Service Unearths Orders Calling for Use of Stones in Defense,” *New York Times* (Nov. 29, 1931): 1, 20.

²¹¹ “Red ‘Hunger March’ Gets Gay Send-Off,” *New York Times* (Dec. 1, 1932): 3.

²¹² “Great Depression Hunger March 1932,” *The Associated Press* (Nov. 29, 1932): 1.

²¹³ *America’s “Hunger Marchers” 1932*, Prod. British Pathé, 1932, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HqJT44QAcpg>

produced several films in the 1930s that depict marchers negatively with police as heroic in stopping communists' incursion on New York. Examples of newsreel titles include *Police Army Cows 60,000 May Day Reds* (1930), *Red Hordes Gather in Monster Rally as Police Foil Disorders* (1931), and *Police Rout Defiant Communist Mob at "Battle of City Hall"* (1932).²¹⁴ While there were several clashes between marchers and police, Universal Newspaper Newsreels omitted showing police using tear gas, bats, and firearms against demonstrators.²¹⁵ Such newsreels frequently screened at major movie theaters not just in New York, but across the US and even Canada. Audiences typically saw these before feature films showing in cinemas or increasingly at New York newsreel theaters that grew in the 1930s.²¹⁶ Americans also were inundated with radio programs, such as those from Father Charles Coughlin, preaching anticommunism and questioning the motives of hunger marches.²¹⁷ Film collectives recognized that Americans were bombarded with negative messages about workers from papers, films, photographs, and radio.

In 1934, Clay Harris wrote an entire piece "Hollywood Newsreels" in *Experimental Cinema* that underscored ways commercial newsreels functioned as capitalist propaganda to

²¹⁴ *Police Army Cows 60,000 May Day Reds*, Prod. Universal Newspaper Newsreel, 1930; *Red Hordes Gather in Monster Rally as Police Foil Disorders*, Prod. Universal Newspaper Newsreel, 1931; *Police Rout Defiant Communist Mob at "Battle of City Hall,"* Prod. Universal Newspaper Newsreel, 1932, <https://www.shutterstock.com/video/clip-1106617279-circa-1930---people-all-ages-march>

²¹⁵ *The National Hunger March in Pictures*, 1932, National Committee Unemployment Councils of US with photos by Film and Photo League of the Workers' International Relief, New York, HD5767.N36, Radicalism Collection, Stephen O. Murray and Keelung Hong Special Collections, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI; Gertrude Haessler carried from hunger march by Washington D.C. police, 1932, *Los Angeles Examiner* (Nov. 29, 1932), Photograph and newspaper clipping, UC11666438, Los Angeles Examiner Photographs Collection, 1920-1961, USC Libraries Special Collections, Doheny Memorial Library, Los Angeles, CA, <https://doi.org/10.25549/examiner-c44-16988>; "Unemployed Protests, 1930," *Mapping American Social Movements Project*, 2023.

²¹⁶ Michael Stamm, "Watching News in Public: The Rituals and Responses of Newsreel Theater Audiences," *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* vol. 63, no. 2 (2024): 96-118.

²¹⁷ Derek Finn, "Charles Coughlin: American Catholic," *Western Tributaries* vol. 3 (2016): 14-16. Coughlin discussed the Ford Massacre and hunger march in Detroit, Michigan in 1931-1932 with brief mentions of the national campaigns.

distort and ignore significant issues plaguing Americans. Harris writes, “It is left, however, to the numerous workers’ film and photo leagues to photograph the real essence of the crisis; to struggle on with inadequate equipment, in spite of confiscation of their camera and film, in spite of police terror.”²¹⁸ Harris conjures a heroic image of workers’ filmmakers that is idealized, yet important to understanding how and why film collectives learned production. Seeking to combat this pervasive corporate, anticommunist media, radicals taught themselves how to make films.

One way film studies developed within the labor movements of the 1920s-30s was through cooperative learning of production methods to teach about workers’ experiences. Self-teaching of filmmaking drove many of their projects. Free or cheap membership fees (about six dollars a year or fifty cents a month) allowed individuals to collaborate, share information, and capture working-class experiences and protests. Participation in these groups afforded members access to filmmaking materials and education. This chapter focuses on developments of documentary filmmaking training in the US based in NYC and the ways the Friends of Soviet Russia, Film and Photo League, and Film and Sprockets Society developed workers’ filmmaking. Their filmmaking focused on participatory, engaged filmmaking. As experimental artists working to transform American society, they believed they had a responsibility to care about social problems and fully examine those rather than escape them. Marquis Childs, an American journalist, claimed about the Depression: “horrors were just around the corner, any corner, if you cared to look. Most people never looked.”²¹⁹ These groups did more than just look—they acted to remedy what they saw.

American collectives created alternative independent news networks. They fashioned

²¹⁸ Clay Harris, “Hollywood Newsreels,” *Experimental Cinema* vol. 1, no. 5 (1934): 40.

²¹⁹ Marquis Childs, qtd. in William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986), 68.

definitions of documentary beyond Grierson, Vertov, and other theorists to more directly center film as an educational device for workers' solidarity and learning about social-historical conditions. A goal that cut across Friends of Soviet Russia, Film and Photo League, and Film and Sprockets Society projects was to create working-class news and American documentaries that portrayed workers dignifiedly. Such films could inform audiences of workers' activities while mobilizing workers in the city, across the US, and even internationally. Their films often were main sources of information about Soviet conditions, the Depression, and workers' organizing that workers, farmers, and other Americans could access. But their methods of teaching and learning filmmaking also reflected their community principles and celebration of amateurism as young Jewish working-class men and women in New York who "learned films from the inside out."²²⁰

Part of the significance of this chapter is to illuminate the grassroots culture of filmmaking. It is an effort to reconstruct the experiences around the films created and the educational journeys to learning film. Members in collectives taught themselves and each other methods for making and preserving films, which was an experimental approach to filmmaking and cultural-political activism. They relied on skills they learned within their local NYC communities by utilizing affordable, available resources. The first section addresses the centrality of documentary and newsreels to collective film production by digging into their working definitions of "documentary" and "news." Section two covers how individuals and collectives learned about filmmaking mainly from Soviets and some Europeans but adapted these lessons to American contexts. Section three expands on this to examine how American groups prioritized collective authorship and community filmmaking over auteur approaches to art, while

²²⁰ Hurwitz, "On Time, Art, Love, and Trees," 1980.

section four addresses their processes of making films with hands-on experimentation. Members celebrated amateur approaches as experimental and independent in both filmmaking processes and filmmaking education.

From watching films to experimenting hands-on with cheap cameras or creating a cutting room in their bedroom, camera workers learned to create films experientially, often including workers and protesters they filmed in the filmmaking processes.²²¹ Filmmakers were not just observers with a camera, but participants in the activities they captured. Collectively shooting, editing, and exhibiting films allowed them to learn through making while agitating for social change. As one FSS member recalled, “Our ‘thing’ was the Documentary Film—socially conscious, meaningful.”²²² Frequently excluded from traditional academic art training, revolting against aestheticism, and without film programs established in the US, they made classrooms of the streets. Filmmaking, for them, had the power to teach workers to be creators of art and radical new ways of living.

Documentary Impulse: Defining Documentary and Newsreel Production

“Documentary” was not a fully formed idea or style in the 1920s and 1930s. From its origins in the late 19th century, film’s potential for documenting life in motion and providing information has captivated Americans. In 1913, Thomas Edison claimed that it was “possible to touch every branch of human knowledge” with film.²²³ And in 1922, after seeing the growth of film as an educational medium, he believed, “the motion picture is destined to revolutionize our educational system and that in a few years it will supplant largely, if not entirely, the use of

²²¹ Leo Hurwitz, “The Last Interview,” Reel 8, 1990.

²²² Lawrence Mollot, “Of Celluloid and Sprocket,” *CCNY Alumnus*, 1947, 8, uncatalogued, City College of New York Special Collections, New York, NY, retrieved by Prof. Sydney Van Nort. FSS was sponsored by the CCNY Art Department and Professor George Eggers. (hereafter cited as Mollot, “Of Celluloid and Sprockets,” City College of New York Special Collections).

²²³ Todd Oppenheimer, “The Flickering Mind,” *Dramatic Mirror* (July 9, 1913): 3.

textbooks.”²²⁴ This promise of film was shared by most American writers and filmmakers in the US. However, some were alarmed. Worries about film’s propaganda potential and moral influence blurred with its persuasive and informational possibilities.²²⁵ Documentary styles created similar feelings amongst those involved in journalism and photography regarding the intersections of realism and sensationalism.²²⁶ As documentary and news styles evolved in the 1920s-1930s, questions grew about relationships between realism and creative subjectivity, particularly what those relationships meant for the communicative power of film. Morris Watson once referred to documentary films as “The Living Newspaper,” signifying film’s ability to immerse viewers in experiences that made stories appear shockingly real.²²⁷ Film collectives experimented with informative strategies from newspapers, photojournalism, arts, and educational media to develop ideas and production methods. Moreover, members of the Friends of Soviet Russia, Film and Photo League, and Film and Sprockets Society studied and taught each other definitions of documentary and news to create a grassroots production circuit. Their definitions focused on immediacy, conceptualization, and creative, educational narrative.

Social documentary and news films in the 1920s connected to street photography and

²²⁴ Hugh Weir, “The Story of the Motion Picture,” *McClure’s* no. 54 (1922): 81-85.

²²⁵ Polan, *Scenes of Instruction; The Institutionalization of Educational Cinema: North America and Europe in the 1910s and 1920s* ed. Marina Dahlquist and Joel Frykholm (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2020); *Learning with the Lights Off: Education and the Culture of Print* ed. Devin Orgeron, Marsha Orgeron, and Dan Streible (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Lee Grieveson, *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early-Twentieth-Century America* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004); *Useful Cinema* ed. Charles Acland and Haidee Wasson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); *Inventing Cinema Studies* ed. Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Frank Tobias Higbie, *Labor’s Mind: A History of Working-Class Intellectual Life* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2019). Many in Hollywood, American conservatives, and Christian organizations rallied against certain films, fearing they would instruct children and adults to adopt poor morals. Films frequently labelled propagandistic included labor films, queer films, those with sexual content, among others.

²²⁶ Laura Marcus, “‘The Creative Treatment of Actuality’: John Grierson, Documentary Cinema and ‘Fact’ in the 1930s,” *Intermodernism: Literary Culture in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Scholarship Online, 2012); Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University, 2001).

²²⁷ *New Theatre and Film 1934 to 1937: An Anthology* ed. Herbert Kline, Arthur Knight, and Irwin Shaw (New York: Harcourt, 1985), 107.

Progressive-era concerns with the welfare of vulnerable, urban and rural people. Historians Barnhurst and Nerone argue that photojournalism shifted both the telling and reception of news in the late 19th to early 20th century. They specifically note that “Changes in the practice of news gathering and styles of news presentation marked the transition to modernism” with the turn to images of contemporary events.²²⁸ Combinations of modern technologies, aesthetics, and social relations became cornerstones of news production and consumption.²²⁹ Many early American commercial newsreels and “*actualités*” were of boxing fights in NYC, the Spanish-American War, the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, and other major current events.²³⁰ Such newsreels were usually commissioned by news agencies or government projects, and eventually Hollywood. Film collectives adapted immersive elements of early newsreel production, but advocated for independent avenues to study, produce, distribute, and exhibit.

Artists like Paul Strand and Ralph Steiner involved themselves in pictorialist and documentary photography movements, which they then applied to film in the 1920s and 1930s. Francis Benjamin Johnston, Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine, E.J. Belloq, and Alfred Stieglitz’s modernist photographs featured images of diverse US labor in the 1880s-1910s. Strand and Sheeler created *Manhatta* in 1921, an experimental short film celebrating the vitality of urban life and the labor force.²³¹ Though not explicitly a labor film, its focus on the city and its workers laid the groundwork for future documentaries, especially as Strand became a member of the FPL in the

²²⁸ Kevin Barnhurst and John Nerone, *The Form of the News: A History* (New York: Guilford Press, 2001), 19; Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

²²⁹ Joseph Clark, *News Parade: The American Newsreel and the World as Spectacle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 93-100.

²³⁰ Raymond Fielding, *The American Newsreel: A Complete History, 1911–1967* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2006), 11-45.

²³¹ Jason E. Hill, *Artist as Reporter: Weegee, Ad Reinhardt, and the PM News Picture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018); Rebecca Zurier, *Picturing the City: Urban Vision and the Ashcan School* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

1930s. But rather than just show, film collectives had more radical interpretations of social documentary and news to argue for abolishing capitalism that created destitute conditions for lower-class Americans. Such influences, nevertheless, did help develop patterns of creative documentation that combined artistry with realistic facts.

International theorists and practitioners experimented with documentary and newsreel theories in the 1920s and 1930s. American documentary production and education were less established than in Britain and the Soviet Union. Most American writings appeared in self-produced media such as when FSS published their own short book on documentary in 1937. Others developed documentary theories and production tips in magazines such as *Soviet Russia Pictorial*, *New Theater*, *Experimental Cinema*, and *Film Front*. In Britain, John Grierson and Paul Rotha developed documentary theory and practice in Britain that explored film's educational, governmental, and political uses. Paul Rotha's *Documentary Film* (1935) and *The Film till Now* (1930) became influential texts to discuss documentary seriously. John Grierson and Paul Rotha both argue that newsreels and documentary films are vastly different—both praise the realism in documentary over the newsreel itself. Grierson understood the documentary as a main avenue to “educate the masses,” whereas newsreels were more primitive and less effective.²³² British documentary, however, did not resonate strongly with American film collectives due to its ties to government and corporate motives to shape public opinions about consumerism and colonialist projects.²³³

Moreover, many of these films were ethnographic in nature, as were many popular

²³² John Grierson, “First Principles of Documentary,” *Cinema Quarterly* vol. 1, no. 2 (Winter 1932): 67–72.

²³³ Grierson and Basil Wright created *Songs of Ceylon* about the Sinhalese religious customs in Sri Lanka for the Ceylon Tea Propaganda Board in 1934. Sri Lanka, or the island of Ceylon, remained a British colony from 1798 until 1948. Grierson headed the GPO Film Unit as an arm of the UK Post Office that helped created such films. Sabine Haenni, *The Immigrant Scene: Ethnic Amusements in New York, 1880–1920* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

American documentaries. Notably, film collectives' versions of documentary and news contentiously shifted from films like city films such as Charles Sheeler's *Manhatta* (1921) or Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922). Documentaries like Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* or *Moana* (1926) often imposed an outside gaze onto subjects with colonialist extractions of Indigenous cultures and white supremacist approaches to "exotic" and "foreign" peoples' lives. In these films, subjects were often made objects without input into the films' creations. In contrast, workers' groups positioned documentary as a participatory production method with interactions between photographers and "actors." Those filming subjects were often part of the groups they captured or were involved in the activities, such as protests or marches, while filming them. Historian Barnaby Haran described American radical film collectives' films, FPL's especially, as working to "mitigate the distanced, voyeuristic, and exploitative tendencies of some social documentary work. They were not bystanders but participants whose documents were not mere documentary reportage but collaborative projects... [that were] interactive, collective grassroots editorialization of New York's (primarily disadvantaged) neighborhoods."²³⁴ Their documentary therefore could provide historical or ethnographic information without exploiting poor, unemployed people or "othering" them via the screen. Even if not identical, American film collectives Friends of Soviet Russia, Film and Photo League, and Film and Sprockets Society had similar ideas and practices driving how they defined and produced documentaries and news. Their goal was to create unity among audiences, those in films, and those creating film—whether that was with Soviets and Americans, farmers and factory workers, or college students and New Yorkers.

In the Soviet Union, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Dziga Vertov, and Sergei Eisenstein developed

²³⁴ Barnaby Haran, "'We Cover New York': Protest, Neighborhood, and Street Photography in the (Workers Film and) Photo League," *Arts* (2019): 15.

frameworks for documentary from a class struggle perspective. Pudovkin's *Film Technique and Film Acting* (1929) became essential reads for members of FPL and FSS.²³⁵ While most analyses of American realism, newsreels, and documentaries look to Grierson and Rotha's theories, Vertov is more illuminating for radical, non-commercial newsreels. Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov, different from Grierson, developed a theory and practice of documentary rooted in newsreels. Vertov's understanding of documentary, news, and journalism were more entangled than that of other theories. As biographer Jeremy Hicks has written, "Soviet journalism inspired [Vertov's] creative transformation of newsreels into the new form of documentary film."²³⁶ This distinction is critical for understanding why radical groups in America created newsreels, documentaries, and journals simultaneously to create visual education.

Vertov worked as a journalist and created Soviet newsreels in the late 1910s before turning to documentary filmmaking in the 1920s. Hicks highlights that Vertov's "explicitly partisan approach to newsreels" was characteristic of broader Soviet journalism and news.²³⁷ Making one's political point of view explicit while reporting on facts was paramount to creating a compelling informational work. Filmmakers must identify facts to then creatively "organize" facts to portray a specific message.²³⁸ Even in Vertov's early newsreel work, there were elements of "staging," "posing," and "reconstruction." "Creative use of newsreel footage" and "rejection of acting" characterized Vertov's work mixing unstaged footage and argumentative assemblage of shots.²³⁹ Through compelling storytelling and vivid imagery, documentaries and news films

²³⁵ William Stott, *Documentary Expression*, 3-10; John Grierson et al., "Eisenstein and Documentary," *Eisenstein 1898-1948* (London: Society for Cultural Relations with USSR, 1948), in Herbert Marshall, *The Battleship Potemkin* (New York: Avon Books, 1978), 156.

²³⁶ Jeremy Hicks, *Dziga Vertov: Defining Documentary Film* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007), 1.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 16-17. Bolshevik journalism aimed to increase literacy of peasants and workers. Newspapers opened opportunities for readers to participate by writing in letters.

²³⁹ Hicks, *Dziga Vertov*, 30-32, 2, 5-10; Patricia R. Zimmermann, "Reconstructing Vertov: Soviet Film Theory and American Radical Documentary," *Journal of Film and Video* vol. 44, no. 1/2 (1992): 82.

shed light on the challenges faced by laborers, humanizing their experiences and creating a sense of collective identity. Vertov announced in 1923 that “*Revolutionary cinema’s path of development has been found*. It leads past the heads of film actors and beyond the studio roof, into life, into genuine reality, full of its own drama and detective plots.”²⁴⁰ Soviet and global film artists who rejected the value or equal importance of newsreels to fiction or acted films were missing core principles of non-fiction films. Vertov emphasized many hesitate to call newsreel makers “artists” and “creative workers,” but that newsreels were crucial to make films “ever more intelligible to the broad masses.”²⁴¹ While Vertov’s theories and Soviet approaches to documentary are far closer to the models that American collectives developed, it is, however, important to acknowledge that Americans did not simply import this form and recreate it. FSR, FPL, and FSS cultivated these definitions to form their own definitions of documentary and news that joined were avant-garde and working-class points of view. They studied Soviet concepts to create films based in collective recording, editing, and interactions with those they filmed.

One shared principle among American collectives was their dedication to an “analytical and participatory model” of documentary.²⁴² Collectives experimented with how to involve members in the filmmaking processes as they explored film’s narrative and political opportunities. FSR and subsequent American film collectives believed film could depict truths and realities more clearly than other media. Moreover, film had abilities to teach innovative ideas and combat false understandings of the world. FSR’s *Soviet Russia Pictorial* reported in 1924,

²⁴⁰ Dziga Vertov, “On the Significance of the Newsreel (1923),” in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov* ed. Annette Michelson and Kevin O’Brien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 32. Vertov featured Eisenstein’s first film *Glumov’s Diary* as a 16th installment of his newsreel series *Kino-Pravda* in 1923, which also showed his creative approaches to newsreels and documentaries.

²⁴¹ Dziga Vertov, “On the Defense of the Newsreel (1939),” in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov* ed. Annette Michelson and Kevin O’Brien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 147.

²⁴² Patricia R. Zimmermann, “Reconstructing Vertov: Soviet Film Theory and American Radical Documentary,” *Journal of Film and Video* vol. 44, no. 1/2 (1992): 82.

“We know that the shadow of ignorance can be dispelled through the art of the motion picture perhaps more effectively than by word of mouth, for the camera does not lie.”²⁴³ FPL built upon this definition to claim, “Immediacy defines documentary,” as Seltzer did. In *To Tell the Truth*, former FPL members recalled how cameramen wanted to get immediate images to accentuate the “improv of the camera.”²⁴⁴ Immediacy was not only in the initial camera work or responding to demonstrations, but also in rapid developing, cutting, editing, and distributing.

While truth was key, filmmakers also embraced the subjectivity of documentary and news production. Filmmakers’ experiences uniquely shaped the choices of content and techniques to produce and communicate a “worker’s view.” For example, Edward Schustack of FSS identified the basics of documentary as “the expression of an *idea*” and how humans relate to their environment to engage “sociology ...history ...economics.” “In documentary,” writes Schustack, “the concept itself, be it the effect of dust storms on agriculture or even soil erosion on food prices, is of prime importance.”²⁴⁵ Workers’ interactions with society drove the content, style, and arguments of films. Such production was at once immediate and calibrated—situational, yet thoughtfully constructed in relation to other media and leftists’ activities.

Collectives readily embraced that documentary and news were not objective reports nor politically neutral. Rather than a “pure” document, radical filmmakers understood the artistry of taking images and assembling them creatively and subjectively. This included fashioning newsreels together as a form of art, recognizing the creative labor involved in the process.²⁴⁶

Harry Alan Potamkin often addressed the need to uplift the “left movie maker who is

²⁴³ *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (March 1924): 70.

²⁴⁴ Leo Seltzer, interviewed in *To Tell the Truth: Working for Change*, Dir. Calvin Skaggs, Icarus Films, 2012.

²⁴⁵ Edward Schustack, “Documentary Filming in America,” *American Cinematographer* Vol. 20 (March 1939): 130.

²⁴⁶ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 118-121; Bill Nichols, “Documentary Film and the Modernist Avant-Garde,” *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 4 (2001): 582; Leo Hurwitz, “One Man’s Voyage: Ideas and Films in the 1930’s,” *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* vol. 15, no. 1 (January 1, 1975): 1.

documenting dramatically and persuasively the disproportions in our present economy.”²⁴⁷

Grassroots film collectives created dynamic and varied “realistic” films. With a combination of raw footage, rejected commercial footage, and assembled images, groups deliberately employed journalistic and avant-garde methods to their productions, assembling images to create a narrative. As Potamkin wrote in 1930, “The document is a basis, and the document transfigured is the ultimate work of art in the cinema.”²⁴⁸ Aesthetics of self-making and participating in the art itself created a radical American definition of documentary and news. Film’s propagandistic potential was exactly the draw for film collectives. Documentary’s avant-garde opportunities to incorporate surrealist, abstract, montage, and constructivist approaches also drew filmmakers in. Bill Nichols, a scholar of film, argues, “Modernist techniques of fragmentation and juxtaposition lent an artistic aura to documentary that helped distinguish it from the cruder form of early *actualités*” or photojournalism.²⁴⁹ Stitching together images in chosen orders created political arguments about workers’ rights, but also novel artistic images. Collectives readily embraced definitions of documentary and news as avant-garde art forms.

Montage became a main inspiration to achieve connecting and educating audiences in America.²⁵⁰ Many newsreels juxtaposed wealthy luxury with how laborers allow for that luxury to exist or the hollow ruling class charity with their violent lynchings of Black Americans or degradation of poor and working-class Americans.²⁵¹ Tischler, Manager of the FPL National Film Exchange, noted that commercial newsreels avoided showing systemic capitalist failures harming Americans. Tischler remarked,

²⁴⁷ Harry Alan Potamkin, “A Movie Call to Action!” *Workers Theater* (July 1931), in *The Compound Cinema: The Writings of Harry Alan Potamkin* ed. Lewis Jacobs (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 583.

²⁴⁸ Harry Alan Potamkin, “New York Notes V,” *Close Up* (Oct. 1930): 353.

²⁴⁹ Bill Nichols, “Documentary Film and the Modernist Avant-Garde,” *Critical Inquiry* vol. 27, no. 4 (2001): 582.

²⁵⁰ Doc Films at the University of Chicago began in 1932 as a loose group devoted to documentary cinema exhibition and feature and experimental films. They became a fully formed group by 1940: <https://docfilms.org>

²⁵¹ S. Tischler, “Towards a Workers’ Newsreel,” *Film Front* vol. 1, no. 4 (Feb. 1935): 19.

We have all seen battleships and fashion news, pie-eating contests and flagpole-sitters, train wrecks and close-ups of bullet-riddled gangsters. Who has seen a close-up of an undernourished child, or a homeless man frozen to death, in a Hollywood newsreel? Is there any news value in showing breadlines and evictions? To be sure we have been shown famine pictures in China and Civil War in Cuba. At home we are given society pet shows instead of the breadlines.²⁵²

Workers' newsreel content included major events, such as May Day protests, miners' strikes, Scottsboro trials, hunger marches, and the massacre of workers at Ford Factories in Detroit.²⁵³

Recording the "social significance in every-day life," filmmakers argued, could articulate workers' conditions and dignity to activate change.

Documentary, for film collectives, symbolized a creative and rebellious outlet to challenge capitalist power and support working-class people. Nichols notes a key issue with the mainstream definitions and histories of documentary is that they typically build on Grierson's models and cement a conservative state-affirming relationship between media and nation.

Nichols argues that avant-garde practices disrupt and exposes entrenched power dynamics and persuasions: "Documentary film affirms, or contests, the power of the state. It addresses issues of public importance and affirms or contests the role of the state in confronting these issues...

Documentary, like avant-garde film, cast the familiar in a new light, not always that desired by the existing governments."²⁵⁴ If everyday people could share narratives, media companies had less authority over production practices, materials, and information. Additionally, the same ordinary objects of life, such as technology, streets, people, and politics all became foci of both

²⁵² S. Tischler, "Towards a Workers' Newsreel," *Film Front* vol. 1, no. 4 (Feb. 1935): 19.

²⁵³ Correspondences and descriptions of events attended and filmed by the Film and Photo League, n.d., original located in RGASPI, Delo 3385, Archives of the Soviet communist party and Soviet state microfilm collection, Reel 2.2394, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, Stanford, CA; Daniel Frontino Elash, "Exploring New Sources on the Workers Film and Photo League," *Overcoming Silence* (2010), 18; Alexander Schwarz, "A Selection of Documents: Workers' International Relief and the Origins of Left-Wing Independent Film and Social Documentary in the U.S.A.," *Studies in Russian & Soviet Cinema* vol. 12, no. 2 (2018): 153–174.

²⁵⁴ Nichols, "Documentary Film and the Modernist Avant-Garde," 582-3; 605.

documentary and avant-garde modernism.²⁵⁵ No longer did films need to only be about great people, major events, or pure fiction. Against the fantasy images of Hollywood, film collectives documented their surroundings to capture and educate about the perils of disenfranchised American workers, including Jews, immigrants, poor and houseless people, and African Americans. Combining avant-garde cultural politics with documentary filmmaking, members of the Friends of Soviet Russia, Film and Photo League, as well as the Film and Sprockets Society democratized filmmaking and film studies to make information accessible while encouraging everyday people to pick up cameras and film their lives.

Participatory spectatorship was a main principle of documentary and newsreels for film collectives. Viewing filmmaking as a “creative laboratory,” like Vertov, film collectives focused on engaged politics, culture, and education.²⁵⁶ Avoiding passivity, Leo Hurwitz defined the role of documentary and news as creating immersive, active experiences. Filmmakers, therefore, had to initiate the participation of the audience and embed this in films. Hurwitz states, “If you wanted to create an experience with your film, an experience in itself that could move people or stir them to ideas and action, then the journalistic form with its primary ‘and’ connectives was very limited.”²⁵⁷ The Depression-era was a critical turn for international news’ circulation and connecting Americans through media. As Depression conditions ravaged the globe while fascism

²⁵⁵ Nichols, “Documentary Film and the Modernist Avant-Garde,” 585-6; 596; Conrad Friberg’s notes for *Halsted Street*, c. 1931, Workers Film and Photo League--Pamphlet File, OCLC: (OCoLC)ocn880586932, John M. Flaxman Library, School of the Art Institute of Chicago Archives, Chicago, IL; *Halsted Street*, USA Newsletter, Feb. 1998, Workers Film and Photo League--Pamphlet File, OCLC: (OCoLC)ocn880586932, Folder 1, John M. Flaxman Library, School of the Art Institute of Chicago Archives, Chicago, IL. The Chicago Film and Photo League created its own films, notably a film headed by Conrad Friberg titled *Halsted Street* from 1931-1932. Friberg’s film focused on urban infrastructure, such as bridges, rivers, street signs, food stands, roadways, cars, as well as children and workers. His notes for the film also include shots of “Mexican grocery store,” “Greek barber,” “Italian carrying package,” and Black children at a fruit stand. Tom Brandon found this 12-minute film in California in the 1970s with its first screening at Chicago Film Center at The Art Institute on March 27, 1974.

²⁵⁶ Dziga Vertov, “On the Organization of a Creative Laboratory (1936),” 1936 in Natasha Kolchevska et al., in “Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov,” *Slavic and East European Journal* 30, no. 1 (January 1, 1986): 137.

²⁵⁷ Hurwitz, “One Man’s Voyage,” 12.

expanded, newsreels provided information across borders. Mostly, these were industry newsreels screened in newsreel theaters in NYC or alongside feature films.²⁵⁸ Like FSR in the 1920s, the Film and Photo League was at once part of this growing newsreel production and circulation and against the proliferation of commercial newsreels that did not show reality or “the whole story.”²⁵⁹ Historian Clark captures the shifting expectations of newsreels by the 1930s to be less focused on reproducing reality and instead on newsreels’ “ability to allow audiences to experience the real on screen.” “The newsreel was more than a simple record of what happened; it was a way for audiences to participate in the events of the day through the act of looking,” he writes.²⁶⁰ Though Clark focuses on commercial newsreels, this analysis of participatory spectatorship translated into independent working-class newsreels. For those filming labor actions, Soviet famine, or Depression conditions, they wanted their films to have audiences learn empathy for those on screen. Groups like FSR and FPL attempted to connect the public sphere of the screen with the daily public life working class and poor people experienced as well as radical politics to alter oppression. Such logic sought to bridge knowledge into praxis.

Intensity of the moving image and evolving ideas about relationships between film and reality created political tensions. Opponents of radical films often feared what viewers would *learn* from films as well as what they would *do* with that knowledge. American Legion chapters, for example, protested Friends of Soviet Russia films in the 1920s. Newsreels provoked an experience where people engaged with motion pictures and each other in a shared space and

²⁵⁸ Michael Stamm, “Watching News in Public: The Rituals and Responses of Newsreel Theater Audiences,” *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 63, no. 2 (2024): 96-118.

²⁵⁹ Hurwitz, “The Last Interview,” Reel 5, 1990.

²⁶⁰ Clark, *News Parade*, 59; 51; 7. Clark notes how newsreels allowed audiences to experience a “mediated reality” that merged spectatorship and news watching to create a public sphere focused on the screen. “Rather than providing a means to educate the masses or generate consensus on questions of public policy,” Clark writes, “the newsreel refashioned the public sphere and the nature of civic participation in the United States.”

created unique relationships with content on screen.²⁶¹ With fictional films, the element of fantasy made what appeared on screen more distant from the viewer. Documentaries and newsreels blurred boundaries between real life and the screen.²⁶² Documentaries and newsreels provided opportunities for workers and disenfranchised Americans to see their real lives in new perspectives while being able to experiment with alternative realities of equality and inclusion.

Ambiguity made regulating documentaries and newsreels inconsistent and difficult. The National Board of Review in New York regulated features and other films, but rarely dealt with newsreels. Newsreels therefore provided some flexibility for distribution and exhibition. In the early 1920s, NBR did evaluate two of FSR's films, *Russia Through the Shadows* and *The Fifth Year*, celebrating them as educationally and historically valuable. However, NBR's Executive Secretary William Barret thereafter rejected approving or dismissing FSR and WIR films, noting that the NBR focuses on theatrical pictures rather than "news reels and pictures of a general educational nature."²⁶³ The Board also saw WIR's *Passaic Textile Strike* in 1926 for an appointment but decided it was not part of NBR policy to approve or disprove the film.²⁶⁴ On the one hand, this highlights the view of FSR newsreels and documentaries as generally educational. On the other hand, it shows how changing definitions of documentary and newsreels as well as

²⁶¹ Ibid., 132-134; 19; 89. Clark focuses on audience experience and argues that newsreels "transformed the ways Americans saw themselves in the world." He argues that newsreels were more like spectacle films than documentaries, but these are commercial newsreels that the figures in my study opposed.

²⁶² Hurwitz remarked that he and others were frustrated watching films that disconnected the movie theater and working-class lived experiences. Leo Hurwitz described "the shock of transition" from leaving the movie theater to the real world that disturbed him. Determining a good film, to him, relied on not experiencing a disruption between the film and real world, which radical film collectives tried to reconnect. Hurwitz, "On Time, Art, Love, and Trees," 1980; A. William Bluem, *Documentary in American Television: Form, Function, Method* (Norwalk: Hastings House, 1965), 14.

²⁶³ Letter from Executive Secretary of National Board of Review of Motion Pictures to S. Russak of International Workers Aid/Malcolm Laboratories about *Passaic Textile Strike*, Oct 5, 1926, MssCol 2100, Correspondences, Box 102, Folder J: Controversial Films, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, New York, NY (hereafter cited as Letter, S. Russak, Oct. 5, 1926, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures Records).

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

views of radical film influenced how American institutions interacted with film collectives.²⁶⁵

Film collectives learned from these interactions to reframe their approaches to filmmaking. The definitions they formed for documentary and news influenced their development and learning of filmmaking techniques.

Soviet and European Influences with American Twists

When Lenin declared “that of all the arts the most important for us is the cinema” in 1922, it sparked mobilization in the Soviet Union, Europe, and United States to create cheap, portable workers’ films.²⁶⁶ Documentary and newsreel production was low-cost compared to commercial or feature productions. In the Soviet Union, the People’s Commissariat for Education dedicated considerable attention to film production and screenings for propaganda, especially in the East. Willie Münzenberg in Berlin, Germany ran the Workers’ International Relief central film operations in the 1920s and took Lenin’s quote seriously to build an international workers’ film unit that began a branch in the United States in the early 1920s. The Friends of Soviet Russia developed a film unit in the US. William F. Kruse headed this unit to create at least four multi-reel newsreels. Kruse frequented the Soviet Union to capture original footage of farming, industrial growth, and the perils of Soviet orphans and working families. He also acquired access to Soviet newsreels to pair with FSR footage for multi-reel documentaries to

²⁶⁵ Raymond Fielding, *The American Newsreel*, 286. Fielding notes that there were some cases in the 1930s where local and state governments, including New York, censored newsreels by developing agencies that previewed newsreels before public showings and then decided cuts or changes. Though there was no formal widespread censorship of newsreels, production, and distribution were regulated by major industries’ monopoly on making newsreels—Fox Movietone, Paramount, Pathé, Hearst, and Universal. There are also instances of local state censorship to documentaries and newsreels from the Friends of Soviet Russia: Pennsylvania State Board of Censors requests of over thirty eliminations from *Russia Through the Shadows*, Jan. 17, 1923, MssCol 2100, Correspondences, Box 102, Folder J: Controversial Films, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, New York, NY.

²⁶⁶ Vladimir Lenin, “Directives on the Film Business” (Jan. 17, 1922), first published in *Kinonedelya* no. 4 (1925), reprinted in *V. I. Lenin, Collected Works Vol. XLII*, trans. Clemens Dutt, ed. Bernard Isaacs (New York: International Publishers, 1934), 388-389; Lenin qtd. in Seymour Stern, “A Cinema Department,” 1931, M89-138, Box 1, Folder 16, Lewis Jacobs Collection, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI.

show in America. Filmmakers like Kruse learned from Soviet filmmakers while abroad. FSR also exchanged equipment. Educational and material interactions between the Soviet Union, Europe, and the US importantly shaped how American workers' film collectives conceived of and produced their films.

That Americans, including Jay Leyda, aspired to study at the Moscow Film School and other Soviet locations highlights how inspirational Soviet teaching was to Americans. The Moscow Film School opened in 1919; it is recorded as the first institutional film school in the world. Moscow Film School's techniques are notable for how leftist film training developed in post-Revolution Russia and filtered into global leftist collectives. A photograph dated June 26th, 1925 shows Soviet film students and teachers in Mamontovku participating in "film-practice" outside in a field. Three other photographs from the same trip show students practicing outside with a standing camera and another photograph of what looks like an acting scene, presumably with direction from nearby teachers.²⁶⁷ It was not just that it was a useful way of learning in a pedagogical sense, but that it represented the politics of democratization by bringing amateurs and workers into cinema production and the general labor of learning filmmaking techniques. FSR, FPL, and FSS celebrated their experiential strategies for involving more workers in filmmaking and allowing for more immediate, raw shots.

Film in the Soviet Union became increasingly crucial to the revolutionary movement and then building a socialist state to reach illiterate peasants and working masses. Interest in documentary and newsreels increased after the 1904-5 and 1917 revolts.²⁶⁸ Historian

²⁶⁷ Aleksandr Grinberg, "Trip with Students and Teachers of The State Technical School of Cinematography on Film-Practice in Mamontovku," June 6, 1925, Photograph, FotoSoyuz and Getty Images, <https://www.gettyimages.no/photos/moscow-film-school>.

²⁶⁸ Graham Roberts, *Forward Soviet!: History and Non-fiction Film in the USSR* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), 9; Masha Salazkina, "(V)GIK and the History of Film Education in the Soviet Union, 1920s-1930s," in *A Companion to Russian Cinema* ed. Birgit Beumers (New York: Wiley & Sons, 2016): 45-65; Duncan Petrie, "Theory, Practice, and the Significance of Film Schools," *Scandia* vol. 76, no. 2 (2010): 31-46; Jamie Miller, "Educating the

Drobashenko notes that newsreels became integral to the post-1917 revolutionary moment for Soviets to spread news and utilize film as political propaganda. Many filmmakers

took their cameras to railway stations and factories being rebuilt from ruins, to the sites of Red Saturdays (voluntary work on Saturday or, sometimes, Sunday), reported on the construction of the first power stations, popularized progressive methods and technology such as water-cannons on peat fields, or showed to the country the first Soviet-made tractors and cars. E. Tisse, A. Lemberg and A. Ryllo went to the Urals on a special assignment to shoot a film about the resurrection of that important region.²⁶⁹

Soviet filmmakers, by the late 1920s, also began to reconstruct and edit old newsreels into new documentaries.

Documentary changed from capturing high-level political events to these more everyday celebrations of revolutionary progress, such as economic change by the early 1930s to document “history in the making, the establishment of a socialist state.”²⁷⁰ As the revolution occurred and after, film was a valuable tool for also reimagining the historical past and the Soviet Union’s understanding of Russian history. Though Eisenstein, Kuleshov, and Pudovkin largely rejected the documentary and the audience’s ability to decipher facts or arguments from this form, each did include elements in their films that mirrored documentary or tried to present “historical images” to this end.²⁷¹ Esfir Shub, who was a leader in nonfiction film worked with Eisenstein and met Vertov. She embraced many of Eisenstein’s ideas to then endorse creating silent documentary films with arguments.²⁷² Roberts remarks that Soviet audiences saw newsreels regularly and were “more likely to have seen *Turksib* [documentary of Turkestan–Siberia

Filmmakers: The State Institute of Cinematography in the 1930s,” *The Slavonic and East European Review* vol. 85, no. 3 (2007): 462–90.

²⁶⁹ Sergei Drobashenko, “Soviet Documentary Film, 1917-1940” in *Propaganda, Politics and Film, 1918-45* ed. D.W. Spring and Nicholas Pronay (London: Palgrave, 1982), 254.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 268.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 249-251; 258; 269. The author frames Soviet documentary as film art and influential on art’s development. He also highlights the historical value of documentary as a source of truth and historical record to assess culture, politics, economics, and social dynamics of a period.

²⁷² Graham Roberts, *Forward Soviet! History and Non-fiction Film in the USSR* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), 51; 72.

Railway construction in 1929] or any number of documentary shorts than the masterpieces of Dovzhenko or Eisenstein...”²⁷³ Historian Lewis Siegelbaum described an unfinished research project about Eisenstein’s footage of the Uzbekistan Great Fergana Canal in 1939.²⁷⁴ In three sections, Eisenstein moved through medieval invasion, Russian Empire class conflicts, and the ongoing construction of the Fergana Canal at the time of filming.²⁷⁵ Eisenstein’s plans did not come to fruition due to Soviet government pressures. Importantly, however, his emphasis was on showcasing daily activities from arguing water prices to digging the canal.

Watching Soviet films often sparked individuals to become interested in social filmmaking. In a 1977 panel about the Hollywood Blacklist, Sam Brody emphasized,

The first Soviet films to be shown in this country *The End of St. Petersburg*, *Potemkin*, *Storm over Asia*, the documentaries of Dziga Vertov and his recondite theories of the nature of the film medium all inspired and fired us with the desire to use this incredibly powerful medium on behalf of working-class struggles. Among us, the notion of going to Hollywood to make meaningful movies never entered our unsophisticated heads.²⁷⁶

Eisenstein’s *Potemkin* premiered in December 1926 in the US, Pudovkin’s *The End of St. Petersburg* in 1928, and Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* in 1929. For six to eleven cents to see a movie in their neighborhoods, they were often affordable entertainment and education for working-class folks. Hurwitz recalled seeing British documentaries, but noted Soviet films were more invested in contemporary issues while British more invested in form.²⁷⁷ Soviet films featuring streets, workers, and utilizing experimental techniques intrigued Americans to create

²⁷³ Ibid., 2; “Soviet Newsreel and the Great Patriotic War,” in *Propaganda, Politics and Film* ed. D.W. Spring and Nicholas Pronay (London: Palgrave, 1982), 270-288. Spring highlights how Soviets filmed battle fronts during WWI and continued showing them after the war. State-sponsored newsreels shared information based on a central Communist ideology.

²⁷⁴ Lewis Siegelbaum, *Stuck on Communism Memoir of a Russian Historian* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), 108-110; Nariman Skakov, “Eisenstein in Fergana: From Avant-Garde to National Form,” *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* vol. 15, no. 1 (2021): 23-38; 27.

²⁷⁵ Skakov, “Eisenstein in Fergana: From Avant-Garde to National Form,” 27.

²⁷⁶ Brody, interviewed by Tom Brandon, Thomas Brandon Collection.

²⁷⁷ Hurwitz, “On Time, Art, Love, and Trees,” 1980; Hurwitz, “One Man’s Voyage,” 11.

dignified depictions of working communities. Revolutionary messages and techniques of Soviet cinema excited Hurwitz and others about possibilities of creating American revolutionary cinema. Leo Hurwitz, Sam Brody, and Leo Seltzer all cite Soviet films as major influences in teaching them about film and awakening their political consciousness. Sam Brody added that seeing *The End of St. Petersburg* in a Broadway Theater stuck with him for decades. He emphasized that Pudovkin employed unique techniques he had never seen before, including “method of editing, characterization of people in the film... We applied as much of this as much as we could.”²⁷⁸ Treating watching films as a study session, filmmakers noted tools to then apply to their own productions. Making documentary films and newsreels confirmed a Hollywood studio was not necessary to make a film—filming what was around you was interesting and important.

For Bernard Gordon and Julien Zimet, attending screenings at FPL meetings and New School inspired them to begin the Film and Sprockets Society at CCNY in 1934. Gordon recalled that this sparked his turn toward the left and filmmaking: “I had been introduced to the great Russian filmmakers and other classic films at the New School for Social Research. My passion evolved from still photography to film... the FBI seems to have missed my early exposure to radicalism at age sixteen.”²⁷⁹ As high schoolers, Gordon and Zimet involved themselves in communist activities that catalyzed their filmmaking careers. These instances show a link between watching revolutionary films to making their own. Moreover, FPL’s space and meetings allowed Gordon and Zimet to receive training in producing films and learn how to study film. Being able to borrow equipment from the League by having memberships allowed Gordon and Zimet to then experiment with filmmaking hands-on. They began by filming protests at CCNY

²⁷⁸ Brody, interviewed by Tom Brandon, Thomas Brandon Collection.

²⁷⁹ Gordon, *The Gordon Files*, 25-26.

and local neighborhoods, then graduated to creating their own screenplays. While Soviet films inspired them, they applied their learnings to capture local issues and people.

Like Hurwitz's call for an "equivalent of plot" in documentaries and newsreels inspired by Soviet filmmaking, groups applied this to focus on American cultural and political life. European-Soviet surrealism and montage greatly influenced American filmmakers. Willard Van Dyke noted his influences of French surrealist and abstract works like Fernand Leger's 1924 *Ballet Mécanique*. He began by making his own surrealist films in 1933 to then make films with the FPL.²⁸⁰ Van Dyke paid close attention to Eisenstein's photographer Tisse's "low camera angles" and use of montage, which became characteristic of his work with the FPL and later WPA films.²⁸¹ In 1947, Lewis Jacobs noted he had intended to make a four-part documentary film about the Great Depression titled *As I Walk* (1934). Since it was not completed, *Footnote to a Fact* is the only portion completed in 1933. The film is somewhere between *Ballet Technique* and *Hunger*. It reflects the social documentary of FSR and FPL capturing realities of dispossession with flairs of surrealism from Buñuel and Dali's 1929 *Un Chien Andalou*. As Jacobs shows consumers juxtaposed with laborers, the film cuts between these street scenes and a woman rocking back and forth toward and away from the camera repeatedly. Protesters appear in demonstrations against fascism. A Black man speaks at a rally and marchers carry signs reading "defend the Soviet Union" and "We Demand Unemployment Insurance." Montage scenes of homeless people in Hoovervilles or passed out on the street clash with marketing signs for products and electric bill payments. The film then cuts to soldiers at war implying American capitalist conditions are war and then animals (dead and alive near trash) appear, signifying

²⁸⁰ James Eynheart, *Willard Van Dyke: Changing the World Through Photography and Film* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), 92.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

humans living like animals in these conditions. At the end, the rocking woman dies after trying to save herself from the cold, showing individuals cannot save themselves but that collective efforts are necessary. Like Van Dyke, Jacobs was influenced by Eisenstein, Vertov, and Eduard Tisse along with French and Spanish surrealism. Others saw in Soviet films the significance of close-up shots of workers and juxtaposing individuals alongside groups as well as ruling class images against working class ones. American filmmakers studied techniques to incorporate them into their films with unique mixtures of realistic pictures with avant-garde shots and editing.

A key difference between the Soviet Union and US was the independence of filmmaking in American collectives. American radical documentary and newsreel production was independent from US state media. Soviet government took over cinema production in August 1919 under Lenin. This also included training at the Moscow School. Soviet filmmakers still had creative freedom even with state studios and distribution lines in the 1920s, leading the globe in avant-garde artistic production. The Soviet Union's artistic experimentation continued even under Stalin's increasing authority and with ideological battles amongst artists and cultural figures. With more state censorship and regulation into the 1930s, however, the Soviet avant-garde that had inspired Americans became increasingly smaller. In 1932, the Central Committee of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union declared socialist realism as the official party style. This required artists to depict not only positive messages about life in the Soviet Union, but that it be done in a realist style largely devoid of abstraction. Soviet experimentation, nevertheless, did not collapse nor did state policies completely control art.²⁸² But Americans were less

²⁸² For international histories of socialist realism, see: Igor Golomstock, *Totalitarian Art in the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy and the People's Republic of China* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990); James, C. Vaughan, *Soviet Socialist Realism: Origins and Theory* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973); Sergei Ivanov, *Unknown Socialist Realism. The Leningrad School* (Saint Petersburg: NP-Print, 2007); Gleb Prokhorov, *Art under Socialist Realism: Soviet Painting, 1930–1950* (East Roseville, NSW, Australia: Craftsman House; G + B Arts International, 1995); Denise Youngblood, *Soviet Cinema in the Silent Era, 1918–1935* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991); Jay Leyda, *Kino, a History of the Russian and Soviet Film* (New York: Collier Books, 1973); Albert,

entranced by Soviet art due to the authoritarian politics surrounding it and its style.

In the United States, collectives connected to the WIR or Comintern expressed having wide creative freedom and decentralized production activities. Unlike the Soviet Union and other European organizations, the US government did not sponsor documentary films from the FSR, FPL, and FSS. In fact, the US government frequently fought against these organizations and their films. John Grierson in Britain encouraged UK government to create documentaries to educate the public. Many of these corporate and government documentary filmmaking agencies were dismissive of “amateur” filmmakers who were more radical. Moreover, Grierson’s films were shown very widely with national and government distribution, whereas American film collectives’ documentaries and news films reached much smaller audiences and had less influence overall.²⁸³

FSR and FPL created films based on developing Communist Party and associated labor events. These demonstrations led choices to decide what to document. However, that was largely the extent of the CPUSA or Comintern’s reach in their projects. While the WIR provided some help, CPUSA or Comintern did not provide materials or distribution for the groups, but relied on members of the group to finance and create all activities. Kruse, Hurwitz, and others frequently referred to the “democratic” processes of choosing what to film and who would film certain events.²⁸⁴ The nature of their quick, participatory production also made it an instantaneous

Leong, “Socialist Realism: Cinema and the Arts,” *Studies in Comparative Communism* 17, no. 3/4 (1984): 157–61; *The Social and the Real: Political Art of the 1930s in the Western Hemisphere* ed. Alejandro Anreus, Diana L. Linden, Jonathan Weinberg (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2006); Stacy Morgan, *Rethinking Social Realism: African American Art and Literature, 1930-1953* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004); *Socialist Realism without Shores* ed. Evgeny Dobrenko and Thomas Lahusen (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); *Social Realism: Art As a Weapon*, ed. David Schapiro (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1973).

²⁸³ Leo Seltzer and Leo Hurwitz, interviewed in *To Tell the Truth: Working for Change*, Dir. Calvin Skaggs, Icarus Films, 2012.

²⁸⁴ William Kruse, “The Proletarian Film in America,” *International Press Correspondence* Vol. 6, no. 12 (Feb. 11, 1926): 184.

process to film, edit, and screen. Intended for immediate release to highlight systemic, urgent issues, the WIR and Comintern based in Europe and Soviet Union had little ability to oversee these American films. Decisions to compose films happened quickly and often fell to a few people on the project within the group. Kruse gathered much of his content in the 1920s from his own travels to the Soviet Union to then quickly assemble footage to show in America. Seltzer referred to most FPL works as “footage” rather than “film,” meaning that these were quickly made, montaged, and jagged works.²⁸⁵ Often shot and edited within a few days, they were then quickly distributed and exhibited only days after their production. Though inspired by Soviet film, Americans were aware of their independence from central state and international oversight. Van Dyke traveled to Europe and the Soviet Union hoping to avoid the oppressiveness he saw emerging in the Soviet Union under Stalin, which he compared to corporate media in America as being under state and capitalist control.²⁸⁶ Collectives’ aesthetics and politics relied on the independence and alternative nature of their media. And without a state-sponsored film school, film collectives had more freedom to design their studying and by extension, their production practices.

Another uniqueness was the collective, participatory production of American workers’ films. Though Soviet films developed from similar principles, it is still the case that Vertov, Eisenstein, Pudovkin became “auteurs.” The films they created fell under ownership of their names, regardless of who else helped make them. American collectives, on the other hand, focused more on collective authorship with groups, rather than individuals, taking ownership of

²⁸⁵ Russell Campbell, “*Jump Cut* special section: Film and Photo League Radical cinema in the 30s Introduction,” *Jump Cut* no. 14 (1977): 23-25.

²⁸⁶ James Eynheart, *Willard Van Dyke*, 125-6; Deborah Cohen, *Last Call at the Hotel Imperial: The Reporters Who Took on a World at War* (New York: Random House, 2022), xxii. Cohen contextualizes foreign correspondents during the interwar and WWII period as reporters who “relayed the global struggles of their era in a new kind of journalism; both more subjective and more intimate.”

production. They also cherished their direct participation or connection to the events they captured—from being a CCNY student to engaging with Soviet orphanages to fending off the police during the Hunger March. American filmmakers merged Russian revolutionary ideals with American trends in participatory educational philosophies and practices.

Even if their circulation was not as broad as other documentary or news organizations, American film collectives FSR, FPL, and FSS centered workers as producers and audiences. In 1939, a letter to the editor of *American Cinematographer* rebuked any history of documentary cinema that did not include American film collectives, particularly FPL. The author notes that the FPL created documentaries that were “thought-out problems in presenting facts.” He goes on to describe the dedication to filmmaking these folks had to creating documentary cinema in the US and to prioritizing workers’ experiences:

...there was a documentary center here in America as early as 1932. The center began with a group of film and photo clubs known as the Film and Photo League...their program was that film shorts, either 16mm. or 35mm., could serve a very useful and important function both socially and educationally if it dealt with important topics of the day such as unemployment, housing, etc....For instance on 16mm. film was produced on the waterfront dealing with unemployed men who live and from time to time work there. Here was a task not merely to make a newsreel record but to dig into and understand what these men did, felt and thought from dawn to dusk. For days scenes were photographed by members of the group who went down to the waterfront as early as 4 a.m. to catch the men waking up from their benches to look for work as stevedores on an early ship arrival.²⁸⁷

The letter goes on to address the reception and reach of the film as well as the lasting educational impacts this film collective has had on film studies in the US. It concludes, “Other films of similar nature followed and were widely shown in clubs, colleges and schools. Today, although the Film and Photo League no longer exists, many who are today practicing documentary film received their primary education and instruction and guidance from association with the

²⁸⁷ Harry Kleinman, “Trace Documentaries’ Beginning Back to 1932” letter to editor, *American Cinematographer* (May 1939): 226.

group...”²⁸⁸ What this letter highlights about American film collectives’ production is the educational opportunities collectives provided. Group members who studied frequently became leaders and members passed knowledge to one another. This form of education was reliant upon the group dynamic and choices members made to study and teach.

Collective Labor, Community Filmmaking

Filmmakers often participated in the events they captured rather than become a disconnected recorder. Collectives’ films centered on the urgency of providing relief for those pictured and for affiliated workers and families. Based in community filmmaking, their films provided knowledge about conditions to elicit direct relief. Some of their first films, such as with FSR and WIR, raised funds for workers’ and farmers’ relief in the early 1920s. Some of these funds went to the Soviet Union for famine conditions, as described in other chapters. Other funds went towards families of striking workers, such as at Passaic, New Jersey during the textile strike in 1926. Films in the early 1930s depicted demonstrations where workers demanded relief, and these films spread those messages even further. Creating films was therefore an act of community organizing—informational output and material needs for workers. Groups collectively authored films and the films became integrated into their communities, often inciting learning but also visible labor, political, and cultural actions connected to labor and social justice movements.

For American filmmakers, community involvement and collective authorship allowed for more working-class people and film students to engage in filmmaking processes they otherwise would not have access to. Collective labor was as important behind the scenes as it was to show on screen. Vertov often spoke of “moving away from the authorship of a single person to mass

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

authorship,” while Eisenstein frequently used ordinary people or amateurs as “actors” and focused on mass acting rather than character-developed “stars.”²⁸⁹ This shifted understandings of art to become more collective work and reflected values of labor solidarity. It also rooted filmmaking and its education in the communities where production occurred. Rather than bringing everyone to a Hollywood studio to film the effects of the Depression, they chose to depict real people facing hardships in their New York communities.

Proximity to neighbors and those they filmed made it nearly impossible to turn away from issues. Members hoped their films could encourage people farther away from these issues to stop walking past and to instead really see the people pictured and their experiences. Leo Hurwitz pleaded, “There are people sleeping on park benches in Union Square. Photograph them and show them. Photograph people on breadlines. Photograph their faces.”²⁹⁰ Purposes for production often arose from issues current in filmmakers’ lives and their communities, such as Gordon’s experiences witnessing breadlines in his neighborhood and watching his father lose income.²⁹¹ Kruse, Hurwitz, Seltzer, Brody, and others all faced hardships as members of working-class families. Their own and their families’ socialist and communist politics also generated experiences where they faced political repression. And their active participation in the protests they covered continuously spawned ideas and events to document and cultivated filmmaking as a community practice.

Groups’ filmmaking practices centered collective authorship, which shifted traditions of authorship and education. Rather than authorities of classrooms or individual directors or actors, these filmmakers perceived their work as interconnected for shared purposes. Though some films

²⁸⁹ Hicks, *Dziga Vertov*, 17; David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

²⁹⁰ Leo Hurwitz, interview in *To Tell the Truth: Working for Change*, Dir. Calvin Skaggs, Icarus Films, 2012.

²⁹¹ Gordon, *Hollywood Exile*, 6.

or press reports note individuals involved with directing, editing, and photographing certain films, most list individuals secondarily and as a group rather than singly. Title cards state authors as “Film and Photo League” and papers report films produced by “Film and Sprockets Society” or “Friends of Soviet Russia” rather than highlight individual authors. The Film and Photo League organized against the division of labor and specialization in filmmaking—this was capitalist reproduction and to “depersonalize” film and its creation. Collective authorship and communal production challenged professionalized boundaries in production. FSR’s *Fifth Year* was allegedly “photographed by more than 100 cameramen under direction of The Workers International Relief Committee.”²⁹² This allowed more people to learn production practices as they engaged with conceptualizing films, making films, and being filmed. Sharing knowledge and materials for filmmaking also aided the growth of collective filmmaking. Sam Brody and Lester Balog, after making *Passaic*, joined the Film and Photo League. They brought their knowledge to the League to help other members learn to make radical labor documentaries and newsreels. Developing these films required participation from workers themselves to be pictured, folks willing to quickly learn how to photograph and edit while in high-stress situations, and other community members who donated materials and money for the films’ creation and viewing.

Another differentiation that made collectives’ documentaries and news films collaborative was that filmmakers participated in the events they photographed. This involved learning about the events while capturing them. Seltzer spoke about fighting off police with the same camera he used to capture police brutality against protesters and the workers demonstrating in several FPL projects in the 1930s. Seltzer had to defense himself with his own camera against

²⁹² William F. Kruse, “Traveling in Russia,” *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (Jan. 1924): 17.

cops at one protest and was arrested in 1932 Scottsboro demonstration, for example. Lewis Jacobs and Leo Seltzer volunteered to go to Scottsboro “to actually get out and shoot a little film” with FPL equipment they transported in their Model T. The goal of this expedition was to film activities surrounding the Scottsboro case and capture the daily lives of African Americans and poor whites in the South. Film scholar James Rosenow adds, “Both men later recounted that early in the process it became clear that they lacked the equipment ‘to finish the document properly’ but continued shooting—fending off attacks from locals unnerved by the sight of ‘communists with cameras’—until supplies ran out.”²⁹³ Lewis Jacobs detailed the incident decades later in an interview with Tom Brandon:

I remember that incident very well; yes, yes, we were sitting in that restaurant there, and that whole crowd came in. We had just left the courthouse. And we sat in that restaurant and the whole crowd came in. They didn’t say a word, they just looked at us. And we all got nervous. And then they came over to us, and said “You guys are Communists.” And said, ‘We’re not Communists. We’re just down here to make some pictures of what happened.’ And they said, ‘No, you’re Communists.’ And we were terrified. We started to walk out and they started to follow us. And we got in the car, and we decided that we better get the hell out of here fast.²⁹⁴

Filmmakers in FPL were at real risk of arrests and beatings. Jacobs and Seltzer later noted that they renounced their affiliations with communism at this moment (and others) to save themselves from beatings or even worse. This example reveals the dedication FPL members had to capturing working-class experiences and those of other marginalized communities. Filmmaking for these groups was not just about creating a film; it was also about being involved in the action captured. The experience of creating a film was just as important as the final

²⁹³ James Rosenow, “Forming an American Modernism,” 72-105.

²⁹⁴ Lewis Jacobs, transcription of interview by Tom Brandon, January 21, 1974, Personality Files, Folder 1185: Lewis Jacobs, Thomas Brandon Collection, Film Study Center, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, 19-20. The film here is *Scottsboro* by Jacobs and Brandon in 1931 of the trial; “Program 5” notes, *Film Forum*, April 23, 1933, MssCol 2100, Box 137, Folder: Periodicals, *Experimental Cinema*, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, New York, NY.

product.²⁹⁵ Film and Photo League members were not just holding cameras, but participated in the marches and protests.

Film and Sprockets' members were students themselves interested in mainly filming CCNY student life. They rejected objectivity and saw their roles as students, filmmakers, working-class people as important to creating films imbued with those perspectives. It was a collective effort to mobilize support for student filmmaking and create films representative of their campus. Film groups created films within their own communities and distributed them within their communities. Increasingly, their newsreels appeared in campus events and began routine screenings of both unfinished and finished films. George Kaplan, president during the 1939-40 year, said that these would also be shown to "entering freshmen."²⁹⁶ Since FSS documented extracurriculars and life at CCNY, these films provided a way for entering students to garner a visual glimpse of their futures at CCNY and current students' activities. In June of 1939, FSS revealed they would produce newsreels to screen biweekly on campus. The group had already created at least one 20- minute newsreel by October 1939 to be part of their slated 6-part series of documentaries. "Collegians Begin Newsreel Series" even appeared in the national journal *Motion Picture Herald* the following month.²⁹⁷ In November of 1939, they began a series of six sound films, "newsreel[s] of undergraduate life" that would document student activities and provide a visual history of CCNY. On November 16th, they held their first exhibition of the first reel in Doremus Hall. Larry Mollot had been the main producer and had been experimenting with sound reels.²⁹⁸ Howard Rukeyser, William Rudy, and Vincent Buonanmassa also worked on the film to include scenes of extracurricular activities, football, women at the Technology

²⁹⁵ *To Tell the Truth: Working for Change*, Dir. Calvin Skaggs, Icarus Films, 2012.

²⁹⁶ "Students to Film Life at City College," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Nov. 12, 1939): 2.

²⁹⁷ "Collegians Begin Newsreel Series," *Motion Picture Herald* (Nov. 18, 1939): 31.

²⁹⁸ "F&S To Show Newsreel of Life at the College," *The Campus* (Oct. 27, 1939): 1.

School, and House Plan activities were main content of FSS films.

Even if not directly involved in filmmaking, FSS sought community input for their filmmaking. The Society circulated a petition to CCNY students in December 1938 to obtain support for producing their own documentary for the 1939 New York World's Fair. Over 1,000 students and faculty, plus thirteen student organizations, signed on by December 23rd. Edward Schustack, the current president, said, "Our college, the foremost example of a municipal college in the world, should certainly be represented at the Fair." *The Campus* reported the petition declaring, "The accomplishments of our faculty, the quality of our scholarships, the thoroughness of our training and our fitness to help build the World of Tomorrow, are all worthy of the widest publicity."²⁹⁹ In 1939-40 at the World Fair in New York City, the Film and Sprockets Society did, in fact, exhibit "a picture of general activities at the college."³⁰⁰ *City College* (1939) was a 1-reel 16mm silent film directed by Julian Zimet and Bernard Gordon. It included "the curricular and extra-curricular activities of City College, with a sketch of its formation and history."³⁰¹ This was a major success in which FSS organized campus-wide support and displayed their work to an international audience. Film and Sprockets Society films attempted to show the activities of working-class students at CCNY to not only freshmen to learn how to prepare for college and promote various activities at the college but also to greater audiences to promote the progressive education and student life at CCNY.

Collaborative authorship extended to how the films were made in closer relationship with those pictured. "Actors" in the films frequently had input to the content to ensure their work was

²⁹⁹ "F&S Proposes College Movie," *The Campus* (Dec. 23, 1938): 1.

³⁰⁰ "Students to Film Life at City College," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 2.

³⁰¹ Its distribution is listed as New York City building, New York World's Fair. *Living Films: A Catalog of Documentary Films and Their Makers* (New York, NY: Association of Documentary Film Producers, Inc., 1940): *Bibliography of Production, Utilization and Research on Instructional Films* (State College: Penn State University, 1953), 48.

represented as accurately as possible. Naumburg writes of her FPL film *Sheriffed*,

The scenario had to be changed as we progressed in order that I might be politically and documentarily correct. Not a single scene was shot without first consulting with and getting the advice of leading members of the United Farmers' Protective Association, among them Lief Dahl and Lew Bentzley (who also 'acted' the role of the organizer in the film). The scenario was subject to constant changes after we had started to shoot because of the conditions under which it was taken: the farmers were working and could be filmed on but rare occasions.³⁰²

This provided workers unique interactions with film, serving as consultants and stars. Moreover, filmmakers had opportunities to learn from non-filmmakers about what to capture and how to depict certain situations. Ordinary people became actors or even "stars." Recognizable to themselves and those in their communities, workers on screen took on local significance. By often treating the people on screen as experts of their own experiences, film collectives empowered workers as knowledgeable and part of developing radical filmmaking in the US.

Students were also excited about becoming "stars" of FSS films. As amateur actors, CCNY students were featured in various documentaries created by FSS. *The Campus* ran an article on November 14th, 1939, titled "Maybe You're in the Film and Sprockets Newsreel."³⁰³ The authors highlighted the tremendous achievement of FSS as an independent, amateur group: "Of course, making a newsreel is a unique event, since there is only one other undergraduate film-producing group in the United States, at the University of Southern California- next door to Hollywood. The F & S not only doesn't have Hollywood's help, but it doesn't even have a ballyhoo staff and has always preferred to do its extensive work very unostentatiously."³⁰⁴ It, too, referenced the financial strain of independent moviemaking, which became an issue by late 1939

³⁰² Nancy Naumburg qtd. In Ed Kennedy, "Three Workers Films," *FilmFront* vol. 1, no. 2 (Jan 7, 1935): 11.

³⁰³ "Maybe You're in the Film and Sprockets Newsreel," *The Campus* (Nov. 14, 1939): 2.

³⁰⁴ USC School of Cinematic Arts, the first film school in the US, was established in 1929. It focused on Hollywood filmmaking.

as FSS struggled to obtain more reels while facing debt.³⁰⁵ These young, Jewish, working-class CCNY students spearheaded amateur projects that contributed to developing documentary schools in New York based on ideas and practices they experimented with throughout the 1930s.

Experiments in Filmmaking: Education as Experience

Filmmakers in FSR, WIR, FPL, and FSS were not formally trained in filmmaking. Filmmaking training included a wide range of participatory practices from reading articles, attending exhibitions, and taking courses. It also consisted of diving into the practice to experiment with camerawork and editing so they could teach each other. Most filmmakers began training without equipment by studying films and imagining their own films. William Kruse was a sheet metal worker and organizational leader; Leo Hurwitz worked in subway construction and sales; Abraham Polonsky worked at his family's drugstore; and most other members of these groups had a variety of jobs before they took up filmmaking. Film workers held several jobs, earning little to no money from the films they made, or received unemployment and relief.³⁰⁶ Working in community with one another to learn and train each other in filmmaking thus became important to access filmmaking skills and materials as well as develop political comradeship for collaboratively creating films about and for working-class people.

Workers found creative ways to learn filmmaking without schools. For FSR, Kruse "made his own famine movies on the cheap by editing Soviet newsreels..." This allowed him to learn how to cut and edit quickly with pre-made film as he learned to create his own films from start to finish. Kruse could study Soviet techniques with production and directing while editing films and learning to make narratives with newsreels. FSR shared film equipment between the US and Soviet Union and obtained film stock through the WIR to produce films that could be

³⁰⁵ "F&S To Hold Movie Revival Thursday," *The Campus* (Dec. 1939): 1; *The Campus* (Feb. 23, 1940): 1.

³⁰⁶ Leo Hurwitz, "One Man's Voyage," 11.

screened on mobile “agit tours.” “Kruse printed his films on twenty-eight-millimeter stock. This allowed him to use portable projection equipment for a successful series of one-time exhibitions in union halls and mining camps...”³⁰⁷ Kruse acquired most of his training in both filmmaking and exhibiting by filming, editing, and exhibiting on the move. Without formal training, Kruse relied on observing Soviets’ filmmaking and his own creativity to find filmmaking practices that aligned with the values and needs of FSR to make and get films out quickly, cheaply, and to as many workers as possible.

As young, inexperienced people, few options to learn filmmaking existed other than jumping into major radical projects. With only two years of high school and a few arts classes at the City College, Sam Brody worked small film and photography jobs to learn filmmaking before helping with on *Passaic Textile Strike* in 1926. Brody, traveling from New York to New Jersey, worked on *Passaic* as a teenager and graduated high school the same year he photographed *Passaic* alongside Lester Balog, Sam Russak, and Mary Levin. Irving Lerner framed this kind of education as such: “We learned our trade as a rule by practicing, namely by taken [sic] a camera in our hand, to sit down at the cuttingtable, etc..”³⁰⁸

In a 1980 oral interview, former Film and Photo League member Leo Hurwitz reflected on his training as a filmmaker outside of industry and formal school. He began by watching movies in his late teens and early twenties to study technique. In the 1920s, he was particularly mesmerized by Soviets Vertov, Pudovkin, and Eisenstein. Without a camera, however, his

³⁰⁷ R.J. Stove, “*The Red Millionaire: A Political Biography of Willi Münzenberg, Moscow’s Secret Propaganda Tsar in the West* [Book Review],” *National Observer* no. 61 (January 1, 2004): 177-178; Sean McMeekin, *The Red Millionaire: A Political Biography of Willy Münzenberg, Moscow’s Secret Propaganda Tsar in the West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 36. In the Soviet Union, many edited footage films were unsuccessful, so Münzenberg turned to studio films like *Polikushka*.

³⁰⁸ Transcript of Irving Lerner in conversation with Wolf-Eckhard Buehler on Lerner’s early career, n.d., Collection 112, Box 11, Folder 13, Lerner Collection Irving Lerner papers, 1935-1978, Performing Arts Special Collections, Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles, CA.

filmmaking career started by walking down the street constructing films in his head. After borrowing a still camera from his uncle, Hurwitz then experimented with a pawn shop camera to capture scenes that intrigued him on New York City streets, such as construction sites. Hurwitz recalled, there was “no place to go to [film] school. I decided I had to learn film by going to the movies and doing things in my head to create a movie. I’d walk on the streets and figure out how to put things together like a film.” He did a little bit of writing for screenplays to test out his acquired skills. Hurwitz then got a 35mm French Sept motion picture camera that could also take still photos from a pawn shop. He recalled that it “could run a roll of 17-19ft” film stock with a “silent speed of 19 seconds.” He slowly began to acquire fragmented shots to make a film. Primarily in the subway, Hurwitz spent hours taking a lot of footage of the trains from the front and side to capture its motion. With shots of 4-5 seconds each, he edited the materials in his mind and thought of how he would build a film, but never physically made anything.³⁰⁹ Hurwitz practiced conceptualizing the process of making a film, but now wanted more practice building film from the conceptualization through the screening.

Once he graduated from college into the Depression in 1930 and returned home to NYC, he had no job prospects, despite working throughout college to afford his education. A job in film or Hollywood was especially out of the question. Hurwitz, like many others, gravitated towards the radical left and Jewish intellectuals in his NYC communities. Upon seeing the desperate situations of working-class and poor New Yorkers, including his own struggling self and family, he turned toward art seeking relief.³¹⁰ When he found the Film and Photo League with like-minded leftist and communist folks, opportunities emerged to learn filmmaking and produce useful films. After becoming a member and attending meetings, FPL members had

³⁰⁹ Hurwitz, “The Last Interview,” Reel 6, 1990.

³¹⁰ Hurwitz, “On Time, Art, Love, and Trees,” 1980.

access to IMO or Filmo cameras that members shared. Hurwitz, at this point, had experience with his pawned Sept camera and began practicing with the IMO and Filmo cameras. Years of self-study thus prepared him for the immediate projects with the FPL. Hurwitz noted, “When assignments came along, it was democratic. They’d say we have a few cameras and a demonstration on Union Square. Who can go cover it? I raised my hand, took the camera, went to the demonstration, and shot.”³¹¹ Hurwitz’s example highlights how experiential learning and self-study in collectives prepared members for filmmaking careers.

Community sharing of materials within and across groups provided resources to those who otherwise did not have access. Equipment was one requirement; spaces to develop, cut, edit, and finish films were another necessity. In the 1920s, the WIR headquarters had limited equipment and space for Kruse and fellow FSR members to use. By 1930, WIR’s headquarters developed into a space with more film equipment and film viewing capabilities to support the Film and Photo League’s growth. A February 1930 report in the *New Masses* states, “Their spacious headquarters is fully equipped with a darkroom, filming room and enlarging room, and all the materials used in the different processes of photography. The club also owns a moving picture projector and screen.”³¹² Such an advertisement pulled in several new members interested in using their facilities. At the age of sixteen, Bernard Gordon and friend Julian Zimet, then fifteen, attended Film and Photo League meetings, used their darkrooms, and experimented with their filmmaking equipment. They used FPL’s resources before beginning the FSS and while they conceived of beginning the group in 1933-1934. At City College, they developed the Film and Sprockets Society to build film study programming. Gordon cited the darkroom and ability

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Unnamed, qtd. in Russell Campbell, “America: The (Workers’) Film & Photo League,” in *Photography/Politics: One*, eds. Terry Dennett, David Evans, Sylvia Gohl, and Jo Spence (London: Photography Workshop, 1979), 92-97.

to use the equipment as a main reason they worked with the FPL. He recalls,

We learned of a photo club in downtown Manhattan where, for a monthly fee of fifty cents, we could use their darkroom... At first we didn't realize this was a decidedly left-wing group, not officially related to the Communist Party, but close. We didn't much care. We got to use the darkroom, which at night was used as a bedroom by one of the comrades, who slept on one of the tables. Mostly, the league was devoted to radical young photographers who were out in the streets recording the struggles of the poor and homeless to survive the crushing Depression... Part of the fee for belonging was to attend the lectures and educationals held in the meeting room, where a rickety 16mm machine projected class-conscious documentary footage onto a bedsheet screen.³¹³

Filmmakers frequently made do with the limited personnel and equipment available. This, too, created versatile filmmakers who could simultaneously direct, produce, photograph, write, and prepare environments for filming.

The caveat to learning filmmaking with cheap, thrifted, and shared equipment was that the final products were not always reflective of members' talents or creativity. Equipment was often "rickety," which sometimes compromised the artistic quality of films. In Naumburg's 1935 *Sheriffed*, she noted the difficulties:

For technical and financial reasons also, it was impossible to make complicated sequences or to reconstruct scenes. As far as the photography was concerned, here too the main difficulties were financial and technical. The camera was old and temperamental, jamming in the middle of important scenes, etc. Moreover, low finances did not permit securing the kind of film best suited for this work. Revolutionary film making is a painful process, as you can gather from the above...³¹⁴

People donated money to the FPL to buy film equipment or members shared their own equipment. As Naumburg discusses, financial and technical concerns were simply part of creating revolutionary films. Moreover, judging these films based on the standards of Hollywood or studio productions was not only unfitting for documentaries and newsreels, but obfuscated the political meanings driving the films.

³¹³ *The Gordon File: A Screenwriter Recalls Twenty Years of FBI Surveillance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 25.

³¹⁴ Nancy Naumburg qtd. in Ed Kennedy, "Three Workers Films," 11.

Other technical difficulties arose with FSS in the 1930s. Lawrence Mollot started at CCNY in 1938 and graduated in 1942. He joined FSS as a Biology major. Interests in film and FSS's experimental approach against Hollywood productions intrigued Mollot to join. Mollot detailed his beginnings in film, noting, "I had been fascinated in film making ever since my older brother bought a 9 ½ mm movie camera in the 1930s...This was an import from France. It had a sprocket hole—not along the side, but in the middle, on the frame line. The camera was spring-wound and you had to hand-crank the projector..."³¹⁵ Experimenting with this camera at home and the equipment at CCNY led Mollot to take on more filmmaking roles in FSS. Drawn to FSS's documentary and newsreel focus, Mollot and others used portable cameras, editing equipment, and projectors to capture and show their works on campus and to NYC audiences. Mollot described experimenting with other FSS members to make a newsreel with "sound" by using the Vitaphone to record voiceovers on a "disc" to sync with the images. When discussing how FSS members learned to make and screen films, he makes clear much of their learning came through jumping into activities. When learning to project sounds films, Mollot remembered,

We would watch the projected picture and proceed to record the narration and music in sync with the picture right onto the disc...What we didn't realize, however, was that since the disc player and projector were not interlocked, when we played the sound with the picture at the public screening, we would slowly lose sync. The picture would gradually outrun the narration, and we would actually have to stop the projector from time to time to let the recorded narration catch up. We kidded the audience about this, but the newsreel was of such interest that people excused the somewhat primitive technology.³¹⁶

Joining FSS was often the first time students engaged with working on films themselves, making short clips with limited materials and often in CCNY classrooms without a designated studio or film room. Gordon and Zimet even applied the skills they learned with fellow students to finish

³¹⁵ Mollot, "Of Celluloid and Sprockets," City College of New York Special Collections.

³¹⁶ Ibid. FSS held routine exhibitions at Doremus Hall for 10 cents a show to help with production costs.

college by making a feature film. As creators at every point, Bernard Gordon and Julian Zimet created an hour-long film together; they “wrote, directed, photographed, produced, and even acted in” a feature film to earn an Honors in Arts degree at CCNY. Gordon’s “young sister, Judy, was the young sister, and his older sister, Nina, was the love interest...” in the film.³¹⁷ This hands-on learning method became important to later film schools, such as the CCNY Documentary Institute. Hurwitz and others taught courses across the US that mainly focused on teaching students to create their own films. By “making [themselves] experts” in filmmaking techniques and theories, they learned pedagogical strategies to teach others and develop further expertise through experience.³¹⁸

Conclusion

Several years before John Grierson’s “First Principles of Documentary” was first published in 1932 in *Cinema Quarterly* or Eisenstein visited FPL members in New York, leftist filmmakers were making social documentaries and newsreels.³¹⁹ Analyzing documentary and newsreel cinema production from the grassroots level reframes the intellectual and cultural history of (American) filmmaking. Cultivating “celluloid power,” radical film collectives developed working-class news and social-issue films documenting American experiences frequently absent or distorted in dominant media outlets. These groups were part of and captured the “agitated streets” or “agitated city” that was New York City at the time.³²⁰ Streets became sites of teaching and learning—spaces where self-taught filmmakers experimented with

³¹⁷ Gordon, *Hollywood in Exile*, 1. Gordon recalled that Zimet’s sister’s husband owns the only 16mm copy of the film *Permit a Child to Join*.

³¹⁸ Hurwitz, “The Last Interview,” Reel 6, 1990.

³¹⁹ Transcript of Irving Lerner in conversation with Wolf-Eckhard Buehler on Lerner’s early career, n.d., Collection 112, Box 11, Folder 13, Lerner Collection Irving Lerner papers, 1935-1978, Performing Arts Special Collections, Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles, CA.

³²⁰ Vojislava Filipcevic Cordes, *New York in the Cinematic Imagination: The Agitated City* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 83; Barnouw, *Documentary*: 113.

techniques, styles, and ideas to produce aesthetic, political, and historical knowledge.

If documentary, as historian A. William Bluem notes, “was born in bitterness and nurtured on human crisis,” filmmakers in the twentieth century appeared acutely aware of how film could communicate crisis by centering those most affected.³²¹ Their belief that film could also mobilize people to ameliorate distress while honoring working-class and poor people made filmmaking an act of resistance. Film collectives’ ambitions to create an America, and world, where this was enduring made their production revolutionary. Communal education was core to making their aspirations a reality. Film collectives cultivated political instruction alongside grassroots modern art education before documentary cinema was formally taught in US institutions. Their learned production methods translated into creating films that they were proud of as political, aesthetic, and educational works of art. Personal and collective journeys into filmmaking shaped the films they created and how they sought to use films as instructional devices.

³²¹ Bluem, *Documentary in American Television*, 15.

CHAPTER 3: “VIVID DOCUMENTS”: WORKERS’ FILMS AND FOOTAGE

When nearly 16,000 workers shut down textile mills in Passaic, New Jersey on January 25, 1926, young amateur filmmakers traveled from New York with the Workers’ International Relief to capture the unfolding strike. Between January and the summer of 1926, communist filmmakers shot and edited thousands of feet of film to create a seven-reel silent labor documentary to raise relief for striking workers and families. *Passaic Textile Strike’s* (1926) opening title card reads: “Organize the Unorganized” and “Build the American Labor Movement.” Audiences then see, “The Battle for Life of the Workers Who Make the Cloth that Clothes You.”³²² It reminds viewers of economic material realities while personalizing viewers’ purchases and connecting them to workers on strike. The film educates audiences about the strike and its context. It also attempts to teach solidarity through the screen. As a “vivid document,” *Passaic* projected real textile workers fighting for better pay and working conditions as well as real allies providing relief and support.

Led by the American Communist Party, the 1926 strike included women, children, and men. Albert Weisbord, who joined the Communist Workers’ Party in 1924, was a main leader of the strike. He orated fiery speeches throughout its duration. He came from a poor family of Russian-Jewish immigrants. His father then became a small manufacturer in Brooklyn, which helped his family rise to a lower-middle-class status.³²³ Weisbord’s leadership in Passaic was notable because of his working-class background with his own jobs as a newsboy, grocery-store clerk, soda-shop worker, and textile manufacturer in a clothing factory throughout the late 1910s

³²² Reel 1, *Passaic Textile Strike*, Dir. Workers’ International Relief, 1926.

³²³ Albert Weisbord, *Passaic: The Story of a Struggle Against Starvation Wages and for the Right to Organize* (Chicago: *Daily Worker* Publishing Co., 1926), 33; Jacob Zumoff, *The Red Thread: The Passaic Textile Strike* (Rutgers: Rutgers University Press, 2021), 5.

and 1920s. He received his education at the City College of New York and taught English to immigrants at the Rand School of Social Science in the late 1910s-early 1920s while working other jobs mentioned above.³²⁴ His wife, Vera, grew up in poor tenement housing in New York that shaped her revolutionary politics and led her to take on leadership roles in socialist and communist labor organizations. Albert and Vera met during the 1926 Passaic Textile Strike and continued working together for various strikes from helping United Coal Miners in Pennsylvania to textile workers in Gastonia, North Carolina in 1929.³²⁵ *Passaic* highlights the role of labor organizing and leadership in the growth of the Passaic strike and WIR relief efforts. It includes a title card that reads: “A small group of organizers, under the leadership of Albert Weisbord, helped the strikers build up their union” before moving to close panned shots of several union leaders, including Weisbord.³²⁶ Emphasizing the process of union building allowed audiences to see themselves as being part of this growing movement.

Passaic Textile Strike begins with medium eye-level shots of workers on streets and then transitions to low aerial shots of mass crowds, some even capturing police brutality from rooftops. The prologue centers the fictional story of the Polish-immigrant Breznak family. It shows their initial transition as American immigrants in Passaic and their home life, focusing on Kada, the mother; Stefan, the father; and their children. As the film continues through to the first reel, images of women and men in the textile factory move across the screen. Managers then announce a wage cut. Workers begin organizing a union, with leaders giving speeches to rally workers toward a strike. The film shows real pay envelopes before noting that wage cuts, extended-irregular hours, and ramped up work speeds have debilitated workers.

³²⁴ *The American Labor Who's Who*, ed. Solon DeLeon, Irma C. Hayssen, and Grace Poole (New York: Hanford Press, 1925), 245.

³²⁵ Vera Buch Weisbord, *A Radical Life* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1977), 104.

³²⁶ Reel 2, *Passaic Textile Strike*, Dir. Workers' International Relief, 1926.

Passaic immerses the audience in the beginnings of the strike across several mills through the picket lines. Black families, church organizations, children, immigrants, whites, women, and men all make appearances to show the power of unifying across differences for labor progress. Title cards announce that “workers from all countries joined in the strike,” which included Hungarians, Russians, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Germans, Czechoslovakians, Brits, Spaniards, Italians, Mexicans, “Bohemians,” and Poles. The film also highlights Jews and African Americans as participants. The following sequence states, “The colored workers, brought North by the bosses to beat down wages, proved their solidarity with their white brothers, joined the union and marched side by side on the picket line.”³²⁷ Appearing after the title cards are images of smiling immigrant workers and a Black family in front of their home, which all emphasize the humanness of workers battling to care for their families, friends, and homes. The film implies that immigrants and African Americans are fighting against racial and ethnic oppression in workplaces and in greater society. As the strike continues, shots highlight police violence against strikers and sympathizers, plus attempts to cover police crimes. Importantly, the film also shows communist-led relief efforts and local community resource distribution to strikers and their families. Along with the fifth reel, the last reel is missing, but the surviving footage concludes with women and men talking to crowds of adults and children passionately about workers’ rights. *Passaic* screened starting in mid-1926, which leads us to surmise that the last reel ends with the ongoing strike to which the film was designed to continue amassing relief.

The Daily Worker advertised *Passaic* in September 1926 as “Stirring—Thrilling—Educational.”³²⁸ Though clear pro-labor propaganda, the film provided pertinent information

³²⁷ Reel 3, *Passaic Textile Strike*, Dir. Workers’ International Relief, 1926.

³²⁸ “New Labor Motion Picture” advertisement, *The Daily Worker* (Sept. 24, 1926): 2.

workers and other Americans otherwise did not have access to with daily news. This mixture of organized propaganda and cutting-edge news characterized film collectives' productions throughout the 1920s-1930s. *Passaic* carefully conveys the American immigrant family experience to show both the vulnerability of American working families and the power of united workers to demand rights and dignity. *Passaic* marks an important turning point in American workers' documentary and newsreels. Between the Friends of Soviet Russia's early-1920s' footage of Soviets in crisis or success and the Film and Photo League's short, quick works on immediate American labor events or Film and Sprockets' celebration of working-class students, *Passaic* continues a throughline of educational left-wing filmmaking. Film collectives intended to raise relief while transitioning to centering American workers' plights to inspire mass action. This film at once attempted to provide contemporary news to grow resources for working and striking families, depict workers as strong, dignified Americans, and create a visual document of this historical event for future audiences to learn from workers' perspectives.

Passaic helped amateur aspiring communist filmmakers gain participatory experience with filmmaking processes from start to finish. Those involved collaborated on all aspects of filmmaking, distributing, exhibiting, and advertising: Sam Russak as director, Alfred Wagenknecht as producer, Margaret Larkin as title-card writer, and Lester Balog, Sam Brody, and William Schwartfeller as photographers and editors. Brody and Balog became core members of FPL at its start in 1929-1930 after their work on *Passaic*. WIR took its previous experience with FSR's Motion Picture Department to bring Brody and others to a meeting to discuss forming FPL in New York as a national, permanent film unit.³²⁹ The documentaries and newsreels they created in the 1930s matured many techniques and ideas present in 1920s WIR

³²⁹ Sam Brody, "The Camera as a Weapon in the Class Struggle," interviewed by Tony Safford, *Jump Cut* no. 14 (1977): 2, <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC14folder/BrodyInt.html>.

films.

This chapter undertakes a daunting task to reconstruct content and histories of lost or fragmented films. Of the films discussed throughout, only five of *Passaic*'s seven reels and six New York Film and Photo League films remain: *Hunger March* (1931), *Hunger* (1932), *Bonus March*, *Workers' News Unemployment Special*, *America Today and World in Review* (1932-1934), and *Workers' Newsreel*. Most films ended up in members' private collections or stored away where they have likely disintegrated over the years. Or they were destroyed in accidental fires and sometimes hidden during the McCarthyist Blacklist period. Unlike films that have entered MoMA or Library of Congress, these films did not gain much cultural significance until former members restored and circulated a handful in the 1970s and 1980s. Anthony Slide highlights the politics and personalities involved in film preservation throughout the 1900s. The US National Archives preserved newsreels and National Archives and Records Service (NARS) began in 1934 to preserve corporate and government newsreels and documentaries.³³⁰ MoMA then began preserving classic Hollywood and international modernist films in 1935.

Film preservation involves "selectivity." Historically, preservationists have selected and received funding to restore and preserve "familiar" films.³³¹ This makes a history of less widely known films and grassroots filmmaking, especially from marginalized groups, an effort to reconstruct the experiences around the films themselves as well as their contents that served educational purposes. Film historian Allyson Nadia Field, in her approach to early Black films and lost films from marginalized groups, argues, "Nonextant film should be an object of study in

³³⁰ Anthony Slide, *Nitrate Won't Wait: A History of Film Preservation in the United States* (Jefferson: McFarland, 1992), 29.

³³¹ Slide, *Nitrate Won't Wait*, 6; Michael Binder, *A Light Affliction: A History of Film Preservation and Restoration* (Independent: Lulu.com, 2014); Caroline Frick, *Saving Cinema: The Politics of Preservation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

its own right, not just a reference point for surviving fragments or items to round out a filmography.”³³² This study of workers’ films takes up her invitation to give the “losers of history” a place in scholarship alongside surviving films.

Film groups created films to show workers and students of the film with goals of inspiring further filmmaking, political action, and financial and material relief for workers, families, and poor people. As the previous chapter focused on filmmakers’ education and practices, this chapter turns attention to the films themselves. Without groups’ films and efforts to inform publics about their films, 1920s-1930s audiences and current historians would be without vital insights into working-class lives. These films ranged in educational value—both in their intentions and reception. Some close readings of key films and their contexts will illuminate the didactic but also avant-garde experimental nature of these films. Collectives’ members documented themselves to preserve their own histories as powerful, important movements, while creating programs that not only presented film history but also narrated a masses’ history through film. This was part of a larger strategy amongst leftist and communist artists to educate the public about social political issues with modern art as a vehicle to do so. Their “vivid documents” have also left us with a unique glimpse of American history from the grassroots level through film.

Educational Value of Documenting Dignity, Labor, and News

Workers’ films had educational value based on their use at labor meetings, sharing global news and historical knowledge, and showing workers various types of labor to build empathy and solidarity. Films presented unique educational opportunities to interest and involve workers culturally and politically. Documentaries, in particular, aptly exposed systemic oppression,

³³² Allyson Nadia Field, *Uplift Cinema*, 26.

visualized working peoples' daily lives, and created historical footage in real time. Leo Seltzer, a filmmaker with the FPL, recalled an antipathy amongst American journalists, filmmakers, and government officials, as they ignored working and poor peoples' conditions during the Great Depression. He remarked that his impetus to create films was to provide workers with information because "Often these films and the photographs we made were the only source of information about the depression for many workers and farmers throughout the country."³³³ Film historian Robert Rosenstone argues that making films and watching them present a unique way of doing historical work and learning history—a way that can prod dominant narratives while constructing ones often excluded or marginalized in historical learning.³³⁴ Rosenstone's historical framework and the idea that these films provided unique information to workers, as articulated by Seltzer, shape the reading of left-wing workers' films in this section as both educational and political. While Seltzer's understanding of the immediate "news" value of workers' documentaries provides an avenue to analyzing their educational value of the moment, Rosenstone's analysis allows us to examine films' educational value in the 1920s-1930s in relation to their ongoing value to learning history.

As the previous chapter addressed, definitions of documentary and news evolved during this period, as did their educational value. Friends of Soviet Russia did not address their films in the early 1920s as documentaries, for example. However, the group and other Americans understood productions like FSR's 1923 *The Fifth Year* as a "vivid document" of Soviet life and advancements.³³⁵ The informational value of such films represents a way to analyze grassroots

³³³ Leo Seltzer, "Documenting the Depression of the 1930s: The Work of the Film and Photo League," *Film Library Quarterly* vol. 13 (1980): 18; David Davidson, "Depression America and the Rise of the Social Documentary Film," *Chicago Review* vol. 34, no. 1 (1983): 69–88.

³³⁴ Robert A. Rosenstone, *Film on History/History on Film* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 5.

³³⁵ National Board of Review of Motion Pictures letter to Friends of Soviet Russia about *The Fifth Year* named as an Exceptional Photoplay, Nov. 1923, MssCol 2100, Box 161, Folder: Exceptional Photoplays 1920-1922; 1923-1958, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public

films as a blend of journalism and propaganda—timely reports partnered with useful information and political persuasion. Scholars have named “citizen journalists,” “participatory journalists,” and “grassroots journalists” to describe the “participation of amateurs in the news.” Melissa Wall, for instance, shares a definition of “citizen journalism” that is salient for this study, as it combines layers of news, journalism, propaganda, public opinion, education, and community-making that resonate with film collectives’ films and writings. She labels citizen journalism as “the production of original media content by amateurs and other in-betweeners that aims to contribute to the building of community and sometimes to social change.”³³⁶ A film like *The Fifth Year* or *Passaic Textile Strike* attempted to persuade Americans that Soviet life and communist ideas were positive models for revolutionary change. By depicting labor and communism favorably, film collectives pushed political propaganda while simultaneously highlighting news from a working-class perspective to provide valuable information to public audiences.

In labor groups, film became a medium that could captivantly share didactic messages. Many leftist and labor organizational meetings struggled to move beyond top-down knowledge distribution or repetitive meeting structures. Agendas often included speakers talking *at* groups of workers without many participatory elements for active engagement. Using film was a way to make workers’ organizations meetings less pedantic with new ways of engaging members. Visual aspects could inform those with language barriers and help facilitate active discussions beyond audiences consuming lectures. Kruse noted that FSR films “deserve chief credit for the success of many meetings and demonstrations” and film features in newspapers, Kruse adds, are

Library, New York, NY; Reprinted in *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (Nov. 1923): 16.

³³⁶ Melissa Wall, *Citizen Journalism: Practices, Propaganda, Pedagogy* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 3–4.

evidence of the propaganda success or appeal of FSR films.³³⁷ Films helped reach illiterate working Americans, workers or racial groups with diverse dialects, and immigrants with various languages. The goal was to engage people who “never go to meetings, and never read anything other than a capitalist comic page.”³³⁸ Labor organizers utilized film’s mass entertainment appeal, rather than fight against it, to develop interesting, innovative learning environments.

Such practices could increase informational circulation and enjoyment of teaching and learning. *The Workers’ Monthly: A Communist Magazine*, affiliated with the Friends of Soviet Russia, was a merger of *Soviet Russia Pictorial*, *The Labor Herald*, and *Liberator*, edited by Earl Browder and later Max Bedacht. The journal frequently included ads for Workers’ International Relief and workers’ films. An advertisement in September 1925 exclaimed,

Local unions, co-operatives, workers’ societies of all sorts will find these films of great value in making meetings and social affairs more popular and interesting. Educational and entertainment pictures, one reel to eight, can be rented. Speakers and machines can be secured when wanted. Help bring the Labor Movie to the Laboring Masses!³³⁹

Film could serve as recruiting tools to draw folks into meetings for film screenings and discussions. Because many workers did not have superfluous leisure time or familial connections to higher education, films served multiple purposes of entertainment, education, and politics all while attending a labor meeting. Such practices maximized workers’ time and finances.

When FSR began in 1921, Kruse noted that “The first step, that of lectures illustrated by lecture slides, was soon followed by the second—the motion picture film.”³⁴⁰ That is, FSR saw an easy leap from lecture slides to films as leading educational tools. Both Münzenberg and Kruse realized the close relationship between print and film, and they argued in the mid-1920s

³³⁷ Kruse, “The Proletarian Film in America,” 184.

³³⁸ William F. Kruse, “Workers Conquest of the Film,” *The Workers Monthly* (Sept. 1925): 526.

³³⁹ Motion Picture Department of the International Workers Aid advertisement, *The Workers Monthly* (Sept. 1925): 480.

³⁴⁰ Kruse, in “The Proletarian Film in America,” 184.

that more people now engaged with films than print. Kruse, in his 1926 article “Proletarian Film in America,” stated, “The propaganda potency of the film in America outweighs the combined influence of newspapers, public libraries and lecture platforms.”³⁴¹ While this is an inflated argument since print remained the dominant source of information in the 1920s, they recognized the increasing role of films—particularly documentaries and newsreels—as powerful information outlets. Movie attendance in the US grew to an estimated fifty to seventy million with about ninety percent of Americans regularly attending the movies by the end of the 1920s, while readership and subscription numbers remained steady with less drastic increases.³⁴² Kruse gloated about FSR films capturing audiences from over 200 cities to small villages in the US during the 1920s-1930s. FSR’s first film *Russia Through the Shadows* allegedly raised \$40,000 in funds for Soviet famine relief after reaching 100,000 to 150,000 viewers.³⁴³ This may not appear to be a lot compared to the millions of Americans attending theaters, but this was a great accomplishment given FSR distributed and exhibited their own films mainly in non-theatrical workers’ spaces. While film collectives employed a combination of strategies, they urged labor organizations to regularly include films in their meetings and informational sessions by supplying films for them to do so.

Film collectives and labor organizations also foregrounded ways to overcome cultural barriers to American institutions. Museums, galleries, reading clubs, and other institutions often desired to reach working classes but more often appealed to elite values with patronizing “uplift” or assimilationist ideals.³⁴⁴ Film’s mass reach, by contrast, had capacities to attract more people

³⁴¹ Willi Münzenberg, “Capture the Film!” *Daily Worker* (July 23, 1925): 3; Kruse, “Workers Conquest of the Film,” 502.

³⁴² Douglas Gomery, “Film and Business History: The Development of an American Mass Entertainment Industry,” *Journal of Contemporary History* vol. 19, no. 1 (1984): 89–103.

³⁴³ Kruse, “The Proletarian Film in America,” 184.

³⁴⁴ Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Culture and the City*; Charles Coleman Sellers, *Mr. Peale's Museum: Charles Willson Peale and the First Popular Museum of Natural Science and Art* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1980);

and allow workers to shape their own narratives outside of these institutions. Collectives understood the popular appeal of film and its origins as a working-class medium. Unlike the art museum or opera theater that had been staples of elite, wealthy Americans and Europeans for hundreds of years before trying to reach lower classes, the cinema in America had cheap shows near working-class neighborhoods at its start. By the 1920s, film had become more integrated into not only cinemas, but also non-theatrical community spaces. Emphasizing film's educational powers, in 1925, *Workers' Monthly* reported that

20,000 Theatres---100,000 churches, schools, clubs, etc., show motion pictures to fifty million workers every week! Here are, really and truly, the masses! The workers' side can be told with movies! What are you doing to help in this job that MUST be done? Labor pictures, from Russia, Germany, and America. Stories, comedies, education, strikes, labor conditions, revolution.³⁴⁵

This statement recognizes not only the role of movie theaters, but also the ways nontheatrical spaces allowed workers to access films, which became a primary tactic of collectives to show labor films. Labor pictures from American film collectives and films they sponsored from Europe and the Soviet Union provided vital opportunities for workers to gain political, artistic, and intellectual insight otherwise missing from Hollywood films and commercial newsreels. Moreover, film resonated more as a working-class medium than other forms of established arts.

Earlier filmmakers recognized the value of film in working-class culture to create films directed at workers' audiences and influence their behaviors. Some of the first films produced were about workers in the 1890s, notably Lumiere's *Workers Leaving a Factory* (1895) featuring

Edward A. Chappell, "Social Responsibility and the American History Museum" *Winterthur Portfolio* 24, no. 4 (1989): 247-265; Nathaniel Burt, *Palaces for the People: A Social History of the American Art Museum* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1977); Kenneth Hudson, *A Social History of Museums: What the Visitors Thought* (London: Palgrave, 1975).

³⁴⁵ International Workers' Aid "Workers' Movies" advertisement, *Workers Monthly* (Aug. 1925): 480; Max Bedacht, "What is Workers' Education?" *Workers' Monthly* (April 1925): 262-263; Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood*, 32-56.

French men and women leaving the Lumiere Factory.³⁴⁶ In the US, Thomas Edison recorded films about workers and workplace safety in the 1910s, including ones with the National Association of Manufacturers in 1912.³⁴⁷ Edison's educational films subtly address workers' concerns. *The Crime of Carelessness* and *Workman's Lesson*, however, place workers as responsible for their own individual safety to follow company and inspector rules. The films depict workers who broke rules out of carelessness or foolishness, and Edison created these films for companies to show workers for compliance. Grieveson places cinema within a larger history of private and state industry efforts to shape a liberal political economy dating back to the nineteenth century. This highlights cinema's history within commercial and state entities in the US and Britain. Grieveson argues that elites used media to promote liberal and imperialist causes that helped cement a liberal political economy with American and, to a diminishing degree, British dominance over global capitalist markets. Film played a central role as "elite pedagogic media" to shape consumers' behaviors and their belief in the liberal political economy, state, and corporations between 1913 and 1939.³⁴⁸ In Grieveson's assessment, corporate-state media became hegemonic in forming public opinion, limiting the discourse about their intentions of using media ranging from radio to world fairs. During a time of American state-regulation and growing cooperation with corporations, film became a powerful tool integrated into a more bureaucratically minded America with stronger public relations systems. Educating against these messages was therefore paramount to counter negative stereotypes of workers.

The image of the silly, irresponsible worker compared to the upstanding, faultless bosses

³⁴⁶ *Workers Leaving a Factory*, Dir. Lumiere Brothers, 1895, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BO0EkMKfgJI>; *Factory Workers Archival Footage*, Dir. unknown, c. 1904, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NeB_krB7sbU.

³⁴⁷ *The Crime of Carelessness* and *Workman's Lesson*, Dir. Thomas Edison, 1912, <https://www.hagley.org/research/programs/nam-project-news/workplace-safety-films-thomas-edison->.

³⁴⁸ Lee Grieveson, *Cinema and the Wealth of Nations: Media, Capital, and the Liberal World System* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 3.

motivated workers' groups to highlight systemic corporate and government neglect and reassign responsibility for poor working conditions to those in ruling positions. Rather than just include workers in film to instruct workers to comply with managerial rules, FSR, FPL, and FSS displayed workers as united and intelligent. Instead of complying, they encouraged rebelling.

Countering anticommunism and media's portrayals of Soviets also drove several film projects. One main task FSR pursued, for example, was documenting and circulating information about post-revolutionary Soviet life to provide what they perceived as accurate information about the emerging Soviet state. Many American leftists discussed how Hollywood movies degraded Soviet people and films or depicted the Soviet Union and US as adversaries, and therefore sought to rectify these images.³⁴⁹ Directed by Chester Withley with Select Pictures in the US, *The New Moon* (1919) depicted Bolsheviks as murderous misogynists under a Soviet state that sanctioned men's abuse and dehumanization of women. Fox Film Corporation made *Red Russia Revealed* (1923) that showed footage filmmakers apparently captured from Soviet Russia. Several major trade papers, including *Moving Picture World*, *Exhibitors Herald*, *Motion Picture News*, and *Photoplay Magazine* praised the film's "honest" images of Lenin and other leaders as "a revolting group — fanatics, butchers, brilliant egotists and morons," who expressed unlimited anger. Interestingly, one *Photoplay* article describes Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin's wife, as the "most sinister visage of them all" contributing to the Soviet Union's disaster and its "pitiful" future.³⁵⁰ The gendered aggression in this statement paired with anti-Bolshevism in other reviews inform little about techniques, narrative, or other qualities of the film. But the images constructed

³⁴⁹ Harry Potamkin, "Movies and Revolution" (1931-1932) in *Compound Cinema*, 170. This article focused on anti-Soviet films and their impacts, and the need for leftists to fight against such productions.

³⁵⁰ "Red Russia Revealed—Fox," *Photoplay Magazine* vol. XXIV, no. 4 (Sept. 1923): 96; "Fox Release Shows Russia of Today," *Motion Picture News* (July 7, 1923): 76; "Trade Press Reviewers Praise Fox Film 'Red Russia Revealed'," *Moving Picture World* (July 29, 1923): 325.

are powerful and frankly, terrifying.

What these films did not show are the efforts of local Soviets and US groups like FSR and WIR to help rebuild after WWI and the Revolution. FSR sent supplies to the Soviet Union, such as tractors, farming equipment, and even motion picture equipment throughout the 1920s, which they publicly documented in their journal *Soviet Russia Pictorial*. FSR's first film *Russia Through the Shadows* (1921-2) included film purchased from a 1917 Soviet "revolutionary film." Kruse located "famine scenes from the WIR," which he "padded out with our own photography of our various relief activities in America and on our Ural tractor farm." Kruse remarked, "Technically it was infantile, but its interest tremendous."³⁵¹ This seven-reel film would have likely been a bit over an hour. Press reports mention its circulation in several small theaters in New York and other US cities, along with nontheatrical exhibitions to workers, unions, and folks likely to contribute to relief. FSR encouraged labor unions and other organizations to rent and screen the film throughout the US: "Applications for the showing of the picture should be made immediately, the F.S.R. office announces. A first private showing has been arranged for the evening of December 11th [1922] at the Civic Club in New York, for which a limited number of invitations have been issued."³⁵² Those who gathered in these limited spaces had access to novel information about workers' and communists' activities in the Soviet Union as well as the technical elements of a film such as *Russia Through the Shadows*.

The educational value of this film was not just up to FSR's own interpretation. National Board of Review members also publicly valued its educational contributions to learning about the Soviet Union and raising relief efforts. In a letter from W.D. McGuire Jr., Executive

³⁵¹ Kruse, "The Proletarian Film in America," 184.

³⁵² "Activities," *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (Dec. 1, 1922): 295. This piece states, "Numerous cities in the United States and Canada have already made arrangement to show the seven reel moving picture, *Russia Through the Shadows* to large audiences."

Secretary of NBR, dated January 29th, 1923, he wrote that Kruse would meet with them to view *Russia Through the Shadows* at the Simplex Projection Theater.³⁵³ FSR's *Soviet Russia Pictorial* included the NBR's praise in several advertisements for the film. One February article stated,

The National Board of Review, in its report on the seven-reel film "Russia Through the Shadows," takes occasion to praise it in superlative terms. It calls the educational value of the film 'excellent,' and historical value 'splendid.' Floyd Ramp, just back from an eleven-months' trip through Russia, an American representative on the International Workers' Aid, will accompany the film in its nationwide showings. Ramp is well known from end of the country to the other as a very popular lecturer.³⁵⁴

Highlighting its educational and historical qualities indicates the general perspective that this film provided critical information for audiences to learn both the contemporary and historical conditions in Soviet Russia. Moreover, it suggests the film will be useful for future audiences to understand the history of the Soviet Union and American relief efforts.

After the success of *Russia Through the Shadows*, FSR produced another film led by Kruse. *The Fifth Year* (1923) included "about 40 Russian newsreels..." and footage Kruse took of participants at the Chicago Federated Farmer-Labor Party conference.³⁵⁵ It first opened in Manhattan in July 1923 and subsequently played at hundreds of theaters and union spaces across the US. Turning away from highlighting the destitute conditions plaguing the Soviet Union, *The Fifth Year* focuses on Soviet advancements in culture, technology, and politics. The *Soviet Russia Pictorial* reported in July 1923:

This latest film...gives an actual insight into the life of both the factory workers and peasants... Instead of the gruesome famine scenes one witnessed in 'Russia Through the Shadows,' one marvels at the complete change. Thousands of athletes are seen at their games, yacht races, horse races, cycle races, all these are once more common occurrences participated in by thousands of workers, while other thousands find time to watch them.

³⁵³ William Kruse and Friends of Soviet Russia letter from W.D. McGuire, Jr., the Executive Secretary of NBR, January 29th, 1923, MssCol 2100, I: Correspondences, Box 3, Folder: Film and Photo League, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, New York, NY.

³⁵⁴ "Friends of Soviet Russia Activities," *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (Feb. 1923): 32.

³⁵⁵ Kruse, "The Proletarian Film in America," 184; "Unity Meet Movies With 'Fifth Year'," *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (July 28, 1923): 5.

Then one sees the Red Army maneuvers and on parade, all kinds of demonstrations. An outpouring of about one million workers to celebrate the First of May. The social revolutionary trial and the protests against the counter-revolutionaries also come in for their share. Then, we come to the Fourth Congress [1922], Claude McKay, famous Negro poet, formerly editor of 'The Liberator' is seen addressing the Congress. Max Eastman is also seen as an interested onlookers at the Communist International.³⁵⁶

McKay was in Petrograd and elsewhere in the Soviet Union for six months in 1922, while Eastman lived in the Soviet Union between 1922 and 1924. Showing Americans at the Congress portrayed Soviet-US alliances amongst leftist artists. It also humanized Soviets to American audiences by seeing everyday life and accomplishments against the anti-Bolshevik fiction films and newsreels. Though obvious propaganda that overlooked arising violent political tensions and state oppression, *The Fifth Year* included Soviet and FSR footage Americans otherwise could not access to learn more about global conditions.

Again, praised by the National Board of Review, a report labeled *The Fifth Year* "another fine contribution to the pictorial ledger of history and human struggle upward. To everyone interested in world affairs 'The Fifth Year' should appeal as a vivid document in terms of the screen." It additionally listed its "moral effect" as "High with excellent educational value."³⁵⁷ There appeared a wide belief that FSR's film was impressive in the activities captured as well as what it could teach American audiences about Soviet, American, and global events. Unlike Kruse's evaluation of *Russia Through the Shadows* as technically flat, he marked *The Fifth Year* as more aesthetically sophisticated and polished. "Technically it was excellent," Kruse said, with additions of "colour-photography and animated trick film being employed to dress it up on American technical standards."³⁵⁸ Kruse's comment exposes that he and FSR were

³⁵⁶ "Unity Meet Movies With 'Fifth Year'," *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (July 28, 1923): 5.

³⁵⁷ National Board of Review of Motion Pictures letter to Friends of Soviet Russia and William Kruse about approving *The Fifth Year*, MssCol 2100, Box 32, Folder: Little Theater Movement, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, New York, NY; Reprinted in *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (Nov. 1923), 16.

³⁵⁸ Kruse, "The Proletarian Film in America," 184.

knowledgeable about needing balance between didacticism and entertaining novelty to have a successful and useful film. Based on broad press coverage in American newspapers and film magazines along with FSR's *Soviet Russia Pictorial*, it seems *The Fifth Year* fared strongest in the US of all FSR pictures because of its stylistic and informational qualities.

FSR increasingly used European and Soviet models to inform Americans about international conditions to form global workers' solidarity. Kruse had petitioned for a weekly workers' newsreel since the early 1920s and again in 1926 when called for one tentatively titled "Workers' Film News Weekly" that would highlight labor and Soviet activities.³⁵⁹ It is not known whether this series came to fruition or not. But in 1924, FSR produced an eight-reel film called *Russia and Germany* that highlighted workers' daily activities. The film turned to raising awareness and relief for famine conditions in Germany. Reviews noted this film was quite different from previous FSR productions. *Soviet Russia Pictorial* reported:

The difference in Russian is very marked, the almost total absence of the military note except as an incident in the celebration of their 'Fourth of July' equivalent is an item that struck me only after I had finished the film. The evolution of Russian farming method, the Agricultural Fair as an educational medium, and the carrying out of new pedagogy in the 'Children's Communes' are all high lights.³⁶⁰

Part of this film's objective was to contrast conditions of Soviet Russia's economic-cultural growth with the destitute situation in Germany that resulted from the Treaty of Versailles punishments and WWI destruction. Kruse remarked that *Russia and Germany* juxtaposed "peaceful progress now being made in Russia with the terrorism and famine that afflicts the German workers."³⁶¹ FSR hoped that the successes in the Soviet Union would serve as models

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

³⁶⁰ Letter from William Kruse, representing Friends of Soviet Russia, to William Barrett of the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures, April 2, 1924, MssCol 2100, Box 32, Folder: Little Theater Movement, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, New York, NY; William Kruse, "Soviet Movies," *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (May 1924): 133-134.

³⁶¹ William Kruse, "Soviet Movies," *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (May 1924): 133-134.

for Europe and the US facing financial, environmental, and political challenges.

Film collectives centralized exposing Americans to other workers' experiences via films. Friends of Soviet Russia films focused on showing Soviet labor to Americans, particularly Soviet factory workers and peasants. An article in 1923 *The Worker* discussed FSR's *The Fifth Year* as a profound educator. It stated,

A traveler just returned from Russia said that one could learn more about Russian life and see more of Russian scenery in two hours by watching this picture than by traveling around a whole year. Various international labor congresses and a Soviet shop session in one of the clothing factories run by the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America are high lights of special interests to labor.³⁶²

Detailed scenes of work on site provided unique glimpses into workplaces for viewers that could prompt them to contemplate similarities and differences in work environments. Moreover, the author of this article indicates the power of the screen to transcend humans' physical and infrastructural capacities to travel as quickly and vastly as movies could do. Conservative and right-wing groups like the American Legion protested *Fifth Year* screenings throughout 1923, citing its red propaganda in attempt to incite workers' revolt in the US.³⁶³ This critique often appeared amongst conservative film critics and political organizations with Soviet films screening in New York as well. Being able to pack so many images and ideas into a few reels of film was at once amazing and terrifying.

Into the 1930s, film collectives expanded the labor they covered and gave more intricate views of American people at work. Several FPL films covered agricultural and dairy farmers, taxi drivers, longshoremen, miners, textile workers, and the unemployed.³⁶⁴ Potamkin announced in 1930 New York that he had "planned a film of the fish docks, the 'live car' bringing in the live

³⁶² "Now 'The Fifth Year' at Orchestra Hall in Chicago on October 6," *The Worker* (Sept. 29, 1923): 5.

³⁶³ "Legion Would Stop Film: Charge 'The Fifth Year' as Being Propaganda," *Variety* (Nov. 8, 1923), 21.

³⁶⁴ Russell Campbell and William Alexander, "Film and Photo League Filmography," *Jump Cut* no. 14 (1977): 33.

fish from the ponds and streams of the Midwest and the far-west U.S.A.”³⁶⁵ Such films intended to highlight the skill of different work as well as the diligence of the workers themselves to teach solidarity to viewers. Elites and management frequently pitted labor and levels of skill against others, but these films provided opportunities for workers to gain appreciation for other labor and see that many faced similar issues they could confront collectively. Though it is not clear whether Potamkin made this film about fishermen, in 1933, Seltzer filmed New York longshoremen, a film that likely traveled to screens around NYC and to the Midwest. Other members discussed ideas for films that showed the interconnectedness of labor across US regions. Samuel Brody of the FPL noted in an interview, “If you can show the fishermen in New Bedford what it’s like to be a farmer in the Midwest then you’ve accomplished something.”³⁶⁶ That steelworkers could see the labor of longshoremen and vice versa meant opportunities to connect across industries to form solidarity, whereas most capitalist films attempted to split different laborers. The accomplishment was therefore not just spreading information, but mainly organizing workers across different jobs to see their commonalities with empathy and fight for each other in gaining better working conditions.

FPL zeroed in on exposing workers to various protests as agitational media to incite additional demonstrations. Film and Photo League films educated Americans about ongoing protests and strikes as well as the troubling conditions of workers during the Depression that were largely hidden by mainstream media. In the later 1920s and into the early 1930s, with fascism on the rise, film collectives compiled European and American commercial footage that American newsreel companies censored. *America Today and The World in Review* (1932-34) by the Film and Photo League shows clips from Nazi Germany, such as Goebbels speaking and

³⁶⁵ Potamkin, “New York Notes V,” *Close Up* (Oct. 1930): 353.

³⁶⁶ Brody, interviewed by Tom Brandon, Thomas Brandon Collection.

massive Nazi crowds supporting Hitler. These showed American audiences how serious the rise of Nazism and fascism were in Europe and the US. Antifascist resistance became urgent.

Footage of American antifascist rallies also made their way into America via these FPL films as FPL urged Americans to join in antifascist activism in New York and elsewhere.³⁶⁷ FPL also captured local New York protests to show to unions and workers across the city and beyond.

Harlem Sketches (1935) is one example of a film that made direct demands for mass protests in the city. It was a film that called for housing and employment movements to improve destitute conditions in Black and Brown Harlem poor neighborhoods.³⁶⁸ Films like *Scottsboro Demonstration* (1932) and *Scottsboro Boys* (1934) footage similarly highlighted unjust conditions Black Americans faced, urging audiences to deeply think about the meanings of these images and how to protest for racial equality. Filmmakers traveled within New York City and to the Midwest and South to film Americans who needed mass support for change.

Members within film collectives, however, encountered disagreements about the best ways to convey educational messages. Tensions often arose regarding how radical films should be and the process of production, for example. That is, should they merely reveal flaws in economic and sociopolitical hierarchies, or should they aim to incite revolution? Film collectives' convictions to show "the truth" often characterized debates over what "the truth" was and how to best explain it to audiences.³⁶⁹ Collectives created networks to support

³⁶⁷ Bert Hogenkamp, *Worker's Newsreels in the 1920s and 1930s*, Pamphlet no. 68 (Manchester: History Group of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1977), 16-24. Hogenkamp notes that the American FPL served as a model for both British and French leftists to create workers' films and workers' artist groups.

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 20. The French communist daily paper *L'Humanité* frequently provided updates on New York Film and Photo League activities. *L'Humanité* covered new FPL releases such as *Sheriffed* and *Harlem Sketches*. Because there was no equivalent yet in France, those writing in *L'Humanité* admired the efforts in America to organize workers' film collectives. *L'Humanité* was founded in 1902 by socialist Jean Jaures as part of Workers' International in France. It came under ownership of the French Communist Party after a political split in 1920 and has featured writers such as Louis Aragon and intellectuals. During Nazi German occupation in WWII, the paper was banned but secretly operated in Paris. The paper enjoyed success after the war but declined sharply toward the later 20th century with the collapse of the Soviet Union and financial troubles, though it continues to print weekly.

³⁶⁹ Several former FPL members recalled their experiences working with Pare Lorentz making government films.

educational infrastructure. Several collective members participated in efforts to build more permanent educational film institutions. Hurwitz and a few others wanted to form a “shock troupe” of filmmakers by the mid-1930s designated to capture certain events rather than having volunteers randomly self-select. Tischler, an author in *FilmFront*, described a process to create a centralized weekly workers’ newsreel based in New York to distribute nationally calling for fifteen-minute weekly newsreels made of fifty-foot stock and for about \$2.25.³⁷⁰ Other members like Sam Brody rejected such formalized structures that mirrored for-profit commercial processes. Whereas some believed planned, delegated filmmaking would best spread information to Americans, others believed the core of workers’ aesthetic was to organically capture events to create a more realistic participatory and educational experience.

Beyond debates over the educational content and consequences, film collective members questioned most effective ways to convey information through stylistic or narrative choices. Questions arose based on films’ persuasiveness or technical skill. Scholars have well-covered debates over on-site original footage and dramatized reenactments.³⁷¹ Gender, however, is a striking factor in how groups understood educational value. The most direct critiques of a workers’ film by an affiliated member, to my knowledge, are men’s review of a woman’s film. Extraordinarily little information exists on Nancy Naumburg’s life or from her own words and her two FPL films are lost. She edited a 1937 book *We Make the Movies*, and she directed and

Lorentz wrote a script for *the Plow the Broke the Plains* and brought Steiner, Strand, and Hurwitz on board because they were more experienced in filmmaking than him. They did not like Lorentz’s script at all, so they filmed their own material without a script, which Lorentz lamented. Hurwitz, Strand, and Steiner wanted to make a more radical anti-capitalist film; Lorentz did not support communism and wanted to highlight government progress with aesthetic visuals and music. Lorentz saw these three cameramen as “rebellious” for their social and pedagogical visions. Lorentz made *The River* with the Farm Security Administration, which he showed over 100 times to try to convince American middle classes of the value of FSA and New Deal projects. *To Tell the Truth: Working for Change*, Dir. Calvin Skaggs, Icarus Films, 2012.

³⁷⁰ S. Tischler, “Towards a Workers’ Newsreel,” *Film Front* vol. 1, no. 4 (Feb. 1935): 20.

³⁷¹ William Alexander, *Film on the Left*, 65-112; Russell Campbell, *Cinema Strikes Back*, 115-164; Barnaby Haran, *Watching the Red Dawn*, 189-210.

photographed two films with the League: *Sheriffed* (1934) and *Taxi* (1935). Naumburg produced both with her partner James Guy, who was a member of the John Reed Club. He participated in antifascist and Marxist arts movements as a social surrealist painter in the 1930s-1940s. Together they created films about striking taxi workers and farmers. An article in the *New Masses* summarized *Sheriffed* as a film that “deals with the poor farmers’ fight against losing their homes and farms to the bankers and mortgages.”³⁷² The *New Masses* article announced the successes of this film after its first screening on September 14, 1935 at the FPL headquarters in New York.

Nevertheless, it is unusually critical of this leftist revolutionary film. Peter Ellis, a frequent contributor to *The New Masses*, notes that his heavy critique is to advance the future of revolutionary cinema. He dives into the “poor photography,” stating “that the producers knew little or nothing about the structure and the writing of their scenario,” and that it is not up to the artistic quality needed for strong revolutionary films.³⁷³ Though the gender politics may not be direct, the nature of this harsh review is different from most of other League films that admire the direction of leftist films as growing, even if not technically perfect. Sometimes, the amateur qualities of workers’ films drew praise. A *FilmFront* article in 1935 also noted *Sheriffed*’s poor photography, “lack of knowledge,” and cheap equipment used to make this film as critic Ed Kennedy frames *Sheriffed* as a “pretty workmanlike little film.”³⁷⁴ Besides the harshness, feminized and infantilizing language pepper these critiques. A review of *Taxi* from her earlier film 1934 also described the film as “amateurish,” the editing as “weak,” and a film only

³⁷² Peter Ellis, “A Revolutionary Film.” *New Masses* (Sept. 25, 1934): 30; Richard Koszarski, “Nancy Naumburg,” in *Women Film Pioneers Project*, ed. Jane Gaines, Radha Vatsal, and Monica Dall’Asta (New York: Columbia University Libraries, 2013), <https://wfpp.columbia.edu/pioneer/ccp-nancy-naumburg/>; Richard Koszarski, “Nancy Naumburg: Vassar Revolutionary,” *Film History: An International Journal* vol. 18, no. 4 (2006): 374-375.

³⁷³ Peter Ellis, “A Revolutionary Film,” 30.

³⁷⁴ Kennedy, “Three Workers Films,” 11.

“competent creators” could correct.³⁷⁵ Popular understandings of newsreel or documentary cameramen often was that of “masculine icon” and solo heroic photographer of war in the early twentieth century.³⁷⁶ Such views seemingly leaked into leftist filmmaking to create complicated, unequal gender relations. Unlike other reviews or descriptions of workers’ films, reviews of Naumburg focus on the formal and technical shortcomings rather than the content or educational value.

In a rare feature of Naumburg’s own words, *FilmFront* included her explanation, which refocuses on the content and educational value of her films despite the technical troubles. Naumburg candidly explained issues faced while producing *Sheriffed*, including the cheap equipment. Moreover, she noted,

The American farm situation is so complex that we found it necessary to concentrate on only one aspect of it: the inability of the farmer to pay the interest on his mortgage and the threat of mortgage foreclosure. Consequently, the film may seem over-simplified. We had no precedent in making a revolutionary American film.³⁷⁷

Naumburg, like other filmmakers producing workers’ films, was inexperienced and learning through creating. She is the only known woman filmmaker in the American FPL. Although women were crucial to translation, producing, writing, publishing, and other film work, their labor is hard to track with little public mention of their involvement. Naumburg’s films of farmers and taxi drivers are unique insights to work that other FPL films do not capture. She reminds readers of the mission of workers’ films to celebrate varied labor and expose inequality: “The purpose of this film is to show working-class audiences what the actual conditions in the life of the American farmer are, and the necessity for militant organization.”³⁷⁸ Despite the

³⁷⁵ Robert Gessner, “Movies About Us,” *New Theatre* (June 1935): 20.

³⁷⁶ Clark, *News Parade*, 93-100.

³⁷⁷ Kennedy, “Three Workers Films,” 11.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

organization's attention to education, gender appeared to color responses to Naumburg's films rather than see the educational purpose. Creative and political debates shaped film collectives' approaches to producing and sharing educational films.

Films for Relief

All involved regarded film's informational potential as important, despite these variances. It remained central that workers' films should not just provide information, but also spark action. One of the major social functions of collectives' films was to provide relief to workers: financially, materially, and politically. Film collectives created films that demanded financial aid for the Soviet Union, financial and material relief for strikers, and government assistance during a time when "American workers were in a generally progressive trend" and interested in Soviet Russia.³⁷⁹ Workers' films could educate audiences about who required aid and what relief they needed, while highlighting the political reasons behind the events depicted on screen. *The Daily Worker* printed an article "Movies for Workers" in 1925 that emphasized how film could help liberate workers from oppression and suffering administered by the ruling classes. The article read, "You, who read the working class press for the truth about the workers' cause—go to working class motion pictures for further enlightenment and entertainment, and at the same time help among one of our dearest causes—Relief for the captives of capitalism in every land..."³⁸⁰ In this case, film could aid in relieving workers "from their chains" of political, economic, and cultural oppression to supplement the labor movement. While this form of relief was more abstract, FSR, FPL, and FSS also created films to raise material relief.

Film collectives screened Soviet films to raise relief for US workers and victims of oppression, but this was only part of their strategy to make their own films to raise relief for

³⁷⁹ Kruse, in "The Proletarian Film in America," 184.

³⁸⁰ "Movies for Workers," *Daily Worker* (Jan. 14, 1925): 5.

organizations and suffering workers, sometimes those represented on screen.³⁸¹ Communist-led efforts drove public demonstration and relief efforts in major cities. Workers' films focused on connecting the audience with those depicted in a film rather than viewing people on screen from a distance. In these films, "ordinary people spoke directly to camera" for the first time.³⁸² Film collectives created films depicting national and local protests that intended to change political policy and inform audiences about the relief necessary to support workers, veterans, African Americans, immigrants, women, and other marginalized folks. As much as this was an aesthetic and stylistic quality to produce documentary and news films, it was politically motivated to humanize struggling workers to elicit sympathy and material relief from harmful socioeconomic and political conditions causing suffering to people in their communities. Some of the first films created by WIR collectives raised funds for workers' and farmers' relief in the early 1920s.

Workers' films became important tools for helping the Soviet Union rebuild soon after the Bolshevik Revolution and World War I. One substantial consequence of WWI and the Revolution was economic and industrial damage, which was tied to destruction of crops, food supplies, and labor markets. Difficulties for workers and farmers ensued, from job or crop losses to full-scale famine. While estimates range significantly, around ten to fifteen million Russian civilians and military personnel died from both WWI and the Russian Civil War—many of whom were parents or older siblings. The number of orphans skyrocketed from wartime loss and increased further with the onset of the *Povolzhye* famine in 1921. Scholars estimate that around

³⁸¹ "To Show Soviet Film," *Columbia Spectator* vol. LV, no. 103 (March 17, 1932): 3; "Film Group," *The Jewish Daily Bulletin* (May 9, 1934): 6. Throughout the 1930s, FPL showed Soviet films, as did Columbia University's Social Problems student club, such as *China Express* (1929) to raise money for the WIR. Advertisements for *Beauty and the Bolshevik* and FSR's *Russia in Overalls* in 1924-1925 in major US cities appeared in magazines like *The Daily Worker* to raise funds for American and Soviet workers. *The Jewish Daily Bulletin* also reported that film groups showed Eisenstein's *Potemkin* and Murnau's *Tabu* at the New School to raise funds for "Jewish refugees from Germany" at the 7:30pm show.

³⁸² Hurwitz, interview in *To Tell the Truth*, Dir. Calvin Skaggs, Icarus Films, 2012.

seven million children became orphans during this period as the Soviet Union turned its policies and social reforms toward increasing orphanages and associated resources.³⁸³

Like American film collectives showed Soviet films to raise relief for American workers, in 1919 Soviets showed American hit films, such as D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance* in Petrograd, to generate famine relief. In 1919-1921, Soviet documentaries about the famine appeared to provide relief for suffering workers and farmers. Pudovkin, for example, directed a documentary *Hunger... Hunger... Hunger* with Vladimir Gardin in 1921. This lost film included exclusive clips of suffering Soviets and Ukrainians to better inform those regionally and globally about the devastating famine and need for aid. Pathé created a newsreel in 1921 of the Soviet famine that showed in prominent New York theaters. While reports on the film convey the seriousness of the situation, they do not call for American relief and celebrate how US theaters "made special attractions of the Russian material."³⁸⁴ Treated more as spectacle or awe at breaking news, such newsreels had important information that often functioned as distant entertainment or news.

As American involvement grew in providing international aid in 1921, Workers' International Relief began film distribution to Europe and creating their own films in Soviet Russia.³⁸⁵ WIR created *Hunger in Soviet Russia* and *Starvation Along the Banks of the Volga* in 1921. Kepley reports that in 1922 WIR and Münzenberg devoted a branch of the WIR to cinema

³⁸³ Alan M. Ball, *And Now My Soul Is Hardened: Abandoned Children in Soviet Russia, 1918-1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 1-17.

³⁸⁴ "First Pictures of Russian Conditions," *Exhibitors Trade Review* (Oct. 29, 1921): 1507; "Pathé Shows Scenes of Starvation in Russia; Baseball Series and Other Events," *Moving Picture World* (Nov. 5, 1921): 80; "Pathé Announces Scoop in Getting News Pictures of Starving Russia," *Exhibitors Herald* (Oct. 29, 1921): 77; "Conditions in Famine Stricken Russia Shown in Detail in Pathé News No. 82," *Moving Picture World* (Oct. 29, 1921): 1034; "Screen 'Scoop' for Pathé News: Gives First Views of Russian Famine to American Public," *Motion Picture News* (Oct. 29, 1921): 2319. Nearly all the trade press articles that covered Pathé newsreel no. 82 and its showings in New York theaters in 1921 are nearly identical. They do not mention productions by WIR. Newsreel corporations and American relief organizations also developed film campaigns for the famine in China.

³⁸⁵ Kepley, "The Workers' International Relief and the Cinema of the Left 1921-1935," 10; Rene Marchand and Pierre Weinstein, *L'Art dans la Russie nouvelle: Le Cinéma* (Paris: Rieder, 1927), 42; Jay Leyda, *Kino*, 157; Jeremy Hicks, "Documentary Film and the Volga Famine: Save the Children Fund's *Famine* (1922)," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* vol. 43, no. 3 (2023): 645-67.

“for fund raising and propaganda,” shortly after FSR started their Motion Picture Department in 1921 to expand relief efforts for Soviet families through crises and to positively promote the advancements of Soviet society to Americans. “Producing and distributing abroad 20 documentaries” in 1922-1924, the WIR rapidly expanded its cinema activities to help with relief efforts. Kepley estimates that about “25 million viewers in Western Europe, Scandinavia, North America, Japan, and Argentina” entertained WIR films.³⁸⁶ Friends of Soviet Russia was part of these efforts with their own films that helped spread information and raise aid globally and in the US.

Many FSR members traveled to the Soviet Union themselves to physically help Soviets and to capture still and moving images to show American people Soviets’ daily lives. Friends of Soviet Russia utilized their journal *Soviet Russia Pictorial* as a news resource in the US to publicize both their films and photographs. *Soviet Russia Pictorial* frequently reported on orphans’ living conditions, the famine, and rebuilding projects in the Soviet Union. Articles celebrated FSR and allies’ efforts to send supplies, money, and personnel to Soviet territories to help workers and their families recover. Photographers published images to raise awareness in the US and solicit material relief in food, clothing, farming supplies, and labor. Increasingly, reports centered on the resilience of Soviets and their path toward rebuilding into a communist state. *Soviet Russia Pictorial* features dozens of articles reporting on technological, political, and cultural progress in the Soviet Union.³⁸⁷

Films could juxtapose images of devastating famine and orphanages to raise relief

³⁸⁶ Kepley, “The Workers’ International Relief and the Cinema of the Left 1921-1935,” 10.

³⁸⁷ William Kruse and Friends of Soviet Russia letter from W.D. McGuire, Jr., the Executive Secretary of NBR, January 29th, 1923, MssCol 2100, I: Correspondences, Box 3, Folder: Film and Photo League, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, New York, NY.

alongside celebratory images of farm technologies to combat those same tragedies. Kruse made several trips to the Soviet Union to gather materials for films *Russia Through the Shadows* and *The Fifth Year*. In 1922, he collected Soviet newsreels and his own original footage to make *Russia Through the Shadows*. Labeled “a famine relief film,” first of its kind, *Russia Through the Shadows* depicted Soviets suffering from famine and post-war devastation along with local and American aid to help farmers, workers, and orphans.³⁸⁸ As the film was set to premier in the US, an “Activities” section of *Soviet Russia Pictorial* reported that “Some material from a new shipment of films which has just reached the Friends of Soviet Russia will be incorporated into the big seven reeler.”³⁸⁹ Kruse himself later clarified that *Russia Through the Shadows* included film purchased from a 1917 Soviet “revolutionary film” and “famine scenes from the WIR, padded out with our own photography of our various relief activities in American and on our Ural tractor farm....”³⁹⁰ Since the film screened in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, and several other major cities, each screening raised several hundred to several thousand dollars in relief funds that the FSR used to transport supplies and people to the Soviet Union.³⁹¹ For example, in Philadelphia, while issues of State censorship of the picture arose due to its communist and Soviet politics, the article reported that “the audience applauded frantically none-the-less, and responded to an appeal for children’s aid with almost \$2,000.”³⁹² FSR estimated

³⁸⁸ William F. Kruse, “Russian Invasion Reaches the Movies,” *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (April 1923): 70.

³⁸⁹ “Activities,” *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (Dec. 1, 1922): 295.

³⁹⁰ Kruse, “The Proletarian Film in America,” 184.

³⁹¹ “Friends of Soviet Russia Activities,” *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (April 1923): 73. This article reported: “The success of the F. S. R. film, ‘Russia Through the Shadows,’ is far greater than our most ardent well-wishers even dared to hope. After the great reception in Philadelphia came one in Boston, with Symphony Hall crowded to capacity and enthusiasm running high. Then it reached New York, and had Lexington Theater been twice its present size it might have held the crowd that clamored to get in. As it is, great numbers went away disappointed because they could not gain admission.”

³⁹² “Friends of Soviet Russia Activities,” *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (March 1923): 56. It was the Pennsylvania State Board of Motion Pictures that raised objections. In March 1923, *Soviet Russia Pictorial* announced that FSR had distributed *Russia Through the Shadows* in Philadelphia, reaching over seven thousand people, at the Metropolitan Opera House. FSR had to plan several showings since more people showed up than the Opera House’s 3,000-person capacity could hold.

that the film raised about \$40,000 for relief efforts during its 1922-1926 screenings. Kruse also toured “Children’s Homes,” returning in December 1923 with photographs and film footage to show Americans at lectures and labor meetings.³⁹³ A combination of media provided various outlets for information to circulate and elicit aid across the US.

American film activities gained international acknowledgement for relief provided. At the 1922 Fourth Congress of the Comintern held in Petrograd, Willi Münzenberg reported on international relief updates. Though all countries helped provide relief, Münzenberg highlighted Japan and America: “The campaign for the famine relief enabled us for the first time to conduct Communist propaganda among the Trade Union workers of North America, and to unite these workers in a relief action under the control of the Communist Party.” This involved creating several workers’ organizations and actions. Münzenberg also cited the Friends of Soviet Russia and Society for Technical Aid to Soviet Russia as major economic relief organizations that supplied tractors and tools.³⁹⁴ Münzenberg highlighted the exhibitions of Russian posters, art, and literature across Europe as well as WIR’s “illustrated newspapers” in the US and Europe that sold about “three million copies.” But even more so, he emphasized the growing role of film in generating relief and spreading information. He claimed, “The film has proven an excellent propaganda medium. Millions of workers and others, of every social position, have visited the Russian film evenings arranged by the IWR [WIR] in Europe, America, and Japan.”³⁹⁵

Following the successful fundraising of *Russia Through the Shadows*, FSR and Kruse

³⁹³ Kruse, “The Proletarian Film in America,” 184; “Kruse Open for Speaking Dates,” *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (Dec. 1923): 278. *Soviet Russia Pictorial* issues from 1922-1924 catalogue shipments and aid shared between the US and Soviet Union.

³⁹⁴ Willi Münzenberg, “Report on Workers’ Relief,” *International Press Correspondence* Vol. 2 No. 116 (Dec. 1922): 976-979, trans. Einde O’Callahan for *Marxist Internet Archive*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/muenzenberg/1922/12/relief.htm>.

³⁹⁵ Willi Münzenberg, “Retrospect and Prospect,” *International Press Correspondence* vol. 3 no. 42 (June 7, 1923): 401-402, trans. Einde O’Callahan for *Marxist Internet Archive*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/muenzenberg/1923/06/retrospect.htm>.

advertised a new relief film and its premier in July 1923. *The Fifth Year* shifted toward highlighting Soviet rebuilding processes and its successes as an emerging communist state. In April 1923, *Soviet Russia Pictorial* announced that “almost forty thousand feet of film are being gone over to prepare for the next news film of conditions in Soviet Russia”³⁹⁶ This would amount to well over an hour of footage in 35mm stock. *Fifth Year* included “about 40 Russian newsreels” purchased in the Soviet Union alongside Kruse’s originally-shot footage.³⁹⁷ Announcements for this film revealed that “All proceeds of this picture will go for the benefit of the Russian orphan homes maintained by the Friends of Soviet Russia.”³⁹⁸ Not only was the film to raise relief for Soviet orphans, but it helped sustain an FSR housing project in the Soviet Union.

Kruse and FSR expanded relief efforts further in 1924 with *Russia and Germany* to raise support for Germany as well as the Soviet Union.³⁹⁹ A newly discovered film strip reads that the film was “Presented by the International Committee for Workers’ Aid American Section: Friends

³⁹⁶ Kruse “Russian Invasion Reaches the Movies,” 70.

³⁹⁷ Kruse, “The Proletarian Film in America,” 184.

³⁹⁸ “Friends of Soviet Russia Activities,” *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (March 1923): 56; “100 Cities to See ‘The Fifth Year,’ Big Russian Movie,” *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (Oct. 6, 1923): 3; “Russian Film Barred in Providence,” *The New York Times* (Sept. 29, 1923): 10. *The New York Times* reported on the ban of *The Fifth Year* in Providence, RI on Sept. 29, 1923 citing the police commission’s fear that the proceeds would be used to spread “Communist propaganda” rather than benefit famine relief and orphans in Russia; “Russian Film, ‘Fifth Year,’ Stopped in Providence,” *Variety* (Oct. 4, 1923): 18; “Legion Would Stop Film: Charge ‘The Fifth Year’ as Being Propaganda,” *Variety* (Nov. 8, 1923), 21; “Picture Under Ban, W. VA. Labor Fights: Prosecutor Refuses to Permit Showing of ‘Fifth Year,’ Film of Russia,” *Variety* (Dec. 13, 1923): 21; *Moving Picture World* (Oct. 20, 1923): 652; “Russia Through the Shadows Banned: Film Termed Communist Propaganda—Stopped for Benefit at Springfield, Mass,” *Variety* (Feb. 15, 1923): 46; *Variety* (Feb 28, 1924): 16; *Motion Picture News* (March 3, 1923): 1064; *Motion Picture World* (April 14, 1923): 736. In Clarksburg, WV, the city issued an organized labor protested ban and prosecution threatened to anyone trying to exhibit it. A Providence, RI board of police commissioners denied license to show the film. Kansas City issued bans on the film with legal tensions and courts involved over interfering in exhibitions. A Boston showing involved protests and refusals to donate to starving Soviet Russians during intermission. Several other cities, such as Binghamton, NY and Cleveland, OH lamented the film as “Communist propaganda.” Despite these outcries, several other reports note that *Russia Through the Shadows* raised funds to build homes, obtain clothes, and support education for “over 1,000,000 little Russian orphans” during its 1922-1923 screenings across the US.

³⁹⁹ “Presented by the International Committee for Workers’ Aid American Section: Friends of Soviet Russia who are also the Friends of Workers’ Germany” edited by William F. Kruse for *Russia and Germany: A Tale of Two Republics* film strip, c. 1924, Box 1, William F. Kruse papers [manuscript], ca. 1915-1940s, Chicago History Museum Archives, Chicago, IL.

of Soviet Russia who are also the Friends of Workers' Germany" and was edited by Kruse. The film highlighted the Soviet Union's accomplishments since the Revolution and recovery from famine. One frame reads, "Russia today is a land of startling contrasts. A new social order flourishes amid the bizarre settings of buried absolutism." A subsequent shot depicts a Russian church. It says, "These views of the historic city are the first and only pictures ever made from the Church Steeple."⁴⁰⁰ Such images and text provided exclusive information to American viewers that otherwise would not be viewable unless traveling to the Soviet Union. In contrast, the film showed the effects of the 1921 famine and its continuation in 1924 on Volga German peasants in the lower Volga valley. The famine in Volga Germany caused a mass migration in 1921-1922 and deaths that resulted in about one-quarter to one-third of the ethnic German population lost between 1921 and 1924.⁴⁰¹ While maintaining its focus on relief, FSR's *Russia and Germany* shifted perspective to depict Russia as in triumphant recovery, a model for Germany and other areas in crises to follow.

FSR soon after released a short two-reel international relief film in 1924. Titled *Prisoners for Progress*, FSR meant to inform Americans about political prisoners in the US, Europe, and Soviet Union. Kruse wrote about the development of FSR's fourth film to William Barret, Secretary of the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures in New York, on December 31, 1924. FSR hoped the NBR would review the film to approve its showings in local New York theaters. The NBR stated, however, "That it is not within the jurisdiction of the Board to pass what is obviously propaganda film, not intended for theatrical exhibition."⁴⁰² Kruse notes that

⁴⁰⁰ *Russia and Germany: A Tale of Two Republics* film strip, c. 1924, Box 1, William F. Kruse papers [manuscript], ca. 1915-1940s, Chicago History Museum Archives, Chicago, IL.

⁴⁰¹ James W. Long, "The Volga Germans and the Famine of 1921," *The Russian Review* vol. 51, no. 4 (1992): 510-25; James W. Long, *From Privileged to Dispossessed: The Volga Germans, 1860-1917* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 2-4.

⁴⁰² Letter from William Kruse to William Barrett, Dec. 31, 1924, MssCol 2100, Box 32, Folder: Little Theater Movement, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New

“The financial proceeds of this picture are to be devoted to prison relief for political offenders in various parts of the world. Obviously, one cannot state their appeal without showing the nature and kind of causes whence their imprisonment and sufferings arise.” To justify the film’s use, Kruse highlighted its educational value and its social value to raise relief. Kruse notes that the Board passed FSR’s previous films and other propaganda films, and that this film is not offensive or radically different in content or purpose than before.⁴⁰³ Even with their propagandistic bent, the information within the films presented valuable information about real events. These films, too, presented audiences with a unique film form in the early 1920s. Newsreels and documentaries for educational *and* direct relief purposes thereafter became a cornerstone of leftist working-class cinema in the US.

Perhaps the most expansive communist-led relief effort was WIR’s production of *Passaic Textile Strike* in 1926. In January 1926, wool and silk textile workers in Passaic, New Jersey and surrounding areas went on strike. Women and children participated widely in this strike alongside men. Responding to 5-10% wage cuts, the Communist Party (Workers’ Party) Trade Union Education League organized the strike. Passaic Textile Strikers and the Workers’ International Relief set up stores to collect and distribute aid. Several other workers and leftist supporters traveled from NYC to participate and provide relief. Sam Brody and Lester Balog were two young radicals who in mid-1926 became lead filmmakers capturing the strike. Brody was nineteen at the time and Balog, twenty-one. Brody and Balog filmed *Passaic Textile Strike* with director Sam Russak and producer Alfred Wagenknecht (German-born to a shoemaker), Margaret Larkin wrote titles, while the Library of Congress surviving reels list Albert Weisbord, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Ella Reeve Bloor, and Norman Thomas as others involved with making

York Public Library, New York, NY.

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

the film. The film itself was made very cheaply and screenings quickly began in October 1926. Profits from the film went toward aid for workers and their families.⁴⁰⁴

When *Passaic Textile Strike* was set to premier in New York and Passaic, NJ, announcements highlighted its educational value and its goal to raise relief for workers' families. *The Daily Worker* ran regular ads between September 18th and the 27th about *Passaic*'s pending release in 1926. On September 18th, *The Daily Worker* published "Motion Picture Showing Passaic Strike is Ready." *Passaic* was important for workers to see because it included meetings, speakers, and strike demonstrations. Moreover, WIR "relief activities are depicted, the food stores, the picket lunch counters, [and] the Victory Playground for the strikers' children."⁴⁰⁵ The article promoted the film with enthusiastic descriptions:

Nothing will so simply, graphically and vividly bring home the big strike and its lessons to the workingclass as will this gripping motion picture of strike events snapped as they occurred...braving police clubs and shot guns, fire hose in zero weather, gas bombs, and withstanding the starvation offensives and strikebreaking attempts of the bosses and their tools.

An article penned by Cyril V. Briggs five days later, labeled the Passaic Strike "heroic" and "courageous." The WIR film showed visually what many articles and lectures could not communicate. Briggs stated,

This picture brings home more forcefully than a thousand speeches the sheer necessity of a united front of the workers with which to meet the united front of the bosses...There are too few labor films of any kind and not another that depicts the struggles of workers during a strike. The motion picture 'The Passaic Strike' should receive the whole-hearted support in routing and dating of every intelligent worker, both because of its educational value and its help to Passaic strike relief.⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰⁴ Zumoff, *The Red Thread* 126-7. Many leftists' organizations adamantly challenged schools, new media, and other cultural institutions for teaching anti-labor and anti-communist propaganda. This instance, however, highlights a key reason why such organizations found it politically, culturally, and intellectually necessary to create their own educational programs.

⁴⁰⁵ "Motion Picture Showing Passaic Strike is Ready," *The Daily Worker* (Sept. 18, 1926): 3.

⁴⁰⁶ Cyril V. Briggs, "Passaic Strike Film is Graphic Struggle Picture: Strike Scenes and also a Prologue by Strikers," *Daily Worker* (Sept. 24, 1926): 2.

By emphasizing the strength of the film as a relief effort and teaching resource, Briggs addressed key ideas that drove WIR film production. While many labor organizations wrote and lectured about the strike and communist activities, film's narrative and visual structures provided powerful images that could persuade viewers to provide relief and sympathy.

Many on the left claimed that revolutionary documentaries had effects on audiences, particularly as it related to *Passaic*. As Phillip Foner notes, "Audiences were deeply moved by the film [*Passaic*], especially by the scenes showing the atrocious police brutality against the strikers, including girl pickets and even the children of the strikers."⁴⁰⁷ The violence depicted in *Passaic* was motivating for workers to oppose brutal conditions. Additionally, the power of workers joining forces could ideally generate optimism amongst workers. A 1926 *Daily Worker* article stated, "The millions of unorganized steel, rubber, auto, oil, coal, textile and transportation workers will receive inspiration from this film, will be encouraged to cross swords with their exploiters for better living conditions."⁴⁰⁸ Such a film served purposes to aggravate working Americans to be angry at how higher classes treated them and to inspire them with hopeful messages of masses joining together. *Passaic* is an example of how film could get Americans out to support in strikes and to help raise relief funds. Next to articles promoting the film in *The Daily Worker* were articles celebrating working-class Housewives raising money for Passaic strikers throughout fall and winter of 1926—\$77 in one instance.⁴⁰⁹ On December 8th, 1926, *The Daily Worker* reported that the *Passaic Strike* film incited Seattle Milk Wagon

⁴⁰⁷ Philip Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States* vol. 10 (New York: International Publishers, 1947), 150.

⁴⁰⁸ "New Labor Motion Picture," *Daily Worker* (Sept. 27, 1926): 3. This announced *Passaic*'s release in New Jersey and New York. They labeled it "a thought-provoking message to organized and unorganized labor alike." And they called for labor organizations across the US to contact *Daily Worker* or the National Textile Strikers' Relief Campaign in New Jersey to get a copy to show in union halls or other spaces.

⁴⁰⁹ Issues of the *Daily Worker* between September and November 1926 all mention *Passaic Textile Strike*—its release, screenings, and some reception. The film typically costed about fifty cents to see.

Drivers' Union members to provide relief aid for Passaic textile strikers and their children, over \$200 outright and likely more.⁴¹⁰ The success of the film raising funds and political support for those in Passaic inspired other laborers to organize and use the film to raise funds for their local unions and encourage locals to support workers. *Exhibitors Herald* announced that "Textile workers in Chicago are utilizing motion pictures in furthering their cause. The Ashland Auditorium is showing films of the Passaic textile strike this week."⁴¹¹ With New York and New Jersey as the center of this film-labor collaboration, other US cities followed in raising relief and awareness for working-class causes.

One appeal for relief the WIR and affiliated communist organizations employed was that relief not only went to the workers—men, women, and children—striking, but their entire families. Such efforts resonated with workers' and immigrants' family values. For example, *Passaic* showed in November 1926 at the "Waldorf Theater for the benefit of the children of the strikers."⁴¹² Several articles noted *Passaic's* scenes of workers and their families could raise sympathy for the demonstrators. A 1927 *Daily Worker* ad for *Passaic* in LA noted the film was twenty-five cents per attendee to raise funds "for relief of textile workers' children." In subsequent years, labor organizations used *Passaic* to generate relief for other striking workers beyond Passaic. Proceeds from Trenton, New Jersey shows of *Passaic* and the Soviet film *Breaking Chains* in 1927 went to New York cloak makers. The announcement read,

For the first time in the city of Trenton the people will have the opportunity to see the new life of Russia before them on the screen this Saturday evening May 7, 8pm at the YMCA Auditorium... The proceeds of the shows will go to defend the arrested cloakmakers and furriers under the newly organized Joint Defense Committee of Trenton.

⁴¹⁰ "Passaic Strike Film Makes Workers Want to Aid Relief Work," *The Daily Worker* (Dec. 8, 1926): 4. Other articles include how Detroit workers and others were enthusiastic and inspired by the film, too.

⁴¹¹ *Exhibitors Herald* (Oct. 30, 1926): 114; *Exhibitors Herald* (Dec. 15, 1926): 102. In St. Louis, MO, *Passaic Textile Strike* showed at United Hall, supported by the St. Louis Conference of the Relief of the Passaic Textile Strikers.

⁴¹² "To Show Passaic Strike Film," *Film Daily* (Nov. 28, 1926): 4. This advertised *Passaic* accompanied by a concert at the Waldorf Theater.

So far Trenton has raised about \$900.00 for needle and tradeworkers.⁴¹³

A film like *Passaic* created widespread familial and community relief that reverberated across the original textile strike and for years after in support of workers in various industries.

Beyond direct aid for those impacted by the strike, *Passaic* intended to educate Americans about the strike. Organizations such as the *Young Comrades* called for stopping anti-labor propaganda in schools, especially surrounding the Passaic Strike.⁴¹⁴ Many leftist organizations adamantly challenged schools, media, and other cultural institutions for anti-labor propaganda and discrimination throughout the 1920s-1930s. This instance, however, highlights why organizations found it politically, culturally, and intellectually necessary to create their own educational programs.⁴¹⁵ *Passaic* was an effort to distribute information from workers themselves. The NBR even rejected evaluating the film due it being a “news reel” and of “educational nature” rather than “theatrical,” much like their dismissal of FSR’s 1924 *Prisoners of Progress*. William Barrett of NBR wrote to Sam Russak, director of *Passaic* and member of WIR, to alert that after seeing the picture for an appointment, they decided it is not part of NBR policy to evaluate the film.⁴¹⁶ In the mid-1920s, the NBR became more careful about handling

⁴¹³ “Proceeds of Russian Picture at Trenton to go to N.Y. Cloakmakers,” *Daily Worker* (May 5, 1927): 2.

⁴¹⁴ Zumoff, *The Red Thread*, 126-127.

⁴¹⁵ History of the Artists Union,” *Art Front* (Nov. 1934): 3, 2, 17; “Revolutionary Art School,” *Art Front* (Feb. 1935): 1; *John Reed Club School of Art* book about updates, courses, faculty, and enrolment information, Sept. 20, 1935-June 1, 1936, J. B. Matthews papers, 1862-1986 and undated, Vertical Files Series, ca. 1920s-1980s Part IV, Box 304, Folder 9: John Reed Clubs of the United States, 1930-1936, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, NC. Another aspect of creating films was to create relief for unemployed artists. The Artists’ Union, Artists Committee of Action, and Unemployed Artists Group between 1933 and 1935 petitioned the federal government for artists’ relief and a permanent federal arts division. They held protests at city hall and local government places “for jobs and immediate relief for all artists.” They also actively demanded a “municipal art gallery” and “center administered by artists.” The federal art bill the Artists Union proposed in January 1935 included a section about classes and lectures that will be held at the municipal art gallery to “educate public taste and make original art available to all people.” Within five years, an *Art Front* article indicates, the John Reed Club School of Art went from classes two days a week to “a full-blown, full-time, self-sustaining school.” These bills did not go through; hence the decisions of groups to create their own facilities and resources.

⁴¹⁶ Letter from Executive Secretary of National Board of Review of Motion Pictures to S. Russak of International Workers Aid/Malcolm Laboratories about *Passaic Textile Strike*, Oct 5, 1926, MssCol 2100, Correspondences, Box 102, Folder J: Controversial Films, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures records, Manuscripts and Archives

American workers' films and Soviet productions with more extensive efforts to mediate what made it into American theaters due to increasing efforts to regulate film that would eventually culminate in the Hays Code by 1934. This fueled film collectives' efforts to rely on non-theatrical exhibition and community-based filmmaking that could circumvent the processes of commercial theatrical films.

Later films turned to trying to build support that would increase demands for government relief in the 1930s with the onset of the Great Depression. Films by the FPL often argued for "unemployment to demand work relief" in efforts to mobilize Americans to protest unjust conditions caused by economic and political devastation.⁴¹⁷ Strategies for this included creating films that more centrally showed American workers in action to reset stereotypes and visualize the power of American labor.

Workers in Film: Workers' News and Volcanic Footage

Workers' news footage challenged American anti-communist images to portray what film collectives deemed "truthful" depictions of the Soviet Union. As noted above, FSR in the 1920s made films in response to commercial news specials or Hollywood films portraying the new Soviet Union as an evil nation or one reliant on the US government to stabilize. Films into the 1930s also showed positive representations of US workers powerfully organized for legitimate social issues. In May 1930, Sam Brody informally announced the formation of the Film and Photo League in the *Daily Worker*: "If the capitalist class fears pictures and prevents us from seeing records of events like the March 6 unemployment demonstration and the Sacco-Vanzetti trial we will equip our own cameramen and make our own films."⁴¹⁸ As independent film units,

Division, The New York Public Library, New York, NY.

⁴¹⁷ Hurwitz, "On Time, Art, Love, and Trees," 1980; Hurwitz, "One Man's Voyage," 4.

⁴¹⁸ Sam Brody, "The Movies as a Weapon Against the Working Class," *Daily Worker* (May 20, 1930): 4.

members could choose events and workers to cover. That workers were “stars” of newsreels and documentaries allowed films to include intimate portraits of working-class life in America.

Film collectives were instrumental in creating workers’ films and class movies—both the actual films and overall genre.⁴¹⁹ They included Soviet news, documentaries, and feature films in their repertoire of workers’ films, and looked to Soviet models of cultural organizations. Class struggle between the proletariat and bourgeoisie was the main content, leaving no ambiguity about bourgeois capitalists as the enemies.

Film collectives brought rare footage of Soviet labor into the US. FRS films of the 1920s showed American workers the lives of Soviet workers in a dignified manner. In 1924, Kruse “titled and adapted” the five-reel *Beauty and the Bolshevik: A Red Army Romance* produced by Proletkino and directed by Aleksandr Razumnyj. Though not originally created by FSR, Kruse’s editing illuminates another element of filmmaking where Americans made foreign workers’ films available in the US. Film negatives for *Beauty and the Bolshevik* show a title card that states, “This picture was made on actual location and the settings are rigidly true to Russian village life today” and another frame says, “After four years constant struggle against the enemies of the revolution a Red Army Brigade gets a breasting spell its the rescued village.”⁴²⁰ While propaganda for the Red Army, this film included insights into the Red Army that many American newsreels omitted when painting Bolsheviks as menacing enemies. Moreover, the fictional film showed real Soviet villages and peasant life to American audiences.

In the US throughout 1924 and 1925, *Beauty and the Bolshevik* often screened after a

⁴¹⁹ “Movies for Workers,” *Daily Worker* (Dec. 17, 1924): 2; “Go to your Class Movies,” *Daily Worker* (Jan. 7, 1925): 6; *Daily Worker* (Jan. 14, 1925): 5. *The Daily Worker* described FSR’s production as “the fine educational film Russia in Overalls” shown by IWA alongside the Soviet *Beauty and the Bolshevik* that Kruse edited for US distribution.

⁴²⁰ *Beauty and the Bolshevik* film strip, c. 1924, Box 1, William F. Kruse papers [manuscript], ca. 1915-1940s, Chicago History Museum Archives, Chicago, IL; “The Beauty and the Bolshevik: First Great Feature Film from Russia” advertisement, *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (Oct. 1924): back page. FSR helped arrange showings of this film.

short documentary FSR, with Workers' International Relief, did make: *Russia in Overalls* (1924). It was a three-reel film with footage mainly captured and edited by Kruse. A film negative describes it as "A Pictorial Account of Russian Economic Life" with "Films used in opening scenes by courtesy 'Amalgamated Clothing Workers' and 'Kuzbas.'" Amalgamated Clothing Workers began in 1914 and its membership included many Jewish immigrants across garment industries. *Kuzbas* was an American bulletin about coal miners in the Siberian Kuznetsk Basin and the American "autonomous industrial colony" Kuzbass started in 1921. The *Kuzbas* bulletin operated in New York City as a tool to recruit Americans to travel to Siberia to work in the coal mines as part of this workers' colony.⁴²¹ This title card reveals how FSR worked with American unions and Soviet-American organizations to obtain images of Soviet activities they could not capture themselves, but Kruse could apply his film training to edit, cut, and arrange documentary shorts.

Russia in Overall's surviving frames note the film's informational importance for American audiences, described as a "Highly educational picture of [Soviet] industrial life." They read in succession:

The average news-reel like a headline only hits the high spots. If you depend upon the screen alone for information you might picture Soviet Russia as a land of parades and politics. But to see the real Russia—the 'Russia in Overalls'—come along with these American coal miners and their families to their new homes on the Siberian steppes.⁴²²

A *Daily Worker* article added, "The oil fields of Baku, clothing and shoe factories, steel mills, locomotive works and many other enterprises are shown, especial emphasis being placed on those in which American labor is directly interested."⁴²³ Another *Daily Worker* article reported

⁴²¹ *Kuzbas: A Bulletin Devoted to the Affairs of the Industrial Colony Kuzbas* Vol.2, no 3 (August 30, 1923), 2018687249, Documents and Photographs from the Kuzbass Autonomous Industrial Society, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., <https://www.loc.gov/item/2018687249/>.

⁴²² *Russia in Overalls* film strip, c. 1924, Box 1, William F. Kruse papers [manuscript], ca. 1915-1940s, Chicago History Museum Archives, Chicago, IL.

⁴²³ "Red Army Comedy Picture Comes to Massachusetts," *Daily Worker* (Dec 3, 1924): 5.

that *Russia in Overalls* “will prove of special interest to the steel workers of the district in that it shows their fellow steel workers of Soviet Russia on the job.”⁴²⁴ American audiences had unique access to images of Soviet landscapes and industries through FSR films. A later report states the film features “industry rather than personalities” and “The beautiful scenes along the Volga are alone worth the price of an ordinary admission.”⁴²⁵ This article articulated the idea of Marxist films showing masses of workers and their work as main characters rather than individual human characters. FSR also took special care to highlight labor and workers that Americans could relate to and learn from. By seeing Soviet labor in action in a communist state, FSR hoped American workers could find positive representation in their respective fields.

Scholars have written about the portrayal of workers in Chaplin’s *Modern Times* or developments of “working class hero” or “noble worker” discourse in the 1930s.⁴²⁶ However, working-class filmmakers and creatives did not see the 1930s as an era depicting working-class people with dignity or as the epitome of American grit. A main reason many, such as Leo Hurwitz and Sam Brody, went into making films about labor and working-class people is because they saw newsreels that “distorted” everyday Americans or Hollywood films that stripped away workers’ dignity. Perhaps there was an idealization of workers in some popular culture and people wrote or made films about workers, but these historical actors saw American culture as far from idealizing or even including generous depictions of workers.

Collective members noted that most mainstream cinema, especially that from Hollywood or commercial newsreels, showed workers as “clowns” or “goofs,” as FPL affiliate Harry

⁴²⁴ “Pittsburgh I.W.A. Beats Theatre Boycott,” *Daily Worker* (Jan. 5, 1925): 2.

⁴²⁵ “Omaha, Neb., Gives You a Few Tips How to Put it Over Big,” *Daily Worker* (Jan. 16, 1925) 4; “Show Red Army Film in Waterbury, Conn., Comrades, Notice!” *Daily Worker* (Dec 11, 1924): 6; *Daily Worker* (Dec. 15, 1924): 4. *Beauty and Overalls* and *Russia in Overalls* “had long runs in New York City and other large cities in the United States.” These films were “met with exceptional success in New York, Philadelphia, and many other localities.”

⁴²⁶ Doyle Greene, *The American Worker on Film: A Critical History, 1909-1999* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2010), 5-8.

Potamkin once noted in *Eyes of the Movie*.⁴²⁷ Historian Michael Shull notes that before the Russian Revolution, anti-labor and pro-labor viewpoints were at times ambiguous, but many industrial films showed workers as easily duped by outside agitators and unions as ignorant failures when they attempted strikes.⁴²⁸ *Mr. Faddleyway Goes on Strike* (1911) and *The Agitator* (1912), for example, show workers as lazy in both thinking and physical labor. “Early movies showed organizing efforts as ineffectual, un-American,” Ken Magnolies assesses.⁴²⁹ Due to the wave of anti-communism after the Bolshevik Revolution(s) between 1905 and 1917, Hollywood created over one hundred anti-Bolshevik films in the late 1910s-1929, according to Shull. Vehemently anti-union and often antisemitic, these films increasingly characterized workers and unions as silly or even evil. *Bolshevism on Trial* (1925) film posters depict a “Bolshevik” as a huge menacing Jew looking to harm Americans, while Disney’s *Alice’s Egg Plant* (1925) shows an agitator chicken from “Moscow Russia” convincing hens to strike. It ends with the little girl Alice duping the chickens into laying an egg to enter a fight between two worker chickens arguing.⁴³⁰ By trying to separate communists and labor radicals from “Americanness,” this genre of films often reduced workers to simpleminded caricatures, yet also dangerous manipulators. With other titles in the 1920s such as *Dangerous Hours*, *Lifting Shadows*, *The Red Viper*, American silents painted communists, socialists, Bolsheviks, and Jews as menacing, ominous, and lurking in the shadows with malevolence ready to target “good” Americans.

Friends of Soviet Russia, Film and Photo League, and Film and Sprockets Society challenged these portrayals. Film collectives instead portrayed workers as hardworking, value-

⁴²⁷ Potamkin, *Eyes of the Movie*, no. 38 (New York: International Pamphlets and Film and Photo League, 1934), 7; William J. Puette, *Through Jaundiced Eyes: How the Media View Organized Labor* (Cornell University Press, 1992), 3-31.

⁴²⁸ Michael Schull, *Radicalism in American Silent Films, 1909- 1929: A Filmography and History* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2000), 19-69.

⁴²⁹ Ken Magnolies, “Silver Screen Tarnishes Unions,” *Screen Actor* (Summer 1981): 44.

⁴³⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

driven Americans. Workers, in this sense, represented American ideals of independence, industriousness, and pragmatism. Leo Seltzer and Edward Kern of the FPL completed a film *Marine* (also sometimes referred to as *Workers on the Waterfront*) in 1934 about New York longshoremen. *Marine* meticulously showed workers “from the moment they awake at dawn sleeping out on the docks of New York.”⁴³¹ Doing so relayed a full example of their daily work, but also emphasized the dedication longshoremen have to their labor. Similarly, Nancy Naumburg and James Guy’s *Sheriffed* featured Pennsylvanian farmers working long hours, while other films showed miners and textile workers as honorable Americans fighting through class inequality. Workers appear strong in numbers with intelligence and resourcefulness.

Even when FPL films showed unemployed Americans and workers in shantytowns, they then showed workers *en masse* demonstrating for change. Films such as *Hunger* (1932) juxtapose workers standing in breadlines and marching in the streets demanding government relief. Other footage shows workers demonstrating on May Day celebrating labor power.⁴³² Another FPL film was *East Side, West Side* about Fifth Avenue in New York during the Depression. It shows disparities between poor, unemployed and wealthy New Yorkers to represent the wide class divide in America.⁴³³ Workers appeared as resilient, resourceful Americans with FPL’s strategy of contrasting poor and wealthy; defeated and powerful.

Workers’ newsreels provided snapshots of important labor events, primarily demonstrations from workers’ points of view. FSR’s newsreels are nearly invisible in any account, but a list Kruse provided in 1926 reveals important lost footage of major American

⁴³¹ Gessner, “Movies About Us,” 20.

⁴³² “Program 5” notes, *Film Forum*, April 23, 1933, MssCol 2100, Box 137, Folder: Periodicals, *Experimental Cinema*, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, New York, NY. FPL’s footage of May Day 1932 screened here.

⁴³³ Gessner, “Movies About Us,” 20.

labor activities throughout the 1920s. Kruse identified

several American labour news-reels on such subjects as the Paterson silk strike, the police brutality in the Chicago stockyards strike, the Herrin battle, meetings of unemployed returned soldiers, Labour Party conventions, Lanzutsky demonstrations before the Polish consulates, our Presidential candidates; most of these we photographed ourselves, a few we bought at very low prices. We now have a sufficient amount of material on war, imperialism, and American labour conditions to make an interesting American labour film... The news-reels were issued in the form of 'Film Editions of the Daily Worker,' thus giving our organ greater publicity among the working masses as well as the honour of being the first Communist Daily to bring out its stories on celluloid.⁴³⁴

Though these films are lost, this evidence of FSR workers' newsreels establishes a historical timeline that ties together the newsreels of FSR in the 1920s and FPL and FSS in the 1930s. Tom Brandon recalled about sixteen Workers' Newsreels on 35mm made by the League and then several "news reviews" like *America Today*. These latter films included original FPL footage cut with "suppressed" commercial newsreel clips.⁴³⁵ Film and Photo League *Workers' Newsreels* frequently showed women marching for economic and legal rights as well as African Americans protesting lynching. Newsreels highlight government and corporate violence against workers to show their perseverance through harsh conditions. Film collectives exposed the American public to the violence workers endured at the hands of police and strikebreakers. Earlier WIR films, such as *Passaic Textile Strike* in 1926 provided an "unusual glimpse of the great strike" showing "cops using clubs to keep 'order'"⁴³⁶ WIR's 1929 film about textile strikes in Gastonia, North Carolina that Brody also helped create shows scenes of police brutality against workers.⁴³⁷ FPL workers' newsreels more intensely depict the violence of state policies neglecting poor and working people during the Depression as well as white supremacy and nativism in harming

⁴³⁴ Kruse, "The Proletarian Film in America," 184.

⁴³⁵ Hogenkamp, *Worker's Newsreels in the 1920s and 1930s*, 15-16.

⁴³⁶ *Motion Picture News* (April 10, 1926): 1607; *Film Daily* (May 4, 1926): 10.

⁴³⁷ "Sam Brody: Maker of Films and Social Justice," *New York Times* (Sept. 22, 1987): 20, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/09/22/obituaries/sam-brody-maker-of-films-on-labor-and-social-justice.html>.

marginalized Americans.⁴³⁸ One surviving *Workers Newsreel Unemployment Special 1931* includes footage of protests at Union Square in New York on March 6th, 1930 where workers demanded government aid. The following sequence shows “the government’s response” to protest with brigades of police on motorcycles and horses quelling demonstrators. Aerial and long shots then show police dragging protesters through the streets and mass confusion as police corral people into tight crowds.⁴³⁹ Compared to mainstream newsreels that omitted this information, audiences could learn about violent local and state forces weaponized against workers. Despite this violence, however, the film concludes with additional protests and marches to fight back against police violence and government neglect.

FSS had a similar interest in capturing working-class students at CCNY to show the progressive educational and collegial atmosphere. Many elites demeaned CCNY’s free education model and its education programs for catering to workers, Jews, immigrants, and radicals. Conversely, CCNY students and faculty frequently saw themselves as challenging exclusionary practices of Columbia, New York University, and other institutions. Creating films to showcase vibrant student life and success became a method of positively promoting CCNY academics, athletics, and student groups. The documentary *Cinema and Sanctuary* also notes FSS captured protests in 1933-1935 at the same time FPL was out on the streets. While it is not clear that women were involved in the Film and Sprockets Society itself, the group did film women students in the technology department to highlight the progressive gender dynamics of CCNY’s science and technology programs. Photographs from the Film Institute in the 1940s show women

⁴³⁸ Some footage also exists from the Chicago Film and Photo League branch: *Great Depression* (1935) and some parts of *Halsted Street* (1934). John A. Salmond, *Gastonia 1929: The Story of the Loray Mill Strike* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 1-15.

⁴³⁹ *Workers Newsreel Unemployment Special 1931*, 1931, Dir. New York Film and Photo League, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C4w4RvnaqNc>.

working in film classes alongside men.⁴⁴⁰ FSS laid the foundation for a successful film program at CCNY that recruited women and provided educational opportunities nonexistent at other higher education programs.

Part of moviemaking also involved creating an archive of events and people. The Film and Sprockets Society, and groups like FPL, explicitly noted that they intended to document themselves—everyday life of workers and students—because mainstream media or art rarely or accurately represented them. They sought to depict themselves with dignity. It was also important for them to keep their own records of struggles.⁴⁴¹ For example, then FSS president George Kaplan noted that in November of 1939, the Film and Sprockets Society began a series of six sound films. These were “newsreel[s] of undergraduate life,” made to “preserve a visual record of City College and its students through the years.”⁴⁴² Increasingly, FSS screened these newsreels for CCNY first-year students to learn more about student activities—athletics, academics, and student groups—and to learn what to expect upon entering college. Because many students entering CCNY were working-class of various ethnic backgrounds, they were often first in their family to attend American college. FSS films therefore served dual purposes of immediate educational material for incoming working-class students and historical footage of CCNY student life for future viewers. Not only would future Americans learn about them from their films, art, and texts, but contemporary Americans would learn about their fellow neighbors. Self-documentation allowed members to take ownership of their own experiences to create historical and present narratives with workers’ voices at the center.

⁴⁴⁰ Mollot, “Of Celluloid and Sprockets,” City College of New York Special Collection.

⁴⁴¹ “Directs Sound Film,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Apr. 11, 1941): 20. There is evidence that FSS carried on activities, including creating more sound newsreels. It seems the group really became subsumed into the Film Institute by the following semester as they no longer appear in newspapers.

⁴⁴² “Collegians Begin Newsreel Series,” 31.

Depicting workers in such positive ways was indeed propagandistic to help advance leftist politics and culture in the US. Ralph Steiner boldly claimed in 1935 that labor movements needed art and propaganda together, stating, “*There can be no effective propaganda without good art.*”⁴⁴³ A twist on Orwell’s claim that “all art is propaganda,” Steiner clarified that workers’ art needed to continuously strive to advance aesthetically and politically to serve any informational or persuasive ends. This approach to film represents what media scholar Mark Wollanger addresses as relationship between modernism and the “information-propaganda matrix.”⁴⁴⁴ The history of modern art and film in the twentieth century blurred with developments in news and persuasive media. Thus, modernist styles had political aims to reshape public thinking, and in the case of surrealists and social realists, some artists made art to communicate Marxist views and urge viewers to analyze contemporary information through a Marxist framework. Film collectives centered learning and bettering techniques, styles, and content to develop stronger workers’ propaganda—art that could teach political, cultural, and social ideas while prompting audiences to action against injustices.

In 1928, public-opinion expert Edward Bernays discussed the changing definitions and societal functions of propaganda in the US. Using social science research, propaganda, in his analysis, serves vital roles in American society and is integrated into core institutions and public practices. Surveying propaganda’s relationship to business, political life, education, and more, Bernays examines how ideas circulate in society to influence mass beliefs and commodity patterns. While Bernays’s framework focused more on commercial public manipulation than film collectives likely worked against, one insight to education helps understand film collectives’

⁴⁴³ Ralph Steiner, “Revolutionary Movie Production,” *New Theatre* (Sept. 1934): 23 (Emphasis in original); George Orwell, *All Art is Propaganda: Critical Essays* ed. George Packer and Keith Gessen (Boston: Mariner Books, 2009).

⁴⁴⁴ Mark Wollanger, *Modernism, Media, and Propaganda: British Narrative From 1900 to 1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 1-37; 62-70.

educational focus. Bernays regarded that “the educator has been trained to stimulate to thought the individual students in his classroom, but has not been trained as an educator at large of the public.”⁴⁴⁵ Educators in film collectives were not trained formally as professors at colleges. This, along with their political ideas, allowed them to assume pedagogical positions whereby they prioritized their ability to educate the public and shape mass ideas beyond just those in their direct instruction. He noticed a similar trend arts and sciences, particularly as he saw museums as lacking effort to make aesthetic ideas intelligible to publics and museums as static in that they did not seek to connect the art within to daily life, which made their ideas of art “dead” in the sense that contemporary Americans could not relate their teachings to their own lived experiences.⁴⁴⁶ Film collectives turned the manipulative practices of commercial media to reconnect workers and disenfranchised Americans to media and propaganda that represented their lived experiences. Newsreels and films like *Marine* and *Sheriffed* helped workers relate to those on screen to take in information as fodder for mass mobilization.

Film collectives did indeed focus on “creating pictures in the minds” of American people with propaganda to “change our mental pictures of the world.”⁴⁴⁷ They cultivated political instruction alongside grassroots modern art education. Hurwitz summarized the spirit driving leftist documentaries and newsreels in their depictions of workers:

We were excited about the ways in which actuality could be structured by film, how a selection of disparate scenes could be built as a mosaic of bits, and yet provide a feeling of the event itself. The world of ordinary things opened up, and out its significant meanings emerged...Where the commercial newsreels would show a ten second clip of an unemployed apple seller, the Film and Photo League made a whole film about hunger and the struggle against hunger. The films we made were newsreels, but newsreels

⁴⁴⁵ Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1936 [1928]), 125. Some scholars claim Bernays was overly optimistic about propaganda before the mass violent consequences of fascist and totalitarian powers. However, use of Bernays here is to situate film collectives’ belief that propaganda could be used for positive means in a broader cultural-political conversation going on in America at the time.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., 141-149.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 25-26.

enlarged in dimension and with a passionate connection with their subject matter.⁴⁴⁸

Hurwitz conveys the filmmakers' deep sense of connection to the material they filmed as well as the audiences'. Workers' films attempted to immerse both creators and viewers in the filmed events. Filmmakers' identities as working-class, Jewish, immigrant, and radical made them participants in their own films while urging workers to join in protests and communist activities. Individuals in film organizations earned no money and volunteered to make films. Creating art and sharing information to shape political views were meaningful enough for them to volunteer their labor, time, bodies, and intellect to labor organizing and radical filmmaking.

Conclusion: Creating an Archive

Film collectives consciously understood films' educational value across time periods. Delving into workers' footage reveals a relationship between films and history as well as the history of film preservation or loss that is based on the pedagogical importance of film. Members were acutely aware of how media sources or academics documented their current and historical activities. Collectives' films created a visual archive of workers' events and people. Even if the physical stock and reels are mostly lost, descriptions existing in print and oral histories sustain an archive to understand workers' history and culture.

Lost marginalized or subversive films include a history of deliberate government or anticomunist destruction of filmic and non-filmic information. Archival materials, along with individuals' self-archiving, have made it possible to tell the production history of these groups without many of the films available. Perhaps some FSR, FPL, or FSS members or their families have films lying around that they see as just home movies or private films. Art curator Gary Carey writes, "Films have a way of turning up in some forgotten vault or dusty attic or in the

⁴⁴⁸ Tribute to the Film and Photo League, 1990, George Eastman Museum.

loving hands of a private collector (often the unsung hero of film preservation).”⁴⁴⁹ Or perhaps there is one deep in the MoMA archives, unlabeled and unprocessed. So far, this unfortunately has not been the case with these film collectives’ productions.

Beyond inequalities of resources and anticommunist politics, there is also the issue of film preservation materially. Frank Thompson, in his 1996 book *Lost Films*, notes that likely over half of 21,000 “features and shorts” created before 1950 are lost. Though focused on studio productions and destructions of films, Thompson highlights the flammable and impermanent nitrate used to create any films before 1950. Studios and movie houses that owned certain films frequently burned old nitrate films once they finished runs in theatres. They also burned films when they did not have space to store them or money to transfer them onto better stock later.⁴⁵⁰ Gary Carey designed an exhibition at MoMA with film stills from the collection. His focus on lost studio films is relevant for contextualizing how silents were often flammable, only kept by units if marketable, and how sound made many silents seem disposable.⁴⁵¹ If this is true of major studios during the silent era and before 1950, this was even more difficult for independent and amateur filmmakers such as those in FSR, FPL, and FSS. With pawned or scrapped materials to create their original films on in the first place, they quickly edited and screened films, which likely increased the wear on the negatives and prints. Many films were also screened with improvised equipment such as car batteries in mines or on farms that could cause increased

⁴⁴⁹ Gary Carey, “Lost Films,” (New York: Museum of Modern Art Publishing, 1970): 4; James Deschin, “Pictures of Lost Movies,” *The New York Times* (March 23, 1969): 37; Gary Carey, *Stills from Lost Films*, 30 January–15 June 1969, Museum of Modern Art, New York City, museum exhibition.

⁴⁵⁰ Frank Thompson, *Lost Films: Important Movies That Disappeared* (Secaucus: Carol Pub. Group. 1996), ix.

⁴⁵¹ Dario Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory, and the Digital Dark Age* (London: British Film Institute, 2001); Charles Tepperman, *Amateur Cinema The Rise of North American Moviemaking, 1923-1960* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); Usai discusses the theoretical aspects of cinema’s ephemerality, while Tepperman and other focus on the history of amateur lost films and writing about lost films generally.

exposure damage from outside environments. Transporting their films around the city and the US without the same funds as studio systems to protect them probably caused damage to films as well. And unlike many studio films, almost no film stills from film collectives' films remain to reconstruct films. Any content or stylistic information comes from paper materials or from former members themselves.

This creates a difficult challenge for the historian to recount their film histories. Images of work and workers that appear in these films are undoubtedly skewed. And the analysis or descriptions of FSS, FSR, and FPL films primarily came from members or allies themselves, which elevates the praise and promise over critique of such films. As Naumburg noted, some created oversimplified visions of labor to communicate a readable message of worker solidarity and calls to action. Attempts to provoke sympathetic emotion for radical politics to ameliorate workers' woes sometimes overpowered cogent, fair depictions or even technical skill. If one watches or reads of these films critically, however, they offer rare glimpses into workers' lives and showcase agency of workers to confront their conditions. They also importantly provide perspective of workers behind the camera. Bert Hogenkamp, historian of international workers' newsreels in the 1930s, emphasizes, "Whatever the criticisms of these workers' newsreels may be, the most important fact should not be forgotten: they have left a filmed record of many working-class activities that would otherwise not have survived."⁴⁵² While I agree that we cannot read these films or their analyses as truth, the creators recognized their subjectivity and even celebrated subjectivity because it was from the unique, overlooked viewpoints of workers. Hogenkamp's point is, in my assessment, therefore most important. That any record or documents of these film collectives' activities exist at all is due to members' attention to their

⁴⁵² Hogenkamp, *Worker's Newsreels in the 1920s and 1930s*, 31.

current social conditions and preparation for historical understandings of their own lived experiences.

This chapter underscores the importance of writing histories of lost films from marginalized groups. Because these processes and individuals played instrumental roles in shaping the history of their own moment and that which we currently experience, it prompts us to rethink definitions of “historians” as well as their relationship to film. Several filmmakers have conceived of themselves as historians of their nations or own experiences. Rosenstone points to the early dramatic “historicals” from Griffith in depicting the American Civil War and Reconstruction.⁴⁵³ *Birth of a Nation* is now understood as historical propaganda, laden with racism and a pro-slavery narrative in addition to repressive gender roles. In 1915, however, this was the established history, especially in the South and among whites. Such films corroborated dominant historical narratives in white America.

European and American avant-gardists also often saw themselves as historians, but more in the vein of challenging established historical narratives or narrating history from the grassroots. Their attempts at “safeguarding the future (schools) and the past (archive, museum)” made them attentive about how to rethink historical narratives and changing the shape of future narratives taught to future generations.⁴⁵⁴ Modernist filmmakers and intellectuals frequently positioned themselves in intersecting worlds of filmmaking and historical professions. Italian neo-realist Roberto Rossellini conceived of himself as a historian throughout the 1940s and 1950s, with his films rooted in past and present Italy, often depicting Italian experiences of fascist rule and Nazi occupation. Theodore Huff was a member of the American Amateur Cinema League throughout the 1930s who archived film materials in the US and researched

⁴⁵³ Rosenstone, *History on Film*, 3.

⁴⁵⁴ Hagener, *Moving Forward, Looking Back*, 111.

American film histories with a focus on Charlie Chaplin. He also created films such as *Ghost Town: The Story of Fort Lee* (1935) that told the history of the Fort Lee, New Jersey film studio and its decline. Huff envisaged himself as both a “historian and filmmaker.”⁴⁵⁵ In *History on Film, Film on History*, Rosenstone argues that because both film and history operate under a set of conventions that dictate or guide how to produce, they involve some level of subjective analysis. These are both industries and practices that occur within power relations that shape whether one uses methods approved by dominant groups or those challenging said power relations. Hayden White and the *Annales School* argued that historical writing and written text in general are fictive at their core: interpretations. And films, therefore, produce “creative actuality”—not necessarily false but a specific construction of real events the creator chooses.⁴⁵⁶

Rosenstone, too, points to Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Vertov, and other Soviet filmmakers as creating “historicals” of the Russian Revolution. Though dramatized and politically-skewed, these films provide information about real historical events—from hundreds of years under tsarist rule to the Revolution many filmmakers themselves experienced. Many leftist filmmakers were especially interested in national histories, often reframing them as historical tensions of class. Eisenstein’s *October*, *Battleship Potemkin*, and *Ivan the Terrible* highlight this in the Soviet sphere. Rosenstone claims that *October* was a work of history more than it was propaganda due to its argument about how the Russian Revolution developed and transpired that was akin to a historical argument one would make in a manuscript. Eisenstein also developed theories on history, as did other media theorists. For Soviet filmmakers, depicting the Revolution

⁴⁵⁵ Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 244; 128; Chuck Kleinhans, “Theodore Huff: Historian and Filmmaker,” in Horak *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde 1919–1945* ed. Jan Christopher Horak (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 195–202.

⁴⁵⁶ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014); Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 80–1. Rotha and Grierson referred to documentary films as such.

was important to not only celebrate their victories, but to catalogue a history that they devised themselves. It was also a method of legitimating their own politics and culture, while affirming myths and symbols to represent their new nation. *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), for example, solidified the importance of the 1905 mutiny in Soviet and Communist history. Films often can capture and enshrine events and people that historians can look to as evidence. These examples highlight how theories of history and media often mutually informed one another in the development of avant-garde cinema.⁴⁵⁷ Creating films as historical records was indeed a political act, whether it was in the American case of corporations like Ford Motor Company to promote capitalism or for leftists to depict capitalism's decimation of America's most vulnerable.

Films can produce histories as "visions," in which filmmakers can express grassroots histories while defying traditional historical narratives and professional convention. Even if not entirely factual, films can provide a sense of "spirit" of the moment depicted. The ability to restructure the narrative and aesthetic presentation of history, moreover, provides a radical avenue for grassroots filmmakers to regain power over their histories and how the public encounters them.⁴⁵⁸ The standard flow and style of academic history often leaves little room for creative narration, and then there is the issue of marginalized scholars being able to access the academy and its resources to produce such histories.⁴⁵⁹ While film and history are disciplinarily different, film offers one way for grassroots organizations to make intellectual contributions that are publicly accessible.

⁴⁵⁷ Rosenstone, *History on Film*, xxi; Masha Salazkina, *In Excess: Sergei Eisenstein's Mexico* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 1-21.

⁴⁵⁸ Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 188-199. Rosenstone specifically refers to "third cinema" and those of nations and groups seeking decolonialism and radical reframing of their histories.

⁴⁵⁹ Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 172; "Re-Visioning History" in *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* eds. Mark C. Carnes, Ted Mico, John Miller-Monzon, and David Rubel (New York: H. Holt, 1995); Tom Ryall, *Britain and the American Cinema* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2001), 118. Ryall notes how Hollywood in the 1920s consulted libraries and research departments to make films.

Still today, workers' films provide some of the only documents historians can access to reconstruct a working-class film history of the 1920s-1930s. Films created by FSR, FPL, and FSS include points of view and information not readily available in manuscript archives—either wholly absent or unprocessed to the same degree as well-known collections. While we can look at Communist Party leadership documents to understand the Passaic Textile Strike or Hunger Marches, fewer documents exist to tell these stories from rank-and-file members. Seeing the street view of marching from New York to Washington D.C. opens an immersive history from the literal vantage point of workers in attendance. Grassroots films present alternative histories that eagerly embrace emotionality and radical visual experiences.⁴⁶⁰ Viewing history through the lens of film can excavate economic, political, social, and cultural tensions but also compels historians to confront their own professional norms to envision historical writing in novel ways. In seeing history as “myth and memory,” this does not necessarily have to reduce history to mere interpretation or without facts. Rather, “new sorts of history that are made possible by the medium of the film... [introduce] new ways of thinking about the past.”⁴⁶¹ Film collectives' educational projects also present opportunities to understand the processes of how histories and archives are made.

⁴⁶⁰ Anirudh Deshpande, “Films as Historical Sources or Alternative History,” *Economic and Political Weekly* vol. 39, no. 40 (2004): 4455–4459. For additional scholarly works on this subject, see Lauren Ball, “The Historical Value of Film,” *Metahistory: An Introduction to Historiography, Selected Essays on The History Of History* ed. Fred Gibbs (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 2021), <https://unm-historiography.github.io/metahistory/essays/thematic/film.html>; Paul B. Weinstein, “Movies as the Gateway to History: The History and Film Project,” *The History Teacher* vol. 35, no. 1 (2001): 27–48; Benjamin J. J. Leff, “Popular Culture as Historical Text: Using Mass Media to Teach American History,” *The History Teacher* vol. 50, no. 2 (2017): 227–54; Bruce Dennett, “Teaching Historiography through Film,” *Teaching History* vol. 44, no. 3 (September 2010): 20; Sian Barber, *Using Film as a Source* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015); John E. O'Connor, “Image as Artifact: Historians and the Moving-Image Media,” *OAH Magazine of History* vol. 16, no. 4 (2002): 23; Robin L. Schaber, “Film and History,” *OAH Magazine of History* vol. 16, no. 4 (2002): 48–49; Brenda E. Stevenson, “12 Years A Slave: Narrative, History, And Film,” *The Journal of African American History* vol. 99, no. 1–2 (2014): 106–118; John Stover, “Framing Social Movements through Documentary Films,” *Contexts* vol. 12, no. 4 (2013): 56–58; David Thompson, “History Composed with Film,” *Film Comment* vol. 26, no. 5 (1990): 12–16;

⁴⁶¹ Sklar, *Movie Made America*, 359; Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 231.

What FSR, FPL, and FSS films provide historically—as both restored full films or print descriptions—are glimpses of working Americans as creative, intelligent, and hardworking. In her short introduction to her 1937 edited collection *We Make the Movies*, Naumburg encourages more experimentation in American storytelling. What grassroots films should do is underscore the importance of workers to the American past, present, and future. She wrote,

Few true films of American life every come out of Hollywood. When films are made of a few of the Americans who have been important of the history of the country, they are generally distorted. The lives of the vast majority of Americans, living on small farms, working in the mines and the factories, are never seen in the movies.⁴⁶²

Recovering silenced stories of these important Americans illuminated cultural and political values that could help the country pull itself out of devastating economic turmoil without slipping into fascism. Film collectives provided alternative iterations of the past, while offering images of a revolutionary future. And by seeing themselves as integral to these processes, workers could be more inclined to walk away from a movie ready to join labor struggles.

⁴⁶² Naumburg, *We Make the Movies* (London: Faber & Faber, 1937), xxiii; Geoffrey Byron, “Amateur Cinematography: Women Technicians and Cine Society Executives,” *Amateur Photographer and Cinematography* (Aug. 7, 1935): 143. Very little information about women exists about those involved with these organizations. Film and Photo League titles frequently listed “men and women” in their films and the FSS filmed women in the technology department. As for actual filmmakers, Naumburg in the US is the only one. In the British FPL that began in the mid-1930s, Nancy Bodington worked on *Flight* with the British FPL. Jean Ross was born in the British Protectorate of Egypt and worked as a film critic with the *Daily Worker* reviewing Soviet films and she worked with the British Film and Photo League.

CHAPTER 4: “THE WORKINGMAN’S COLLEGE”: WORKER-INTELLECTUALS AT THE MOVIES

In the early 1920s, William Kruse—in partnership with the Friends of Soviet Russia and Workers International Relief—screened original labor newsreels and Soviet films like *Polikushka* (1923) in union halls, schoolhouses, small rented theaters, and in FSR/WIR meeting headquarters. By 1926, Kruse announced plans to obtain “equipment that permits pictures to be shown in daylight” and develop production and exhibition activities in “rural and small isolated mining districts.”⁴⁶³ This occurred while the Film Arts Guild circulated and screened European and Soviet films, such as *Battleship Potemkin*, at New York art theaters from 1925 until about 1931.⁴⁶⁴ By the early 1930s, the Film and Photo League brought many of Kruse’s WIR plans to fruition with expanded screenings of Soviet, European, and FPL films at the New School, coal mines, and other workers’ districts in and around New York. The Film and Sprockets Society exhibited similar films regularly at the City College Pauline Edwards Theater to build the City College into a premier school for documentary and avant-garde film study. Each group functioned as both distributors and exhibitors—sometimes bringing foreign films to the US for the first screenings. Exhibitions concocted diverse viewing experiences that brought workers and cineastes in contact with similar workers’ and avant-garde films. In union halls, the Cameo, and the New School, New Yorkers saw pictures from their own neighborhoods to Soviet Russia. Collectives had flexible exhibition networks to reach various audiences from university intellectuals in theaters to miners in fields. As films flowed in and out of New York, groups built revolutionary and avant-garde cinema culture in the 1920s and 1930s that allowed a variety of

⁴⁶³ Kruse, “The Proletarian Film in America,” 184.

⁴⁶⁴ Film Arts Guild invite to private preview showing of *Battleship Potemkin* at Wurlitzer Hall in New York City, 1926, MssCol 2100, Box 3, Folder: Film Arts Guild, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, New York, NY.

people to study films and the social conditions they depicted.

Film exhibitions became major sites of contention for Americans—reformers, conservatives, and radicals—for their abilities to influence audiences by teaching values, social norms, and ideas. More so than other recreational spaces, educational possibility became central to their social-cultural function alongside entertainment value. Movie theaters overtook saloons in urban working-class communities as a main form of leisure and congregation in the early 20th century, particularly by the 1920s.⁴⁶⁵ While saloons served as social hubs, political organizing spaces, and cheap entertainment venues for the working-class, nickelodeons and then movie palaces allowed men and their families to attend together.⁴⁶⁶ Moreover, movies offered cheap leisure that increasingly outpaced affordability compared to alcohol, art galleries, shopping, amusement parks, or other entertainments. Movies also served as more affordable educational options. Potamkin in *Eyes of the Movie* mentioned D.W. Griffith’s statement about film exhibitions as “the laboring man’s university” in his call for new leftist films to “instruct” audiences about Marxist values.⁴⁶⁷ While Griffith’s racism overshadows insight from his comments and I object to upholding his words authoritatively, this example shows how a major American director recognized exhibitions as working-class education, which supports that film collectives tapped into a broader societal belief and culture.

Because cinemas were more popular locations to attend than colleges in the 1920s-1930s for most Americans, exhibitions importantly engaged publics with film histories, theories, and

⁴⁶⁵ Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 191; 196-198.

⁴⁶⁶ Jon M. Kingsdale, “The ‘Poor Man’s Club’: Social Functions of the Urban Working-Class Saloon,” *American Quarterly* Vol. 25, No. 4 (Oct. 1973): 472-489; Jon Grinspan, “The Saloon, America’s Forgotten Democratic Institution,” *The New York Times* (Nov. 26, 2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/26/opinion/sunday/the-saloon-americas-forgotten-democratic-institution.html>; Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁴⁶⁷ Potamkin, *Eyes of the Movie*, 31.

cultural-political education. As “The Workingman’s College,” movie theaters hosting dozens of people provided a less formal class session where workers could watch films, discuss ideas, and interact with a diverse array of people. Exposure to global cultures, history, science, and technology became central to these experiences. Rosensweig in *Eight Hours* discusses the appeal of pictures to immigrants as well as difficulties still due to reading and learning cultural cues. Nevertheless, exhibitions were often more financially accessible than taking an enrolled course and New Yorkers could easily find a theater nearby in each borough.⁴⁶⁸ By the 1910s, many characterized cinemas as “the academy of the workingman” or “the workingman’s college.”⁴⁶⁹ This was mainly because shows were cheap, widely available, and short—not requiring workers to sacrifice much of their wages or time, especially after working full days.⁴⁷⁰

Rather than leisure being a distraction from the labor movement or union organizing, movies could grow workers’ collective strength. “Film theaters” and “visits of groups of workers and students to film studios” in the US, much like in the Soviet Union, were key locations for “audience education.”⁴⁷¹ Rosensweig indicates that movie watching in the US actually aided labor organizing by nature of the interactions at shows and the content in films. He says, “At the Rialto more than at the rum shop, young workers were likely to meet members of other ethnic groups and these recreational associations could begin to facilitate some of the workplace organizing that had proven so difficult in earlier decades.” Movies could help workers see “themselves as ‘Americans’” to demand more from American society and recognizes the lavish portrayals on screen warrant “questioning” capitalist, elite systems.⁴⁷² Exhibitions facilitated

⁴⁶⁸ This is not to claim that saloons or other working-class areas did not have educational or political value, but that this idea for cinemas gained greater potency.

⁴⁶⁹ Rosensweig, *Eight Hours*, 194; Lucy France Pierce, “The Nickelodeon” *The Film Index* (1908): 4; Snow, “The Workingman’s College” 458.

⁴⁷⁰ Rosensweig, *Eight Hours*, 202, 209-12.

⁴⁷¹ Jay Leyda, “Advanced Training for Film Workers: Russia,” *Hollywood Quarterly* vol. 1, no. 3 (1946): 283-284.

⁴⁷² *Ibid.*, 202.

interactions between workers and the movies as well as with other workers at the theater.

Rosensweig emphasized that “Workers who spent their time in the movie theater in the 1920s might find their way to a union hall in the 1930s and 1940s...”⁴⁷³ Exhibitions functioned as classrooms and gathering spaces with tighter links to labor than previously given credit in the US.

This chapter focuses on exhibitions as educational spaces. Early cinema exhibitions before the 1920s frequently held lectures about the film and technologies of motion pictures. In the 1920s-40s, for these collectives, exhibition lectures were important for learning about film history, theory, and technique. The Film and Sprockets Society and Film and Photo League ran various film series around New York City. The Film Arts Guild often screened avant-garde “revivals” at the Cameo Theater and their own Film Arts Guild Cinema. Seeing films was an experience. That is, exhibitors thought deeply about how to display films—how to pair them, how to contextualize them, and how to advertise them.⁴⁷⁴ Analyzing exhibitions involves looking at exhibition spaces and what they entailed from discussions to lectures to pairings of screenings. Exhibition programs and advertisements for series of shows read here as syllabi. This is because the pairings and order groups showed films often fit a theme or narrative arc to make an argument about film history and technical development that also intended to teach audiences “The History of the Russian Film” or the development of the documentary film. Much of the information about exhibitions from the Film and Photo League, Film and Sprockets Society, and Film Arts Guild comes from their own printed materials and newspaper reports of their upcoming or recent shows. Groups strategically paired films, while also providing paper programs and oral discussions to provide as much information as possible. Collectives’

⁴⁷³ Ibid., 228.

⁴⁷⁴ “Societies to Revive Classics Form in U.S. and Britain,” *Exhibitors Herald* (Nov. 21, 1925): 30.

exhibitions created important political organizing spaces as well as intellectual spaces for workers and elites.

Art acquisition, distribution, and exhibition are rarely thought of as “grassroots” or democratic processes. Art and film distribution is often understood as large, company ventures entangled with Hollywood investors and art-market brokers. Many, however, became frustrated with these models of distribution and dissemination of works because they limited experimentation and taste. They believed archaic ideas of art as well as capitalist profits dominated these practices. With the start of the Armory Show, many began to view art distribution as a process that should be expanded to include many artists on the fringes who had been rejected by traditionalists. Furthermore, pushing past the monopolies of a few major companies like Vitagraph, Biograph, Lumiere, and others, film distribution in the teens and onward exploded into hundreds of smaller production-distribution companies across the US and globally.⁴⁷⁵ Creating alternative cinema and art distribution circuits challenged commercial industries in addition to bringing modern film to American audiences. Within this was an acknowledgment that modern art was a learned understanding that required sustained effort to teach and exhibit. Amateur distribution companies and alternative dissemination circuits were instrumental to getting foreign works into the US as well as getting native modern art and film into spaces for viewing.

Many times, groups such as the Friends of Soviet Russia and Film and Photo League, brought exhibitions to workers and areas without major cinemas. People like Julien Levy and Symon Gould made their very own galleries and cinemas to exhibit modern art and film. Traditional standards for acquiring exhibition halls or getting works into shows concerned those

⁴⁷⁵ Eric Hoyt, *Ink-Stained Hollywood: The Triumph of American Cinema's Trade Press* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022), 12-18.

wanting to show works that many elites or exhibitioners did not consider valuable nor moral. Museums often were not regularly accessible to working-class folks, as these were in downtown Manhattan away from their homes in immigrant and poor neighborhoods in the city. New Yorkers therefore created their own exhibitions that welcomed artists and audiences typically marginalized by mainstream exhibition practices. In January 1930, *New Masses* included an ad for a “Red Art Night” held by the NYC John Reed Club set to include the “First Showing of a Special Russian Film” that was unnamed.⁴⁷⁶ Harry Potamkin and Sam Brody, as leader in the JRC at the same time they were in FPL, helped facilitate JRC film showings. While these circles intersected in art and film worlds, FPL members in this instance, expanded their audiences by creating screenings at other labor organizations.

This chapter has four sections addressing the various learning objectives of these strategies. What could American audiences learn from seeing Soviet, European, or American films selected by working-class communists and leftists? What kind of cultural and political relationships formed at exhibitions? Section one contextualizes radical educative film exhibition within the little cinema movement of the 1920s. The explosion of avant-garde film exhibitions in New York developed audiences for films such as Eisenstein’s montage works or Flaherty’s ethnographic documentaries. This movement also helped instill appreciation of film as art in American audiences. Whereas most scholars describe the little cinema movement as experienced primarily by elite intelligentsia, this chapter shows how workers and elites both participated in avant-garde film exhibitions. Though the political, aesthetic, and educational values wavered

⁴⁷⁶ “Red Art Night,” *New Masses* (Jan 1930): 13; “John Reed Club Exhibit,” *New York Times* (Feb. 2, 1933): 15, <https://www.nytimes.com/1933/02/02/archives/john-reed-club-exhibit.html>. The 1913 Armory Show, designed by the American Painters and Sculptors, was an early example of modern artists’ and exhibitions’ rejections in the US. This practice of exhibitions for *refusées* carried into the interwar period for those seeking to display modern art and film, often with leftist themes.

amongst diverse groups, these aspects of films were broadly identifiable and appreciated for their communicative power.

Nontheatrical exhibitions were key for the labor movement. Section two addresses how mobile nontheatrical exhibitions allowed creative ways collectives could reach workers around and outside of New York. Union halls, rural schoolhouses, coal mines, and meeting spaces where makeshift exhibitions occurred were crucial for distributing workers' films to workers and farmers. Taking films to farms and coal fields became staple practices by the 1930s to teach workers about their fellow workers in various professions to build solidarity and knowledge of widespread workers' struggles. Section three highlights another major mode of exhibition: shows at universities and colleges. Such events provided unique ways for working-class radicals to enter academies to sit next to professors and experience collegiate discussion about film technique, history, and theory. Film series often functioned as a class—reading the series as a syllabus on organized topics parallel to a class. Rather than only sporadic films, series grew in the 1930s to create more formalized structure to learn at shows while building more coherent arguments about labor and film.

Finally, the last section emphasizes how exhibitions were not only spaces for watching or thinking, but also action. Exhibitions sparked active dialogue as well as protests. Collectives such as the League protested 1930s Nazi films screening in New York. Oppositely, groups such as the Friends of Soviet Russia in the 1920s faced protest and censorship at exhibitions from the American Legion and anticommunists. Many Soviet and American labor films faced backlash from conservative, and sometimes liberal, cultural critics and government authorities. Exhibitions served as important study spaces that allowed for a variety of people interested in film and social issues to congregate and learn together and organize actions—a space that was

not as easily available in most museums, colleges, or other cultural institutions.⁴⁷⁷

For workers and elites alike, films provided unique opportunities to learn about the world from New York and to open conversations about inequalities or advancements. This was in addition to enjoying the experience of watching movies. Unlike elites, however, workers had fewer options to have these learning and entertaining experiences. In 1910, Jane E. Snow described the important function of the cinema:

The workingman, while he is acquiring his higher education at the moving picture show, needs the amusing features of it to relax his wearied muscles after his day of toil at the shop or factory... The workingman cannot attend the professional ball games because it takes half a dollar just to get into the grounds, and in addition it requires the loss of half a day's time. He cannot attend the high class concerts because neither his purse nor his time will admit of it, nor, for the same reasons, can he travel to any great extent, but he can visit the moving picture shows, and there he can travel through all lands and learn the condition of people in all climes. Who then can say that the moving picture show is not the workingman's college? The medium through which he may rise to the rank of a broad-minded, well-educated man.⁴⁷⁸

Snow's description here involves a progressivist approach to uplift and refinement via culture in the 1880s-1910s. Radical film collectives had similar impulses in how arts could better the education of working people and thus create more human living conditions in the United States. Exhibitions held by Friends of Soviet Russia, FPL, and FSS, however, harnessed the propaganda abilities of film in attempt to convince audiences of film's revolutionary artistry and compel them to revolutionary action. Exhibitions could be mass study sessions or spaces to apply their learned knowledge to antifascist and pro-labor protest.

Film collectives deliberately built audiences in workers' spaces, universities, and little theaters across New York City to promote workers' films and a belief that attending exhibitions

⁴⁷⁷ Television later on also struggled to serve radical educational purposes due to network monopolies, costs of TVs, and the programming. Nina Leibman, *Living Room Lectures: The Fifties Family in Film and Television* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 5-12.

⁴⁷⁸ Snow, "The Workingman's College," 458.

should accompany direct labor actions. Scholar William Alexander noted the FPL had to build its viewers and exhibitions with extraordinarily little resources. One reason was that FPL films rarely could get into theaters, as they “probably would have been censored” or outright were unwelcome in many premier cinemas. However, their mobile and nontheatrical exhibitions intended to procure opportunities for farmers and city folk to connect via these films. People in cities had more readily accessible cinemas, union halls, universities, and other venues to view radical films, whereas methods to reach farmers and small towns often involved transporting films and makeshift equipment to screen in local schoolhouses, workplaces, or even outside. Films allowed audiences to grow awareness that it was not just farmer or city issues, but a national issue to address poverty, food insecurity, unemployment, and other issues plaguing lower-class Americans.⁴⁷⁹ This grassroots “audience building” was foundational to radical film collectives’ abilities to develop educational infrastructures for both workers and higher-class academics.⁴⁸⁰ What made interwar film collectives unique was their focus on showing films to prompt action and practice, but also to cultivate audiences’ taste for revolutionary films in contrast to Hollywood, commercial productions. Combining these ethics allowed them to reach multi-class audiences.

Workers’ Little Cinema Movement

Rather than separate “little cinema movements” and “workers’ film movements,” film distribution-exhibition circuits in 1920s-1930s New York cut across class and institutional lines. The US little cinema movement began in the 1920s into the 1930s. Ciné clubs, film societies, and small theaters regularly screened European and American avant-garde films. From avant-garde shorts to experimental features, little cinema exhibition circuits were key to distributing

⁴⁷⁹ *To Tell the Truth*, Dir. Calvin Skaggs, 2012.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid.

films that did not appear in mainstream theaters.⁴⁸¹ New York City was the epicenter of the little cinema movement in the 1920s, but spread across major cities in the US, including Washington D.C., Boston, and other cities with concentrated wealth and technological growth. Workers' film exhibition-distribution work was similarly centered in NYC with projects expanding into Detroit, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and working-class urban neighborhoods. Some projects reached rural farming areas of the Midwest and South throughout the 1930s. In this section, I analyze the little cinema and workers' film movements as partners that co-created film publics in New York City that served to enhance avant-garde film artistry, film studies, and labor rights.

Workers' International Relief and Friends of Soviet Russia began exhibiting films in local theaters as early as 1920-1921. Screenings faced resistance from conservative and right-wing organizations such as the American Legion across the country. Friends of Soviet Russia imported and exhibited the first Soviet film in America in 1923. *Polikushka*, directed by Alexander Sanin and based on Leo Tolstoy's 1863 novella, premiered in New York with clearance from the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures—first as a private showing through FSR and then in local theaters throughout the city. For several years, FSR exhibited the film around the US in various union halls, labor meetings, small sympathetic theaters, and elsewhere mainly to workers and left-leaning folks interested in new avant-garde Soviet cinema. In April 1924, William Kruse wrote to William Barret of the NBR noting that *Polikushka* has not been “satisfactory financially,” yet they continued screenings to make even in hopes it would spark more interest.⁴⁸² Despite lack of profits, *Polikushka*'s story about a serf who desires a

⁴⁸¹ Mike Budd, “The National Board of Review and the Early Art Cinema in New York: ‘The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari’ as Affirmative Culture,” *Cinema Journal* vol. 26, no. 1 (1986): 3-18; Tony Guzman, “The Little Theatre Movement: The Institutionalization of the European Art Film in America,” *Film History* vol. 17, no. 2-3 (2005): 261-284.

⁴⁸² *The Educational Screen* (April 1924): 155; Letter from William Kruse, representing Friends of Soviet Russia, to William Barrett of the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures, April 2, 1924, MssCol 2100, Box 32, Folder: Little Theater Movement, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures records, Manuscripts and Archives

better life after being exposed to better living conditions during a trip to the city with his wealthy landowner resonated more powerfully with FSR that it was willing to continue screening it around the US at a money deficit. Moreover, *Polikushka* represented a turn toward revolutionary cinema in terms of its Marxist message and “peasant ethic” that later films expanded upon.⁴⁸³ Sanin’s film also represented a new wave of Soviet avant-garde cinema that became appealing to emerging arthouse theaters seeking non-Hollywood productions.

The little cinema movement in the 1920s helped build a film public in New York City to consistently screen modernist films. Little cinemas, much like earlier nickelodeons, were often near working-class immigrant neighborhoods, like Union Square. In NYC, chains of little cinemas were especially robust in Manhattan along Broadway, 8th, and 55th streets, primarily due to Symon Gould’s Film Arts Guild, the Cameo Theatre, and the Acme Theatre. Symon Gould created the Film Arts Guild, also known as the International Film Arts Guild. Gould formed the Guild in 1925 as a distribution and exhibition company to import artistic foreign films and exhibit “classics” of cinema to American audiences. Throughout its run, the Guild utilized existing theaters in the city, including the Cameo and 55th-Street Cinema. Operating into the early 1930s, Gould grew the organization into a film appreciation and educational film society. Besides screening latest American avant-garde works, little art cinemas were sites for American premiers of European avant-garde films—old and new. The Guild brought *Nosferatu* in 1929, copies of *Potemkin* in 1926, and several other French, German, and Soviet films into US circuits for the first time. In 1927, the Guild had “moved uptown to the Guild Theater” in NYC, which

Division, The New York Public Library, New York, NY.

⁴⁸³ Oksana Bulgakowa, “1917-1927: Russian Film Between the Old and The New Genres, Narratives, And Bodies,” *Revue Des Études Slaves* vol. 90, no. 1/2 (2019): 257–67; Alexey Vdovin, “‘Devilish Money’ and Peasant Ethics: Leo Tolstoy’s Economic Imagination and Emplotment in ‘Polikushka,’” *The Russian Review* vol. 76, no. 1 (2017): 53–71.

was originally a theater for stage performances. Here they screened major premiers of Man Ray's *Emak Bakia* and *The Living Dead Man* by L'Herbier.⁴⁸⁴ The Film Arts Guild pioneered screening programs of Dadaist and Surrealist films as well as avant-garde set design with artist Fernand Léger.

Audiences could also see Soviet films here regularly, and at times, leftist film collectives' newsreels and documentaries. Gould's Film Arts Guild was responsible for many Soviet films screening in the US. Gould's relationships with Soviet companies, such as Amkino, allowed him to import latest avant-garde films into the US. The Amkino Corporation was located on 723 Seventh Avenue in New York, just a few blocks from where WIR, FSR, and FPL headquarters sat. Gould corresponded regularly with Amkino and others to establish film exchanges and timelines for showing Soviet films.⁴⁸⁵ Gould's imports included the first American public screening of Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* at Wurlitzer Hall in New York in December 1926 with subsequent sponsored screenings at other New York theaters. The film had first shown privately in Gloria Swanson's apartment with Hollywood stars present, including Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks. Rather than just a revivalist or appreciation society, Gould and his Guild had connections to the American labor movement and Soviet film industry.

In a letter written by P. Fatoff dated April 7th, 1930, the author wrote to the US

⁴⁸⁴“Pirandello Story Screened,” *Christian Science Monitor* (March 14, 1927): 6; “Symon Gould Is No Longer Connected with the 55th Street Cinema,” *Variety* (Sept. 17, 1927): 25; “Emil Jannings Plays Othello at the Little,” *Washington Post* (June 16, 1929): A2; “Little Offers Nature Study,” *The Washington Post* (Oct. 6, 1929): A4. The Film Arts Guild also expanded to cities in New Jersey and DC, still coordinated by Gould.

⁴⁸⁴ Broadside advertising the American premiers of *Emak Bakia* and *Living Dead Man* sponsored by the Film Arts Guild, 1927, MssCol 2100, Box 32, Folder: Little Theatre Movement, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, New York, NY; Film Arts Guild Publicity Immediate Release for the planning and upcoming show of *Emak Bakia* and *Living Dead Man*, Feb. 16, 1927, MssCol 2100, Box 32, Folder: Little Theatre Movement, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, New York, NY.

⁴⁸⁵ Letter from Symon Gould of the Film Arts Guild to William Barrett of the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures about his business with Amkino to show Georgiy Stabovoy's *Two Days* (1927) at his Film Guild Cinema opening, Nov. 30, 1928, MssCol 2100, Box 1, Folder: Amkino, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, New York, NY.

government to warn about “Bolshevist propaganda in NYC, specially among the Russian.”

While this letter at first appears pedestrian in the piles of anticommunist alerts in the early twentieth century, this author focused their attention on film exhibition in New York. In “Movies,” they cite FSR, Gould’s Film Arts Guild, and several theaters as the propaganda masterminds spreading communist ideas in local cinemas. The letter reads:

The most hot efforts communists make now to spread soviet motion pictures, after the talkies came and small theatres began to look for silent pictures the soviet pictures came here in big numbers. Now all small theaters are taking talking and Belsheviks understand that it makes difficult for them to find the theaters where to show propaganda silent films. They organized now the Society of Friends of Soviet Pictures in America [Friends of Soviet Russia]. They will make propaganda in *Times* and other capitalist newspapers whose critics are so ‘liberal’ that all that is coming from Soviet Russia hail as new ‘achievements.’ To refuse to print what these propagandists sent them ‘is a shame’ for them. Every Sunday *Times* publishes news about the new soviet picture ‘general lin’ which will soon show in Cameo Theater (communist headquarters for movies). The Bolsheviks had before a theater Film Guild (52 West Eight Street); but director of Film Guild (which is his own business, no guild is in reality) Simon [Symon] Gould didn’t pay Amkino (279 Seventh Avenue, NYC, soviet movies agency here). They don’t give him new pictures. Bolshevicks opened here their own theaters (masked but getting subsidy): Second Avenue Playhouse, corner of Eighth Street, in care illegal immigrant Zarovich, who brought here *Potemkin*, took it all over the country and now remained here, although had only terminal visa... They show soviet pictures in small towns and spread propaganda.⁴⁸⁶

The author then named a list of theaters he believed as “hotspots” for Soviet pictures: Acme Theater, Brighton Playhouse, and the New Beneson Theater in the Bronx. While the author is unknown, they clearly have a lot of information about the exhibition and distribution network in New York to know main spots for Soviet screenings. Despite this being a hostile anticommunist letter, it reveals how the little cinema movement and radical workers’ cinema intersected in 1920s-1930s New York. Moreover, it shows that there was a public perception about links

⁴⁸⁶ P. Fatoff letter about “Bolshevik propaganda” in New York City, April 7, 1930, 23, in *Investigation of Communist Propaganda: Hearings Before a Special Committee to Investigate Communist Activities in the United States of the House of Representatives*, Seventy-first Congress, Second Session, Pursuant to H. Res. 220, Providing for an Investigation of Communist Propaganda in the United States, June 9 and 13 1930, United States: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1930.

between movements as well.

The Acme, for example, was well-known by New Yorkers as a cinema specializing in Soviet avant-garde films. Alfred Kazin, New York Intellectual writer and son of Jewish immigrants, mentioned his experience with seeing Soviet silents and talkies at the Acme in his autobiography *Starting Out in the Thirties*. Kazin's friend Otis Ferguson wrote film and music articles in *The New Republic*, and he lived above the Acme Theater on Union Square. When visiting Ferguson in 1935, Kazin recalled:

The Acme was an ancient, narrow, cavernous box dating from the silent days. It was so small that it induced an intimacy with the Russian faces on the screen, who seemed lifelike and more "natural" anyway, direct, simple, feeling, angry when they were angry, happy when they were happy, and who could wring your heart as nothing else could when they marched along the dusty road, singing. The way to the men's room was up a narrow ladder just behind the orchestra; the noise of the toilet being flushed could be heard all over the theater. But not until that night had I heard the movie from the floor above, Ferguson, a bantamweight cockily beating time with his heels, was finishing up a piece, humming away at his desk, while the voices of stern and virtuous Soviet military commanders in *Chapayev* boomed up through the floor. "Go it, man!" Ferguson shouted, and grabbing his bottle waltzed it around the room. We were hilarious. The room was loud with the sound of those crunching, nut-cracking Soviet consonants—the very sound of which, when I was down in the theater below, always induced in me so much affection, but which on the sound track alone made you see them as actors carefully molding their voices.⁴⁸⁷

Chapayev, directed by Soviet Vasilyev brothers Sergei and Georgi, was a sound film celebrating the Red Army and revolution released in the US in January 1935 after premiering in the Soviet Union in 1934. Shortly after this experience above the Acme, about a half mile away, Kazin noted seeing the Automat, Union Square Park, and Kitty Kelly and Beck shoe store picket lines all near Union Square. This is a notable example of how modernist media consumption happened—often multiple arts or experiences occurred simultaneously and sometimes in

⁴⁸⁷ Alfred Kazin, *Starting Out in the Thirties* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1965), 32. Kazin's politics were complicated. He affiliated with many socialists and communists in New York, but also deeply resonated with social democracy and liberalism. He frequently criticized conservatism and neoconservatism.

unexpected places. Kazin also reminds us how integrated Soviet films were into the New York experience, alongside the casualness of intellectuals stumbling upon this revolutionary film and then shoe-store workers on strike down the street next to a little cinema.

The little cinema movement also intersected with workers' film exhibition because of the movements' drives to create a public knowledge of cinema history. Gould and his colleagues, for instance, sensed their exhibitions would promote an education of the history of film. One review noted, "The old films were illuminating, for although they proved that the producers of the past were resourceful, they at the same time demonstrated the remarkable progress of photoplays."⁴⁸⁸ German exile director Ernst Lubitsch's main praise for the Guild was that it made audiences reflect on the history of film since its origins, primarily the experimental progress in the first two decades of the twentieth century. He stated, "We had no means of obtaining a historical perspective of the development of the screen. I have always deplored the lack of something like a central library of photoplays, affiliated, perhaps, with circulating libraries in the larger cities...The industry is developing with such leaps and bounds that screen history is made very fast."⁴⁸⁹ Without these resources, exhibitions became main centers of learning cinema history. The Guild provided an array of films for viewers to see refined studio pictures, like Lubitsch's, and experimental, informal techniques created by amateurs in the city. Pairing these styles showed the evolution of film, while recognizing the rapidity of its progression in just the past few decades. Without an explicit "history of film" curriculum, the Guild was able to educate the public on this history by simply creating bills to tell these narratives.⁴⁹⁰ Film revivals became major events to construct historical narratives of cinema. They were a main aspect to build

⁴⁸⁸ Mordaunt Hall, "Relics of the Past and German Tragedy Make Interesting Program," *New York Times* (June 13, 1926): X2.

⁴⁸⁹ "Lubitsch Praises Guild," *New York Times* (March 14, 1926): X5.

⁴⁹⁰ Edward Kern, "Reviving Distinguished Films," *New York Times* (Dec. 16, 1934): X4.

appreciation for modernist cinema, but also to appreciate film for its role in labor movement.

Like workers' film collectives, the little cinema movement sought to create an informed, participatory film-viewing public. This involved soliciting input for films to revive for exhibitions. When the Guild held its first exhibitions at the George Cohan Theater in 1925 with a screening of Chaplin's *A Woman of Paris*, it "received requests for nearly 200 pictures of the past," including German, French, American, and Russian/Soviet films.⁴⁹¹ This practice became embedded in the Guild; as the *LA Times* reported in March 1926, "Letters to the press asking for just such an opportunity as the new International Film Arts Guild now offers have been many and frequent, and have evidenced a strong desire on the part of the public to see again the best films of the past ten years." The result of this particular bill included exhibition of Paul Leni's *The Three Wax Works* (1924), Dudley Murphy and Fernand Léger's *Ballet Mécanique* (1924), and Chaplin's *The Pilgrim* (1923). The *LA Times* claimed that this "bill crowded the Cameo Theater with tickets at two dollars and seventy-five cents each."⁴⁹² This cost likely deterred working people from attending, but New Yorkers flocked in to view these "unusual pictures" out of intrigue as well as intellectual interest. The Guild fostered a dialogue across city patrons and audiences in New York about foreign cinema in the US.

Moreover, the Guild, like workers' movements, encouraged active participation in its exhibitions. In 1926, the *NYT* reported that "The Guild announces that special arrangements are being made whereby students and teachers may attend the Cameo presentations at reduced rates."⁴⁹³ Making direct connections with schools and educators highlights the Guild's devotion to not only pairing education and film, but inculcating aesthetic values amongst the public. This

⁴⁹¹ "With the Producers and Players," *New York Times* (Dec. 6, 1925): X9.

⁴⁹² A. Klumph, "Miss La Plante Sees NY," *Los Angeles Times* (March 28, 1926): 23.

⁴⁹³ "Cyrano de Bergerac in Color," *New York Times* (April 11, 1926): X5.

project was happening simultaneously with critical conversations surrounding developing film curriculums and film schools.⁴⁹⁴ As other places in NYC were informally teaching filmmaking, editing, and the history of film, The Guild held “a series of amateur film nights, when motion pictures of short lengths made by non-professionals will be shown for a cheer or a booh.

Arrangements have been made by a national organization for the purchase of interesting amateur films.”⁴⁹⁵ By supporting amateur artists, the Guild supported new waves of films that displayed novel techniques and content to see amateur films alongside masterworks. In addition, such screenings encouraged viewers to experiment with filmmaking on their own. Showing amateur films also created another layer of participation within film culture whereby artists participated in the literal creation of film as well as conversations about how to create film.

By building a canon of film masterworks, utilizing cinema as education, and creating spaces for audience participation and critical dialogue, the Guild attempted to create an educated film public that would be knowledgeable of the films themselves but also the history of film. The National Board of Review of Motion Pictures was instrumental in obtaining, housing, and providing access to many collectives for screening films. The NBR was but one of many institutions and individuals who acknowledge the social value and potential harm of film. A newspaper review stated that films’ “potentiality for good is beyond computation, and the menace that might conceivably lurk in them is quite as great. Every effort must be made by everybody to bring it about that they may be a power for good; and such an organization as the Film Arts Guild, devoted to that end, deserves the strongest support and the most favorable consideration.”⁴⁹⁶ This, they believed, would come through developing an educated public that

⁴⁹⁴ Polan, *Scenes of Instruction*, 78.

⁴⁹⁵ “Finding Unusual Films,” *New York Times* (Dec. 5, 1926): X11.

⁴⁹⁶ H. Greene, “Film Arts Guild,” *The China Press* (1926): A5.

could distinguish good pictures from bad ones. Of course, it was the Guild and NBR who predominately selected what films to screen, thus influencing what films were elevated above others. While this was an attempt to shape American film tastes, knowing the Guild's connections to Soviet cinema shows that taste-shaping was not a politically neutral endeavor, and the Guild's little cinema shows connected to workers' movements.

Between 1926 and 1929, The Film Arts Guild moved from exhibiting its films at the already-established "Salon of the Cinema" Cameo Theater on Broadway and 42nd Street, to its own picture house: "The First 100% Cinema," as it was declared by its architect Frederick Kiesler.⁴⁹⁷ In 1928, Gould announced his plans with Frederick Kiesler, a Viennese architect, to build a Film Arts Guild Cinema on West Eighth Street. Intended to seat 500 people with screens instead of walls surrounding seating, a ceiling as a screen, and "architecture of funnel-like interior [that] can be changed to suit plot setting," this architecture was the pinnacle of avant-garde architecture brought to New York.⁴⁹⁸ Kiesler drew many of his aesthetic principles from his experiences in European avant-garde circles and hoped to foster a taste for this in America. Kiesler's ideals for this theater were premised on both its avant-garde aesthetic and didactic potential to cultivate a taste for the avant-garde amongst Americans. Its sheer novelty would hopefully draw intrigue and excitement among Americans to also support art cinema.⁴⁹⁹ Gould and Kiesler combined pedagogical attitudes with a love for art cinema.⁵⁰⁰ The opening of this independent cinema mirrored several radical groups' attempts to establish self-directed exhibitions to experiment with programs and have more control over the space.

⁴⁹⁷ Laura M. McGuire, "A Movie House in Space and Time: Frederick Kiesler's Film Arts Guild Cinema, New York, 1929," *Studies in the Decorative Arts* vol. 14, no. 2 (2007): 66.

⁴⁹⁸ "4-Screen Theatre Being Built Here," *New York Times* (Dec. 9, 1928): N1.

⁴⁹⁹ "Form Child Film Guild," *New York Times* (Dec. 30, 1928): 89.

⁵⁰⁰ Tony Guzman, "The Little Theatre Movement: The Institutionalization of the European Art Film in America," *Film History* vol. 17, no. 2-3 (2005): 274.

The Guild Cinema opened in February 1929 with *Two Days*, a Soviet-Ukraine film directed by Georgiy Stabovoy about the Russian Civil War.⁵⁰¹ The Guild became more pronounced in communist journals like *Revolutionary Age* in 1929 with advertisements for their showings of Soviet cinema, such as *Arsenal*.⁵⁰² And before the Guild ceased around 1931, they ran mainly Soviet films.⁵⁰³ Like other theaters in the early 1930s, their popularity and showings fizzled out due to financial concerns and shifting cultural-political needs onset by the Depression, though they continued with smaller audiences and screenings. The Guild ceased activities once Gould went bankrupt by 1933, as reported by *Variety*.⁵⁰⁴ Understanding the Guild's activities in terms of economics, however, does not do much good to underscore its importance, especially to workers' cinema. The Guild's programs prompted great interest in the Cameo and art cinema at large. Reporting on ticket sales, a newspaper noted that seating about 600 people, "business [at the Cameo] has surpassed the former house standards to some little degree, proving conclusively that while the old patronage was probably alienated, there were enough interested people to make up a gross which has run between \$4,000 and \$5,000 weekly."⁵⁰⁵ Gould's coordination with the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures, major art critics, foreign distribution networks, and communist workers' organizations supported the little cinema movement in NYC.

⁵⁰¹ "Film Arts Guild Opens NY Theatre," *New York Times* (Feb. 1929): 20.

⁵⁰² Like the Guild Cinema, The Little Carnegie Playhouse on West 57th Street opened with a Soviet picture: Eisenstein's *Ten Days That Shook the World* on November 3, 1928. Gillece Szczepaniak, "Smoke and Mirrors, *The Arts* (1928): 97.

⁵⁰³ *The New Yorker* tended to infantilize Soviet Russia production due to smaller studios and that their major directors, such as Eisenstein, worked in a "shed" and slept in studios or their "one room" living spaces. "Mass Meetings," *The New Yorker* (Dec. 1928): 11.

⁵⁰⁴ Little information exists about Gould's life throughout the 1930s. In the 1940s, Gould turned his focus to political office and founded the American Vegetarian Party in 1948. Anne Morey, "Early Art Cinema in the US: Symon Gould and the Little Cinema Movement of the 1920s" in *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema* ed. Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes and Robert C. Allen (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007): 235-247.

⁵⁰⁵ "Reviving Old Films for Exhibition is Proving Successful," *The Sun* (May 30, 1926): 68.

Workers' shows in the 1930s drew on little cinema methods, mainly independent distribution, renting small theaters, and advertising avant-garde films, established in the 1920s. Radical leftist groups ran in an alternative stream to the little cinema movement. Friends of Soviet Russian, Film Arts Guild, and Film and Photo League were part of the broad movement but developed their own little cinema circuits primarily to screen Soviet films and self-made newsreels and documentaries.⁵⁰⁶ Eisenstein's *October* and various other films enjoyed broad advertising in leftist magazines with sponsorship from film collectives.⁵⁰⁷ Newsreel theaters opened in New York that coincided with the little theater movement in the 1920s-1930s. Clarke writes, "The first newsreel cinema in the United States opened in 1929 in Times Square..." as part of Fox Film's Embassy Newsreel Theater. "For just twenty-- five cents admission, audiences enjoyed an hour-long program of Fox newsreels and other short films running continuously from ten in the morning to midnight."⁵⁰⁸ However, these were commercial newsreels and workers' groups created cinema circuits to display independent leftist newsreels ostracized from many New York cinemas.

At times, some Americans tried to separate the little cinema movement from Soviet and workers' cinema. Such views grew as some champions of avant-garde film painted little cinemas

⁵⁰⁶ Amkino distributed Eisenstein's *Ten Day that Shook the World*, which was denied by the New York State board on July 27, 1928. It was said to have content that was "inhuman" and "tends to incite crime." National Board of Review of Motion Pictures Meeting Minutes and letter to Amkino issuing a rejection of *Ten Days that Shook the World*, July 27, 1928, MssCol 2100, Box 1, Folder: Amkino, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, New York, NY; Department head of Amkino Roman Rebush letter to Wingate of the State of New York Education Department noting Amkino sponsored an unedited version of the film in November, Dec. 12, 1928, MssCol 2100, Box 1, Folder: Amkino, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, New York, NY. In October, Amkino submitted the film again for review and was issued a permit to show the film on November 2nd, but received requests for several alterations. Amkino said they were not able to include all the edits requested of them in time for the opening to "make the picture understood to the audience."

⁵⁰⁷ "Soviet 'Jazz Comedy' Shown at the Cameo," *Jewish Daily Bulletin* (March 28, 1935): 4. The author noted the Cameo also frequently showed Soviet movies, such as *Moscow Laughs* by G. V. Alexandrov.

⁵⁰⁸ Clark, *News Parade*, 128. Fox Films launched the Embassy Newsreel Theatre in Times Square as a way of promoting Fox Movietone News and showcasing its still-new sound technology to exhibitors.

as elite events opposed to revolutionary politics. William Johnston, for example, derided Eisenstein's *Potemkin* and those who supported its showings in the US. Around its premier in the US in 1926, in *Motion Picture News*, which Johnston edited, he wrote, "It would seem a shame to sacrifice what is hailed as motion picture art to the welfare of our country's social fabric."⁵⁰⁹ Johnston hoped that art films would cultivate patriotic ideas to stave off Bolshevism. Matthew Josephson in *Motion Picture Classic* interviewed Gould and recounted his experience going to see a showing by the Guild: "I elbowed my way into a pretentious theater lobby thru a cultured mob in evening dress and eight-cylinder cars... artists, professors, all the younger generation and the smart 'New Yorkers' were there..." With phrases about "uplifting the public taste," Josephson highlights the movement as one by and for "intelligentsia."⁵¹⁰

But at the same time of this article's publication and into 1930, Gould's Film Arts Guild's exhibitions enjoyed advertising in communist journals *Daily Worker*, *Revolutionary Age*, and *New Masses*. From hosting a fundraiser for *Revolutionary Age* with the Soviet Arsenal screening alongside Soviet newsreels to programming Soviet and FPL films at the Acme and Cameo, the Guild was more tied to communist left than most scholars of the little cinema movement indicate.⁵¹¹ Brad Chisholm examined FPL's exhibition strategies in 1992, noting that despite the Guild's main focus on art cinema and art house audiences, "Gould's group was so interested in League newsreels, though, that the Acme and Cameo would advance \$25 to \$50 to the League to ensure the availability of its next newsreel offering." Some have read Gould's alliance with FPL and the radical left as strategic to get access to new Soviet avant-garde films

⁵⁰⁹ William A. Johnston, "An Editor on Broadway: The Week in Review," *Motion Picture News* vol. 34, no. 25 (Dec. 18, 1926): 612.

⁵¹⁰ Symon Gould, interviewed by Matthew Josephson, *Motion Picture Classic* (Sept. 1926): 34-35; 69; 82.

⁵¹¹ Fred Sweet, Eugene Roscow, and Allan Francovich, "Interview with Tom Brandon," *Film Quarterly* (Fall 1973): 26; *New Masses* (Jan. 1929): 36; Brad Chisholm, "Film and Photo League Exhibition Strategies," *Jump Cut* (July 1992): 110-114, <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinesays/JC37folder/30sLeftExhibition.html>.

and American newsreels, but this still shows the partnership between the little cinema movement and labor movements in New York. Though art house exhibitions might not have been as “politically focused” as those at union halls or WIR headquarters, these examples reveal the likelihood of workers entering art cinemas and elites viewing communist and labor films.

The Cameo and Filmarte Theatres frequently screened left-wing and progressive films, as exhibited by their routine features in advertisements within *The New Masses*.⁵¹² In the anthology of *New Theatre and Film*, Knight and other former FPL affiliates discussed the role of little cinemas in the development of their collectives. Cinemas such as the Little Carnegie Playhouse, Cameo, Fifth Theatre, and Filmarte were premier sites for New Yorkers to see avant-garde pictures and learn more about Soviet cinema. Knight recalled of the 1920s and 1930s that

The Little Carnegie was generally acknowledged to be the flagship of the arthouses; but the Filmart, on West 58th Street, kept abreast of the French imports and the Cameo (now the Bryant) on 42nd Street served as headquarters for the emerging Soviet cinema. But I also attended (I think in 1935) a daylong showing of about a dozen of the greatest Soviet classics at the historic Fifth Avenue Theatre (on Broadway) ... Elsewhere, mostly in union halls and at political meetings, the leftist Film and Photo League offered its primitive documentaries and social protest shorts as an alternative to Hollywood’s glossy features and escapist frame of mind. Admission to these events was generally free, although a small donation was expected.⁵¹³

Besides little theaters showing films through their own auspices, film collectives formed partnerships with select cinemas to rent out for shows or to distribute to. The WIR sometimes distributed Soviet films to local theaters like St. Marks, while FSR rented out theaters throughout the 1920s to screen their own films.⁵¹⁴ The FPL also rented the Fifth Ave. Theater to show ten Soviet films over two days on March 1st and 2nd in 1935 to “coincide with the current Film

⁵¹² “A Drama of Moscow on the Eve of the October Revolution,” *New Masses* vol. 26, no. 6 (May 4, 1937): 36.

⁵¹³ Arthur Knight, “Foreword,” *New Theatre and Film 1934 to 1937: An Anthology*, ed. Herbert Kline (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 4-5. Knight also specified that 5th Avenue Playhouse showed European avant-garde films regularly.

⁵¹⁴ “Red Art Night,” *New Masses* (Jan. 1, 1930): 13; Harry Alan Potamkin, Emjo Basshe, Carl Haessler, “Movies and the Theatre: *New Masses* (Jan. 1, 1930): 15. Potamkin asks audiences to “examine” the films.

Festival taking place in Moscow celebrating the 15th anniversary of Soviet films”⁵¹⁵ Renting out theaters or distributing to certain cinemas allowed FPL and other collectives to establish audiences in the area and reach beyond to workers to also address intellectual middle and high classes.⁵¹⁶ FPL frequently converted their own meeting headquarters into lecture halls, seminars, and theaters to show films with guest speakers to discuss issues related to modern arts, labor, and communism.⁵¹⁷

Some communists, like Potamkin, were critical of the little cinema movement for its development of “cults” of films and canonization of bourgeois film-watching practices. In “Film Cults” and “The Ritual of the Movies,” Potamkin argued for having a critical audience that engaged with films rather than passively watched. One critique of the little cinema movement that caused workers’ groups to move away from it was the focus on teaching taste without a strong ethic for encouraging viewers to join labor actions or filmmaking. Potamkin emphasized that “the film club has its ultimate justification only when it recognizes itself as an educational forum.” It was less important that movies were entertaining, and instead more crucial that groups evaluate films based on what they “have contributed to the history of the film” and societal change.⁵¹⁸ Such films must also be based in social reality to be of use to the community and audience watching them. He worried about avant-garde film societies full of bourgeois people uninterested in the social-political function of the film club and the films screened. Other leftists

⁵¹⁵ “Theatres,” *Variety* (March 6, 1935): 6-8; Ruth B. Stoloff, “The Yiddish Theatre Opens with a Bang” and “Thunder Over Mexico” showing at the Rialto Theatre” *Variety* (Sept. 24, 1933): 4.

⁵¹⁶ “Workers Newsreel Preparatory Theatre Opened Sunday Under Auspices of National Film and Photo League,” *Variety* (May 22, 1934): 52.

⁵¹⁷ The FPL also frequently converted their WIR meeting spaces into cinemas. Speakers listed for the symposium are Meyer Schapiro, Nathan Adler, David Siqueiros, and others who mediated an “open discussion.” Film and Photo League flyer for “An Unusual Showing of Abstract Cinema” that included *H20* by Ralph Steiner, *Fall of the House of Usher* by Watson, part of *Potemkin* by Eisenstein, and part of *China Express* by Trauberg, n.d., AG 77, Box 13: Activity Files, 1932-1986, Subseries I. Committees and Organizations, Folder 1: Film and Photo League, c. 1934-1935, Willard Van Dyke Archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

⁵¹⁸ Harry Potamkin, “Film Cults” and “Rituals of the Movies,” *National Board of Review Magazine* (May 1933): 219-221.

scorned little theaters for rejecting or minimizing film collectives' documentaries and newsreels, either because theaters did not want to show communist pictures or because they did not deem them as artistically valuable.

Little cinemas were also not the most effective way to show workers films and build mass working-class mobilization. Places like the New School and City College became key sites for viewing Soviet and radical avant-garde cinema in the 1930s. The Film and Photo League and Film and Sprockets Society utilized these universities often to teach about Soviet, documentary, and avant-garde film history, theory, and techniques. The development of little cinemas grew parallel and entangled with radical exhibition strategies, nevertheless, with connections that helped worker and avant-garde cinema exhibitions.⁵¹⁹ Connections between the little cinema movement and workers' exhibitions that often-screened similar pictures show how elite and working-class audiences had access to similar learning experiences.

Mobile Exhibition: Taking Films to Workers

Mobile exhibitions became staple pedagogical strategies that importantly expanded the geographical range for where New York film collectives could screen their films. From visiting New York union halls to traveling to Pennsylvania coal mines, films became more available and integrated into laborers' daily lives. Exhibitions by these groups went against the common political economy of exhibiting films for profit. Many scholars of amateur, experimental, radical, and independent cinema making have focused on the portability of cameras and materials to capture images. Haidee Wasson, however, emphasizes that "radical films and experimental films

⁵¹⁹ Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies*, 132. Even with the Guild's dissolution and Gould's bankruptcy, art cinema continued to grow in the 1930s. Though NYC interwar-era art cinema never attained a major public audience like it did in Paris, London, and Berlin, it did become institutionalized through projects like the MoMA Film Library and developing film curriculums at in NYC.

also needed to be seen and not only made.”⁵²⁰ These film exhibitions were almost entirely for workers’ relief, funding for the groups’ sustainability, and securing films for future exhibitions to aid the labor movement. Mobilizing exhibitions also required ingenuity to create makeshift projection equipment from automobile batteries or bedsheet screens, for example. Putting movies in motion across the United States expanded political education as well as allowed more workers to learn from and about films.

For example, during the Great Depression, the US avidly used media and film with programs such as the WPA. Using trains and vans, they transported film screenings throughout the country. The “spectacle of mobility” created a different exhibition style that expressed the state’s modernity through infrastructural ingenuity.⁵²¹ Similar to *The Road to Happiness*, mobile film production and exhibition highlighted not only the importance of film, but government structures and corporate entities as essential to American life. With the WPA, more Americans became involved in constructing their own history through film, yet this was always tied with state and corporate bureaucracies.

Portable projectors, as Haidee Wasson has written, importantly reshaped the political economy of film exhibitions that also challenged class boundaries. In *Everyday Movies*, Wasson states, “Portable projectors and the films they played on them enabled the wresting of film programming away from the hands of a highly centralized commercialized industry and created conditions in which, ideally, anyone could show a film. Do-it-yourself film performance dispersed the powers of projects, spreading them to amateur, artist, aristocrat, anarchist, and authoritarian alike.”⁵²² Wasson notes that the expansion of projection and programming

⁵²⁰ Wasson, *Everyday Movies*, 27.

⁵²¹ Grieveson, *Cinema and the Wealth of Nations*, 286-300.

⁵²² Wasson, *Everyday Movies*, 6.

infrastructure shaped the creativity and variability of films and their functions. “Films were teaching, training, selling, and advancing spiritual well-being,” thus creating ample opportunities for film collectives to expand the content and uses of film in the US.⁵²³ Difficulties arose with lighting (during the day) and screen capabilities for projecting. The radical act for film collectives was not only in the filmmaking itself, but carried through their projection and showing of certain films to develop engaged audiences.

Historically, American film collectives had models of mobile film exhibition with Soviet cultural and educational collectives. FSR’s journal *Soviet Russia* in 1921 published an article about “propaganda steamers and trains” that detailed Soviet mobile cinemas, which indicates American film collectives were aware of Soviet activities and studying their implementation in the US.⁵²⁴ Soviet mobile cinemas, or agit-trains, operated from 1918 until early 1920s as support for the Red Army. The Soviet government referred to these as “agitation-instructional trains” because of their educational value to spreading political and cultural propaganda. Agit -trains printed communist literature in the millions to distribute in the towns they passed through and to visitors on the trains. Slavic Studies scholar Adelheid Heftberger states, “Between December 27, 1918 and December 12, 1920, the collective for agit-trains and steamers held 1,891 meetings, where 2,752,000 participants listened to 1,008 presentations.... more than 2 million people attended cinema screenings and concerts.”⁵²⁵ In 1919 until 1921, agit-steamers, such as *Red Star*, also showed films to thousands of Soviets on the Volga and Kama. Heftberger details the operations of these mobile cinemas:

October Revolution was the most active of all “agit-trains,” serving 12 tours of duty from 1919-1920. In two months alone, it screened cinema to over 100,000 people in 97 screenings. Typically 16 to 18 cars in length, other agit-trains included the *Red*

⁵²³ Ibid., 7.

⁵²⁴ “Propaganda Steamers and Trains,” *Soviet Russia* (April 9, 1921): 365-366.

⁵²⁵ Qtd. in Lidiia Maksakova, *Agitpoezd “Oktiabr’skaia Revoliutsiia” (1919-1920)* (Moscow: Nauka, 1956), 26.

East, Soviet Caucasus, and Red Cossack. All were equipped for any possible propaganda need, each with its own broadcast radio station, internal telephone system, mobile camera shop, printing press, and newspaper office.⁵²⁶

Trains had resources for multimedia production and dissemination.

By the mid-1920s, Vertov took over leadership of these agit-train systems to share newsreels, documentaries, print news, and create films along their journeys. Vertov wrote films for agit-trains or to be filmed while doing traveling exhibitions, one example as the “Draft of a Scenario Intended to be Filmed During a Journey by the Agit-Train, The Soviet Caucasus.”⁵²⁷

Expansion of mobile cinema in the Soviet Union also included film trucks in Petersburg, Novgorod, and Kiev throughout the 1920s to create newsreels that were shot, edited, and screened almost simultaneously. These trucks could film and project as they stopped in towns and villages. Scholars estimate that “by 1925 there were already 1,000 travelling cinemas with mobile projectors active in the Soviet Union, showing mostly documentaries.”⁵²⁸ Aleksandr Medvedkin was a Russian director who took over the agit-train project in the 1930s, named the Film Train (*kinopoezd*). Medvedkin summarized his approach to running the Film Train as a project to document Soviet workers but also to spark local debates about how to fix issues in specific villages and have locals connect these to the broader project of developing the new Soviet state. Medvedkin stated that the “production of a film is organically and intrinsically linked to its screening in the place of production.”⁵²⁹ American film collectives took a similar

⁵²⁶ Adelheid Heftberger, “Soviet Agit-Trains from the Vertov Collection of the Austrian Film Museum,” *Incite! Journal of Experimental Media* no. 4 (2013-2014), <https://incite-online.net/heftberger4.html> ; Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917–1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 59.

⁵²⁷ Heftberger, “Soviet Agit-Trains from the Vertov Collection of the Austrian Film Museum,” *Incite!*; Adelheid Heftberger, “Propaganda in Motion: Dziga Vertov’s and Aleksandr Medvedkin’s Film Trains and Agit Steamers of the 1920s and 1930s,” *Apparatus: Film, Media and Digital Cultures in Central and Eastern Europe* (2015), <https://www.apparatusjournal.net/index.php/apparatus/article/view/2/75> *Kino-Eye*, 275-278,

⁵²⁸ Heftberger, “Propaganda in Motion,”; Emma Widdis, *Alexander Medvedkin* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 131.

⁵²⁹ Thomas Tode, “Agit-Trains, Agit-steamers, Cinema Trucks. Dziga Vertov and Travelling Cinema in the early 1920s in the Soviet Union” in *Travelling Cinema in Europe: Sources and Perspectives*, ed. by Martin Loiperdinger, (Frankfurt am Main and Basel: KINtop Schriften 10, Stroemfeld/Roter Stern Verlag, 2008), 143–56; Emma Widdis,

approach when showing films in different urban and rural communities, such as in Passaic, New Jersey.

Newsreels presented portability opportunities for film collectives. Unlike newspapers, film was more complicated to disseminate across the US or abroad. Most scholarship on newsreel exhibition focuses on commercial newsreels shown in US theaters. Michael Stamm's and Clark's work, for example, focus on newsreel exhibition in theaters from Hearst, Fox, and others. By looking outside theaters to traveling newsreels and workers' films, New York becomes a locus for an extended film exhibition-distribution circuit that focused on workers' news and displaying films they believed were most informational to workers. Many scholars have written on nontheatrical exhibition. Wasson highlights how the 1920s and 1930s experienced a growth in radical and avant-garde movements that grew because of portable and self-operated projectors, which she notes, also allowed for "the growth of film theory" and diversification of film content.⁵³⁰ These movements thus expanded access to operating film equipment and ability to see and learn about the film.

The WIR became interested in distribution and exhibition in the early 1920s with Friends of Soviet Russia in the US. "Kruse's homemade *agitki* tours" in the US raised Americans' interest in Soviet films.⁵³¹ Kruse not only directed and produced FSR films, but led the distribution and exhibition around the US. Kruse strategically used film stock that would allow for mobility of films. Kepley interviewed Kruse in the 1970s and detailed, "For American distribution Kruse printed films on 28mm stock to permit the use of portable equipment, and he

Visions of a New Land. Soviet Film from the Revolution to the Second World War (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Widdis, *Alexander Medvedkin*; Adelheid Heftberger, "'Propaganda in Motion. Dziga Vertov, Aleksandr Medvedkin, Soviet Agitation on Agit-trains, Agit-steamers, and the Film Train in the 1920s and 1930s,'" *Apparatus. Film, Media and Digital Cultures in Central and Eastern Europe* no. 1 (2015): 25.

⁵³⁰ Wasson, *Everyday Movies*, 68-69.

⁵³¹ McMeekin, *Red Millionaire*, 180.

personally ‘road-showed’ the films in a series of one-night exhibitions in rented neighborhood theaters, union halls, schools, mining camps, and private homes, eventually reaching 200 cities and towns and 100,000 persons.”⁵³² Kruse took these films around NYC, and he traveled to other major cities in the US as well as more rural areas in the Midwest throughout the 1920s.⁵³³ One example Kepley provides of the success of Kruse’s FSR mobile exhibitions is that *The Fifth Year* raised about “40,000 dollars in one year,” presumably in 1923.⁵³⁴ As Kruse advanced in his technical and exhibition skills, he and FSR sought more methods to screen films in nontheatrical and mobile spaces that could reach more workers. Kruse noted in 1926 that FSR films in the past few years

...were mostly held in rented theatres, though in many cases schools and other public buildings were secured through liberal or labour aid. In small towns theatre owners dependent upon labour support rented our pictures as part of their regular programme, often, too. Labour Temples were used. An itinerant projection outfit is now being planned to work in the rural and small isolated mining districts, and consideration is being given to equipment that permits pictures to be shown in daylight.⁵³⁵

Kruse displays here innovative ideas that could expand the educational value of films by reaching more people, and desire to exhibit films for American workers with less access to cinemas and film studies compared to NYC. These ideas eventually led Kruse to pursue a lifelong career in developing film equipment with Bell & Howell as part of the film education industry.

Another form of “mobile” exhibition that FSR and other film collectives practiced was showing pictures that allowed audience members to “travel” to distant or foreign places while watching films. *Soviet Russia Pictorial* printed the review of an audience member for FSR film

⁵³² Kepley, “The Workers’ International Relief and the Cinema of the Left 1921-1935,” 11.

⁵³³ McMeekin, *Red Millionaire*, 177-182. In the Soviet Union, many edited footage films were unsuccessful, so Münzenberg turned to studio films like *Polikushka*.

⁵³⁴ Kepley, “The Workers’ International Relief and the Cinema of the Left 1921-1935,” 7-11.

⁵³⁵ Kruse, “Proletarian Film in America,” 184.

The Fifth Year that glowingly stated, “That the picture was brilliantly conceived and beautifully pictured and could not fail to impress anyone who saw it...” What follows is even more illuminating for how exhibitions could transport audiences into new scenes that could then provoke innovative ideas. The viewer remarked,

We are now getting ready for another one of these pictures that makes it possible for you to travel to Russia while sitting comfortably in a seat at the moving picture theatre. Educators say that travel is one of the best means of gaining an education and we agree wholeheartedly. This new picture will give us something of Germany as well as Russia...⁵³⁶

They were referring to the upcoming FSR picture *Russia and Germany* that screened across the US in late 1924 through 1925. Notably, the author emphasizes the power of the screen as a mechanism to travel, with travel being a main form of immersive education. FSR films thus provided opportunities to reach people on the move and to transport viewers into new areas and ways of thinking about their labor in relation to Soviet industries.

While some workers’ films “screened at sympathetic movie houses, like the Cameo,” by the mid-1920s, nontheatrical distribution and exhibition became more prominent, especially the showing of films in union halls, churches, farms, and rural schoolhouses throughout the East Coast and Midwest.⁵³⁷ This form of distribution and exhibition were core to the FPL. FPL often screened their own and Soviet films at union events, or they took them directly to worker-meeting locations. Tom Brandon highlighted how “The films were shown in neighborhood centers, workers’ halls, language brotherhood centers, in mining towns and working-class areas. There was always someone to introduce the film, sometimes even program notes.”⁵³⁸ These

⁵³⁶ *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (March 1924): 70.

⁵³⁷ J. Hoberman, *Home Made Movies: Twenty Years of American 8mm & Super-8 Films* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1981), 66; Leo Seltzer, interview with Thomas Brandon, Jan. 5, 1974, Personality Files, Folder J213: Leo Seltzer, Thomas Brandon Collection, Film Study Center, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; Russell Campbell, “Film and Photo League Radical Cinema in the 30s,” *Jump Cut* (1977): 23-25.

⁵³⁸ Rich, “The Missing Chapter in American Cinema,” Thomas Brandon Collection.

exhibitions were methodically planned out to maximize the educational and political impacts. FPL members designed not only exhibition plans for the physical films, but the educational materials around films to provide audiences with written and oral explanations for how to read films, understand films within a history, and identify core themes and techniques for workers' films and labor organizing.

Following the model of Vertov's "Kinout train," the League's various chapters distributed their films through union halls, schools, and strike headquarters, at times with a hand cranked projector and a sheet pinned between two trees. And, like Vertov, they hoped their films would be an instrument to motivate and mobilize the working classes towards action. The showings could be raucous, with viewers recognizing themselves on screen, and others amazed to see what was happening outside their own area.⁵³⁹ Hoberman notes that FPL members even acquired and used "a portable projector for strikers on picket lines."⁵⁴⁰ This way, films could provide already agitated workers with additional motivation and support to continue striking. FPL members, such as Seltzer, quickly mobilized already made films and film equipment to show them with short lectures or make new films when demonstrations arose throughout New York, or sometimes elsewhere in the US.

Filmmakers went into local communities to exhibit films at primarily working-class venues with innovative screening techniques for both their own films and Soviet productions. In the early 1930s, a Farmers' Movie Circuit exhibited Soviet films in "churches, town halls, small theaters and barns" where many localities did not have their own designated theaters in

⁵³⁹ "To Tell the Truth Attachment #4, Part II. How The World Works: Documentary Inside the System and Out (1929-1941)," *National Endowment of the Humanities Detailed Treatment* (Jan. 2009): 11, chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgglefindmkaj/https://www.columbia.edu/itc/film/gaines/documentary_tradition/NEH_ToTelltheTruth.pdf.

⁵⁴⁰ Hoberman, *Home Made Movies*, 66.

Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wisconsin, and Michigan.⁵⁴¹ Leo Seltzer similarly noted that the FPL traveled to share films with working-class folks in rural areas with limited access to news and movie theaters:

I took some of our films to the Pennsylvania coal fields and showed them on a sheet stretched between trees to miners who had been out on strike for two years. On another occasion, with a projector improvised to run off an automobile battery, I went through the middle west with Sidney Howard, the playwright, showing Film and Photo League films to farmers in their homes and in rural schoolhouses. Often these films and the photographs we made were the only source of information about the depression for many workers and farmers throughout the country.⁵⁴²

Though part of this was due to not having stable or established exhibition spaces, much of this derived from pedagogical and political principles inherent to the FPL to bring cinema to the people.⁵⁴³ By making film and film education more accessible, leftists believed they could better organize workers and teach them about the conditions of the Great Depression.⁵⁴⁴ Transporting films to places like the 1934 National Film Conference in Chicago where FPL exhibited and discussed forty reels of film from the year before allowed more centralized discussions about exhibiting films and what they could teach about American workers' conditions.⁵⁴⁵ While FSS did not travel as widely as FSR or FPL, they did show films in several locations around CCNY, but like FPL by the mid-1930s, also relied more on exhibiting in universities and colleges.

Bringing the Workers and Radicals In

While mobile exhibitions brought films *to* workers and rural areas where film theaters were scarce that created new educational spaces, film exhibitions at city universities provided

⁵⁴¹ Sam Brody, *New Theater* (Aug 1934) in *Celluloid Power: Social Film Criticism from The Birth of a Nation to Judgement at Nuremberg*, ed. David Platt (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, 1992): 192.

⁵⁴² Leo Seltzer, "Documenting the Depression," 256.

⁵⁴³ This was also in line with British documentary practices, especially cinema trains and traveling exhibitions put on by the Empire Marketing Board with John Grierson. Grierson, *Cinema and the Wealth of Nations*.

⁵⁴⁴ Forum showings included not only the film, but also "a critical discussion on the picture as well as the cinema generally," along with social activities and complementary food, drinks, and dancing. "Forum to Film 'General'," *Film Daily* (April 10, 1937): 7.

⁵⁴⁵ Barnouw, *Documentary*, 112.

ways to bring workers and radicals *into* educational spaces that helped integrate film studies into higher-education curriculum. During this period, workers also gained more access to universities through film showings. City College of New York and the New School for Social Research became primary locations where working-class and left-wing New Yorkers gathered to view and discuss avant-garde and revolutionary films. Friends of Soviet Russia exhibitions did not occur at colleges, but they did bring workers into unique, typically elite, city spaces, such as *The Fifth Year*'s first showing at Manhattan Casino on July 28, 1923. Here, Kruse and FSR displayed motion pictures of workers and farmers with several working-class Americans in attendance, whom Kruse also filmed and photographed during the show.⁵⁴⁶ Film and Photo League and Film and Sprockets Society exhibitions increasingly did occur at universities throughout the 1930s.

A 1908 article identified nickelodeons as “academic halls” because of film’s ability to display images realistically and creatively. This *Film Index* snippet also expressed desire for any Americans to have the capability to screen films in addition to more access to cinemas.⁵⁴⁷ Lucy France Pierce’s language is important here because she indicates that film exhibitions were main sites of learning compared to courses universities and colleges offered in the early twentieth century. Film collectives recognized the sentiment of Pierce’s statement. For one, they felt similarly about cinemas and film exhibitions as academic centers. Additionally, they developed strategies to increase the academic reach of film that also converted universities and colleges into film theaters. Shifting ideas about film’s use in society was facilitated by the partnerships of film collectives with several institutions and forums dedicated to the promotion and study of film. Among these institutions, two pioneer colleges stand out—the City College of New York and the

⁵⁴⁶ “Unity Meet Movies With ‘Fifth Year’,” *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (July 28, 1923): 5. Kruse did a similar screening for Federated Farmer-Labor Party members at a conference in Chicago and Kruse took pictures at meeting.

⁵⁴⁷ Lucy France Pierce, “The Nickelodeon,” *The Film Index* (1908): 4, 6.

New School for Social Research. They hosted film exhibitions that were primarily attended by working-class and left-wing New Yorkers to learn film appreciation and engage in discussions about avant-garde and revolutionary films. The integration of film studies into the curriculum of these institutions symbolized an acknowledgment of film as a legitimate academic discipline.

The Film and Photo League held frequent exhibitions at the New School between 1933 and 1936. Claus Dieter-Krohn, Judith Friedlander, Peter Rutkoff, and others have written wonderful cultural, political, intellectual, and institutional histories of the New School for Social Research. Labor Temple, and similar spaces where film collectives held workers' exhibitions. FPL's first exhibition at the New School for Social Research was in 1933. People could purchase advance tickets for fifty cents at the FPL headquarters, New Masses, Workers Bookshop, and New Theatre. Tickets at the door were seventy-five cents. FPL branded this an exhibition of "the productions of independent amateurs and experimenters." The show featured a program of shorts, including Watson's *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Florey's *The Coffin Maker*, Man Ray's *L'Etoile De Mer*, Steiner's *H20*, Ivor Montague's *Day Dreams*, FPL's own newsreel *America Today*, and several European newsreels: *Austrian Riots*, *French riots*, and *Ambridge Massacre*.⁵⁴⁸ This program highlights the array of films they put together on a single program to draw in a variety of viewers—those interested in seeing new surrealist and dadaist works like Man Ray's also likely caught part of radical newsreels.

One impact of these exhibitions was that FPL newsreels and documentaries frequently screened alongside premier avant-garde abstract or feature films. Film Forum was a film club located at 125 W 45th Street formed by Sidney Howard, Tom Brandon, Margaret Larkin as

⁵⁴⁸ Film and Photo League flyer for "Program 1: Shorts" held at the New School for Social Research, March 1934, AG 77, Box 13: Activity Files, 1932-1986, Subseries I. Committees and Organizations, Folder 1: Film and Photo League, c. 1934-1935, Willard Van Dyke Archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

president, vice president, and secretary, respectively. Howard and Brandon worked with FPL at the same time, and Larkin had worked on films with the WIR, mainly writing title cards for *Passaic* in 1926. The Advisory Board included Bakshy, Bourke-White, Freeman, Leyda, Littell, Potamkin, Platt, and Steiner. Functioning essentially as an FPL film club, a Film Forum exhibition at the New School on January 22, 1933, for example, screened excerpts from FPL's *Hunger* before showing Fritz Lang's *M*. Listed were also upcoming feature films to be exhibited by the Forum at the New School: *Ivan*, *Bed and Sofa*, *Birth*, *Finis Terrae*, *Kuhle Wampe*, *Mother*. The advertising poster describes the production of *Hunger* as such: "These newsreels are made in the face of financial discouragement, political opposition, and actual physical danger."⁵⁴⁹ Promoting exhibitions in this way allowed FPL films to serve as "documentary and historical work[s]" where intellectuals already attuned to the university could see and analyze workers' films. Similar shows continued into 1934. Margaret Bourke-White and FPL members selected a series of shorts, including *The Fall of the House of Usher*, *20*, and *Day Dreams*, to screen at the New School. They advertised the program as an exclusive opportunity, stating, "never have such delightful bits of cinema artistry been brought together under one bill." This show occurred at the New School because "such films cannot be well enough appreciated by the general public to receive a billing in one of the larger theaters."⁵⁵⁰ Shows at the New School therefore served as ways for film collectives to legitimize certain films as artistically valuable in addition to merging traditional intellectual and working-class audiences. Different programs created arguments about film history, theory, and styles.

Pairing workers' documentaries and newsreels with avant-garde shorts and features at the

⁵⁴⁹ Film Forum's Program I held at the New School for Social Research, 1935, Box C192, Folder 2d.1: Clippings, programs, etc. regarding movies, Leo Hurwitz Collection, Moving Images Department, George Eastman Museum, Rochester, NY.

⁵⁵⁰ "Screenings: Film and Photo League—New School," *Columbia Spectator* Vol. LVIII, no. 108 (April 3, 1934): 2.

New School allowed FPL to engage a variety of Americans interested in Marxist ideas or those drawn in by exclusive avant-garde film screenings who then also were present to hear political messages. In September 1934, FPL showed “experimental shorts” at the New School, which included the first American showing of *Montparnasse* by Deslau alongside Man Ray’s *Emak Bakia* and an “uncensored version of Watson and Webber’s *Lot in Sodom*.” Before these shorts was a showing of *American today*, a newsreel produced by FPL on Sept. 29, 1934.⁵⁵¹ A similar program ran in February 1935 at the New School with FPL screening the feature *Phantom President* and *Stark Love*, “a documentary of the North Carolina mountains with native actors.”⁵⁵² Such programs became staples of FPL exhibitions. FPL developed several seasonal revival series that brought together acclaimed avant-garde works with FPL newsreels from past years and newly filmed pictures. These exhibitions occurred usually on Saturday evenings at 7pm and 9:30pm. Single shows typically costed about fifty cents and full series tickets for \$2.00. In March 1935, FPL’s “Spring Revival Series” featured G. W. Pabst’s *The Beggars’ Opera* with a League newsreel.⁵⁵³ *The Daily Worker* included a feature of this program, noting that the newsreels would show “scenes of Wednesday’s demonstration against the Cuban regime, as well as demonstrations against Italian and Spanish fascism.”⁵⁵⁴ Other films in this series included *Shanghai Express*, *China Express*; *Golden Mountains*, *Killing to Live*; *Hells House*, *A Nous La Liberte* and *Mirage de Paris*.⁵⁵⁵ Such eclectic mixes of films appealed to broader audiences

⁵⁵¹ “League to Show Shorts,” *The Film Daily* (Sept. 18, 1934): 7.

⁵⁵² “Film Notes,” *Columbia Spectator* Volume LVIII, No. 79 (Feb. 15, 1935): 2.

⁵⁵³ “Reviving Beggars’ Opera,” *The Film Daily* (March 15, 1935): 2 with a league newsreel *Motion Picture Daily* (March 15, 1935): 12; “Reviving Two Prison Films,” *The Film Daily* (Feb. 1, 1935): 2; “Lederer to Make Tour Showing 2 Anti-War Films,” *Film Daily* (March 28, 1935): 2.

⁵⁵⁴ Film and Photo League “Spring Series of Distinguished Films” flyer for program at the New School for Social Research, March 16-May 11, 1935, MssCol 2100, Box 3, Folder: Film and Photo League, MssCol 2100, Box 32, Folder: Little Theater Movement, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, New York, NY.

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

interested in avant-garde films by not making them only Soviet or workers'-focused.

These series attracted attention from major trade journals and even *The Columbia Spectator*. *Variety* noted that FPL was providing “academic analysis” of films in at the New School every two weeks. The article stated that the “purpose of the series is to contrast different techniques used on fundamentally similar plot themes.” Interestingly, the shows did not include lectures, but did have program notes to “develop the theoretical and practical points of divergence in the various couplings”⁵⁵⁶ FPL held additional shows to prompt audiences to compare films and learn differences amongst techniques, political messages, and connections across film history.⁵⁵⁷ With tickets at the Film and Photo League headquarters, Workers Bookshop, and Mayfair Bookshop, the League held “A Program of Comparative Cinema” on December 22nd at the New School. Weine’s *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* anchored the section “post-war modernism” with Conrad Veidt and Werner Krauss. The program included the “premier of *The New Legion*” as part of a “contemporary realism” section with Irving Browning and Manon Miller, and then concluded with “machine-age modernism” featuring *Rhapsody in Steel*. Two shows occurred at 7pm and 9:30pm for fifty cents in advance or seventy-five cents upon arrival. A December 29th “Benefit Harlem Film Production” ran from 2pm to 12pm that included Four Marx Brothers’ *Animal Crackers* and Disney’s *Four Seasons*. While it could appear that the League compromised on their politics and anti-Hollywood aesthetics at times when they held benefit shows to appeal more widely to audiences when raising money for certain projects, it is also likely they prefaced films like Disney’s as opposites to political films they lauded and

⁵⁵⁶ “Contrasting Duels: Academic Analysis of Comparative Film Treatments,” *Variety* (March 27, 1935): 29.

⁵⁵⁷ “Screen Notes,” *New York Times* (Dec. 4, 1935): 27; “Alliance to Screen *Emperor Jones*” *The Film Daily* (Dec. 24, 1935): 2; “Alliance to Discuss Time” *The Film Daily* (March 21, 1935): 4; “Showing Satire at New School “Pie in the Sky,” *The Film Daily* (Nov. 14, 1935): 2.

identified only technical elements as praiseworthy in such films.⁵⁵⁸ Some benefit shows, as it happened with FSS too, also featured high-profile popular films to raise more money.

Perhaps the most expansive FPL show of their own films at the New School was on May 11th, 1935. Here, FPL premiered Nancy Naumburg and James Guy's *Taxi* at 7 and 9:30pm. As the League's "first feature production," the "story deals with the life of taxi drivers and is acted by members of the taxi union." The program paired *Taxi* with *Day Dreams*, *Harlem Sketches*, *Marine*, and *East Side, West Side*—the latter three were FPL original shorts.⁵⁵⁹ FPL later showed Naumburg and Guy's *Sheriffed* at the New School along with documentary and newsreel shorts. That FPL premiered its first two feature-length documentary films at the New School indicates the mixed flows of working-class people into the New School to view films as well as growing academic sympathizers for FPL and communist films. Although mainly isolated to the New School, FPL exhibitions became central locations for filmgoing in New York during the 1930s.

The Pauline Edwards Theater at the City College was another major exhibition site, primarily for the FSS. Before their documentary-specific series, FSS ran several "film revival" and "film appreciation" programs that highlighted foreign films as well as experimental and classic films from America, Europe, and the Soviet Union. Bernard Gordon, who was the president of FSS at the time, noted that there were several main thrusts to the program:

Its members believe that the time is ripe for recognition of the film as a tremendously important medium, artistically, economically, and socially. While the accepted professions are overcrowded, there is an absolute dearth of trained men in the field of moving picture production. We wish to point this out to the student body and thus create a demand for film courses on the curriculum. In addition, we are painfully aware of the complete absence of intelligent film appreciation among educated people, despite the fact that the movies form a major item of entertainment. Our programs are therefore designed

⁵⁵⁸ Film and Photo League flyer for "A Program of Comparative Cinema" featuring *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *The New Legion*, and *Rhapsody in Steel*, c. 1934, AG 77, Box 13: Activity Files, 1932-1986, Subseries I. Committees and Organizations, Folder 1: Film and Photo League, c. 1934-1935, Willard Van Dyke Archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ. The bottom of the flyer lists upcoming shows of the Marx Brothers and Disney to support Harlem Film Production (likely *Harlem Sketches*).

⁵⁵⁹ "Film-Photo League to Show 'Taxi'," *The Film Daily* (May 7, 1935): 2.

to point out the significance of the film and open the way to their genuine appreciation, all by the unsurpassed method of exhibiting the best films which have been produced to date. It will be apparent that any movement which succeeds in raising the level of film appreciation should have the salutary effect of improvings [sic] the standards of the commercial film.⁵⁶⁰

This “manifesto” mirrored several leftist and US film appreciation societies of the time.

Recognizing films as an art form that required increased training of film scholars and ordinary people, FSS hoped their programs would not only contribute to professionalizing study but also bettering overall quality of films. Members were also keen to debates within the art world in which many art critics and scholars minimized cinema’s value as a serious art due to its status as a mass medium, newness, entertainment value, and technological apparatuses. Gordon wrote in the FSS-published *Technique of the Film*, “Many who are well acquainted with painting, music, and literature are complacently ignorant of the barest fundamentals of cinema construction, although the motion picture affects a large percentage of them even more than the eccepted [sic] arts.”⁵⁶¹ As art students at CCNY, this critique suggests an understanding of art in a more experimental, progressive frame than traditional arts education. FSS pushed boundaries within their department to allow for film study as well as around the city and country to advocate for the value of film as art and documentary.

Press around the city and campus quickly noticed the excitement surrounding FSS developing film education and exhibitions. On March 19, 1937, *The Campus* headlined FSS’s first series “Has Aroused Interest of Movie World,” reporting that “many prominent people from the educational, artistic, and movie worlds” were set to attend the series. Critics from periodicals

⁵⁶⁰ Bernard Gordon, “Film -Sprockets Club Plans to Trace Movies’ History,” *The Campus* (Jan. 5, 1937): 4.

⁵⁶¹ Bernard Gordon and Julien Zimet, *Technique of the Film* (New York: Film and Sprockets Society and City College of New York Art Department, March 1937), 15-16, uncatalogued, City College of New York Special Collections, New York, NY, retrieved by Prof. Sydney Van Nort. (hereafter cited as Gordon and Zimet, *Technique of the Film*, 1937, City College of New York Special Collections).

and newspapers, such as Archer Winsten of *New York Post*, William Boehnel at *World Telegram*, Howard Barnes of *Tribune*, and Frank S. Nugen of *NYT* indicated they would attend. High school and college teachers and administrators had purchased tickets to the show, as did Robert Gessner who wrote for *New Theatre* and Lewis Jacobs of *Experimental Cinema*.⁵⁶² As key figures in cinema criticism and news, this was a major report indicating FSS's connections across the city and waves made by the group. News continued to cover their activities into the 1940-41 academic year.

Attention given to FSS programs also revealed the group's attempt to provide accessible learning materials to students and the public. "College Has Film Series" in *Motion Picture Daily* in 1937 noted this series was "designed for laymen." FSS strove to not only introduce people to films and scholarship for the first time, but to make existing materials comprehensible to ordinary people. As FSS members read theory from Pudovkin's *Film Technique* or Rotha's *Documentary Film*, they made these ideas and practices digestible for public audiences.⁵⁶³ Such series and programs were designed to also spark appreciation for film and its techniques amongst prospective film students.⁵⁶⁴ Essentially, FSS programs operated like a film survey or introductory course to Film Studies. In a 1939 *New York Times* report, the Film and Sprockets Society claimed to be "furnishing, outside of the curriculum, a serious approach to motion-picture technique and criticism in an effort to enable students to distinguish good pictures from bad." They had Sergei Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Rene Clair, Pabst, Lubitsch, De Mille, Vidor, Brennen, *Ten Days that Shook the World*, *Mother*, travelogue cartoons, Chaplin and Lloyd

⁵⁶² "Film Sprockets Series Opens Tonight; Has Aroused Interest of Movie World," *The Campus* (March 19, 1937): 1.

⁵⁶³ Gordon, *The Gordon Files*, 28.

⁵⁶⁴ Gordon and Zimet, *Technique of the Film*, 1937, City College of New York Special Collections, 4. The group also hoped to at last create "a concise and simple discussion of the art of the film" which absence they claimed, "is inspired by the unfamiliarity with the medium which is apparent even among well educated people."

slapsticks, Boyd's abstract films, and Ivens planned for the semester. This lineup of films created a curriculum for audiences to learn about the history of film and styles; it, too, covered filmmakers from across the US, Europe, and Soviet Union that provided a wide range of topics for people to become interested in. Another indication of the Society's aims to make films not only educationally accessible, but financially was their reduction of fees by 1939. "The Society is the only one in the city which is carrying on a serious study of motion pictures. To this end it has initiated a new policy whereby the College student may view the film classics for the price of ten cents," said Meyer Goldberg who was president for the year.⁵⁶⁵ Students, then, had more incentive to see and learn about films at a cheaper price and could keep the group running. This allowed FSS's ideas about not only film as art, but politics of accessibility to reach more people.

FSS did also work with mainstream institutions such as MoMA and NYPL to rent films to screen at CCNY since they were the only institutions that had large, catalogued collections for sharing.⁵⁶⁶ Exhibitions for FSS series also occurred at various locations across campus, which allowed a range of people to become familiar with the group. Their series frequently ran at Pauline Edwards Theater or Doremus Hall, but they also held screenings in Room 306 in 1936 before they began official series.⁵⁶⁷ This also shows that the group's audiences grew from beyond a classroom size to requiring a full theatre for exhibitions.

Beyond the film screenings, FSS frequently held standing exhibitions at CCNY to accompany their series. While the films screened on particular nights during a series, they included lectures and sometimes program notes with background context and analysis, often

⁵⁶⁵ "Film and Sprockets to Offer New Series of Motion Pictures," *The Campus* (March 4, 1939): 1. They also provided a synopsis of Pudovkin's *Mother* to be shown in Doremus Hall Thursday at noon and listed other films *Ten Days*, *End of St. Petersburg*, and *Westfront* as part of the later series.

⁵⁶⁶ Gordon, *The Gordon Files*, 3.

⁵⁶⁷ "Russian Film," *The Campus* (Oct. 23, 1936): 4.

framing the films' relationships to art and history of film.⁵⁶⁸ However, at any point, people could view film stills and writings about the films—similar to a museum exhibit—displayed in the Hall of Patriots, outside the Pauline Edwards Theatre, or by the Art Department classrooms. On April 30, 1939, *The New York Times* wrote “Movie History at City College” that began: “An exhibition outlining the history of American motion pictures and the technique of the documentary from which is illustrated through stills and commentaries written by student members.”⁵⁶⁹ Students created this show at the Hall of Patriots, which opened on May 3rd, 1939. FSS students working toward art degrees incorporated much of what they learned in their art courses to apply to their film shows. This was a way of legitimizing film as a serious art deserving of both standing and rotating exhibitions. It also served as an effective teaching practice with multiple access points, where people could encounter the Hall of Patriots exhibition walking by or see the films and be directed to more information with the standing exhibit.

Bringing in guest lectures also became a customary practice of the organization, starting in 1936 to expand their educational reach and receive more training as students. Elias Katz of Teachers' College of Columbia, for example, spoke with FSS about “Motion Pictures Made by Public School Students” in December 1936. The article noted that “Several films supervised by Mr. Katz and produced in the city schools will be shown.”⁵⁷⁰ In a free show, FSS under the leadership of Goldberg invited in Irving Meginnis, a “lecturer on motion pictures,” to “give an informal talk on early films.” They screened *The Great Train Robbery* as the “first narrative film ever made” with the first Chaplin comedy and first cartoons.⁵⁷¹ In its second series of

⁵⁶⁸ Similarly, the Film Arts Guild brought in films from US and European filmmakers that the group believed exemplified not only the best art films, but also could show the history of film.

⁵⁶⁹ “Movie History at City College,” *The New York Times* (April 30, 1939): 54.

⁵⁷⁰ “Film and Sprockets,” *The Campus* (Dec. 1, 1936): 1. They included this meeting would be held in room 304 the following Thursday, at 12:45 p.m.

⁵⁷¹ “Film and Sprockets to Show Early Films,” *The Campus* (March 14, 1939): 1. They labeled this series “Famous First Films” before 1910.

“greatfilms,” including Eisenstein’s *Ten Days That Shook the World*, FSS supplemented the films with “several lectures on specific phases of motion pictures.” The March 4th, 1939 article noted, “Among those who will speak during the next few weeks are Joris Ivens, whose film on China opens in NY next week; Sidney Kaufman, radio critic and motion picture commentator, and Paul Strand, director of *The Wave*.”⁵⁷² Since these lecturers were relatively well-known, they drew in others to CCNY campus for the series and provided education that students on campus were not getting from their own CCNY courses. The CCNY community was introduced to experimental filmmaking happening across the city; they also gained access to film scholars who began this work without established film education.

Reviving films they deemed historically valuable as examples of extraordinary aesthetics, techniques, and social content, the Film and Sprockets Society developed programs to spark film appreciation amongst their classmates and city community. *The Ticker*, from the School of Business and Civics at CCNY, ran a short piece noting that tickets for “The Rise of the American Film, 1912-1915” FSS showing on February 22nd, 1936 at 8:30pm could be purchased at The Concert Bureau Room 1421A for \$0.25.⁵⁷³ Films shown included *The New York Hat*, *The Fugitive*, *The Clever Dummy*, and *The Fool That Was*. They also showed a Chaplin film in Alcoves “to boost sales for the movie revival” that was “designed to trace the use of movies as an art.”⁵⁷⁴ On May 15th, 1936 the second movie revival night from the Art Department premiered featuring *Gertie the Dinosaur*, *The Freshman*, and *The Sex Life of the Polyp*.⁵⁷⁵ These films displayed FSS’s early attempt at designing a history of film curriculum, at this point largely

⁵⁷² *The Campus* (March 3, 1939): 4.

⁵⁷³ “Showing of Pre-War Films in Auditorium Saturday” *The Campus* (Feb. 17, 1936): 1; *The Campus* (Feb. 21, 1936): 2.

⁵⁷⁴ “Cinema Group of the Art Department,” *The Campus* (Feb. 22, 1936): 4; “Chaplin Film Booms Revival in Alcoves,” *The Campus* (Feb. 24, 1936): 2.

⁵⁷⁵ “Silent Sachems Star in Revival,” *The Campus* (May 8, 1936): 2.

about American cinema.

Foreign films, however, became increasingly central to these revivals and film appreciation series. This was likely partially due to having more access to foreign films incorporated in the MoMA and NYPL film libraries as well as the organization's developing relationships with left-wing and avant-garde circles in the city. *The Campus* had been running several Soviet film advertisements for screenings around the city and reviews of Soviet films throughout 1936 and beyond. On November 5th, 1936, FSS provided "A showing of the Russian film *Potemkin* [Eisenstein, 1925] and a two-reel Charlie Chaplin comedy, *The Immigrant*," at 12:30 in room 306 for \$0.10. The article continues, "The Society invites all those interested in the study of the cinema to attend regular Thursday meetings," which captures the essence of the group to recruit those interested in film to continue building space for study.⁵⁷⁶ Other articles also provided lengthier synopses of films, thus serving as another education outlet to learn more about the films. In one series, they screened Germain Dulac's 1928 French silent *Seashell and the Clergyman* as well as F.W. Murnau's 1924 German silent *The Last Laugh*.⁵⁷⁷ These were already renowned avant-garde films by the 1930s that FSS highlighted as masterworks of art cinema. FSS's connection to the Art Department and other cultural institutions allowed them to forge an art cinema education through their programs, as did their fundamental investment in arguing the film's artistic value.

Like FPL's public showings at the New School, The City College's FSS worked to distinguish film as a modern art form and promote its serious study. In addition, FSR, FPL, and

⁵⁷⁶ "Russian Film," *The Campus* (Oct. 23, 1936): 4; "Recommended," *The Campus* (Nov. 2, 1936): 2; "'Potemkin' Shown by Film Society," *The Campus* (Nov. 6, 1936): 4. *Potemkin* was screened with a Chaplin short for \$0.10. It also included a post-screening article describing the film and stating, "Three hundred students packed the lecture room to witness the motion picture, which was preceded by a Charlie Chaplin short, *A Rough Passage*."

⁵⁷⁷ *The Campus* (March 5, 1937): 3.

FSS strived to make films not only educationally accessible, but also financially by reducing fees. This opened opportunities for more people to learn about and appreciate films, aiding in the democratization of film education. Collaborations between various cultural institutions such as libraries, museums, bookstores, academic departments, newspapers, and journals also played a crucial role in FSS's efforts to connect with more people and exchange resources. FSS was tied to Columbia students and mainstream institutions like MoMA and NYPL. The democratization of access to film significantly contributed to the integration of film studies into higher education curriculum. In the US, the 1930s involved a strengthening of the bond between film and education, the democratization of film appreciation, and an increased recognition of film as a legitimate and powerful cultural and educational tool.

The New School and City College were a ripe crowd for radical film exhibitions with Central European exiles settling to teach after fleeing Nazi occupation at the New School and Jewish, immigrant, leftists at CCNY.⁵⁷⁸ Showings at the New School often included “distinguished” Soviet and avant-garde films that were often barred from or deemed unmarketable in major US theaters. The FPL and New School were therefore at the forefront of importing and exhibiting European and Soviet works in the US.⁵⁷⁹ Original American workers’

⁵⁷⁸ Klaus Dieter-Krohn, *Intellectuals in Exile: Refugee Scholars and the New School for Social Research*, trans. Rita and Robert Kimber (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987).

⁵⁷⁹ Film and Photo League “The History of the Soviet Film” program flyer with *The New Masses* at the New School for Social Research, 1934, MssCol 2100, Box 3, Folder: Film and Photo League, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, New York, NY; “Film and Photo League “Winter Series of Distinguished Films” flyer for program at the New School for Social Research, January 5-March 2, 1935, MssCol 2100, Box 3, Folder: Film and Photo League, MssCol 2100, Box 32, Folder: Little Theater Movement, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, New York, NY; Film and Photo League “Spring Series of Distinguished Films” flyer for program at the New School for Social Research, March 16-May 11, 1935, MssCol 2100, Box 3, Folder: Film and Photo League, MssCol 2100, Box 32, Folder: Little Theater Movement, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, New York, NY. Copies of all FPL flyers for these programs are also in: AG 77, Box 13: Activity Files, 1932-1986, Subseries I. Committees and Organizations, Folder 1: Film and Photo League, c. 1934-1935, Willard Van Dyke Archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

productions such as *Taxi* by Nancy Naumburg and James Guy often ran alongside foreign avant-garde productions.⁵⁸⁰ The purpose of these programs was to put US FPL films in conversation with European and Soviet masterworks to legitimize US documentary cinema and emphasize the international scope of Marxist projects. Pedagogically, this served to integrate cinema into a university educational institution and develop more stable exhibition spaces for avant-garde and social documentary cinema in New York. For those at the City College, similar programs reached primarily working-class audiences who attended shows with New York cultural critics and academics. Exhibiting in schools, such as the New School and City College, cultivated a different educational thrust. Here, professors, students, and community members gathered to watch programs created by collectives FSS and FPL. These exhibitions often sparked desires to create courses and degree-granting programs.

Censorship and Protest at Exhibitions

Exhibitions provided key opportunities for audiences to debate politics. Because collectives frequently screened Soviet, Communist, and left-wing films, they faced threats of censorship and resistance from conservative and sometimes even liberal Americans. Collectives, however, were also active in knowing exhibitions around the city to identify fascist and antisemitic films set to screen. Organizing protests against these film showings, especially for the Film and Photo League, became another way of shaping public film information and a method for utilizing exhibitions as antifascist and anticapitalist organizing. Cinemas or exhibition venues, therefore, were sites of protest and direct action. Beyond watching or talking about films, collectives actively tried to halt showings of films or censorship of certain films. This section highlights how film collectives put into practice their learned politics and film knowledge to

⁵⁸⁰ Richard Koszarski, "Nancy Naumburg: Vassar Revolutionary," *Film History* vol. 18, no. 4 (2006): 374.

physically occupy venues or screenings.

Censorship during this period was not restricted to radical political content. Censorship practices varied regionally, with different countries and cities adopting diverse approaches to regulating film content. Conservative regions in the United States, such as Pennsylvania, for instance, enforced stricter censorship than more liberal areas, even outright banning films like *Battleship Potemkin* in 1926. Mostly religious and conservative political groups demanded censoring Bolshevik films as well as films that challenged social norms. The Motion Picture Production Code, also known as the Hays Code, began in the 1930s, prohibited depicting explicit violence, nudity, sexuality, and controversial social or political themes. Films addressing issues such as sexuality, gender, and racial inequality were met with protests during the 1920s and 1930s, primarily by religious and conservative political groups. Marlene Dietrich's androgynous roles in films like *Morocco* (1930) challenged gender norms, leading to public outcry and protests against perceived moral transgressions. Workers' and Soviet films were immersed in this culture of censorship during the time as victims of repression. However, film collectives also participated in fighting against motion pictures that had antisemitic, Nazi, and anticommunist themes.

Workers' and communists' music halls and theaters grew in importance for educating and sharing revolutionary ideas while visualizing and connecting with new audiences and ideas of spectators. Fava argues that they also became major sites of "conservative attacks."⁵⁸¹ Despite facing threats and resistance, collectives persisted in their protests and independent screenings of leftist films. An illustrative example of this occurred in the 1920s when Friends of Soviet Russia confronted groups across the US attempting to ban their films from being screened in local

⁵⁸¹ Fava, "The Composers' Collective of New York," 176.

theaters. One report noted that in 1921 “Two reels of pictures of the meeting of the Third Internationale in Moscow last summer were seized” from a communist organization, which likely was FSR.⁵⁸² As the first Soviet film shown in the US, *Polikushka* received mixed reviews for its avant-garde techniques and communist politics. Kruse predicted possible backlash to the film, given recent protests against FSR’s *Russia Through the Shadows* and other activities. He proclaimed that FSR would ensure audiences will see the film even if it faces protests at other theatres.⁵⁸³ In a following statement, Kruse mentioned groups had attempted to stop the showing of *Russia Through the Shadows* in 1923 and its relief efforts. Despite these protests, Kruse responded that the film’s exhibitions

...will not be suspended. By this time the routing of the moving picture and the drive for the adoption of orphans are well under way and will proceed with comparatively smaller investment of effort. But the work must be kept up. Propaganda to the effect that the need for relief is at an end has been launched from a number of places. To offset it, however, is the direct call for continued co-operation made by the Soviet Government...⁵⁸⁴

Kruse concluded that FSR was getting ready to premier *The Fifth Year* in the US and was rallying against censorship of their pictures.

Collectives’ protests represent a key moment of film exhibition politicization. Such

⁵⁸² “Broker Held as Radical,” *New York Times* (Nov. 22, 1921): 13. In Chicago, federal police arrested J. Moritz Loeb during a raid of an FSR meeting about protesting Sacco and Vanzetti.

⁵⁸³ The Film and Photo League protested *No Greater Glory* by Columbia Pictures by “starting a national campaign” to curb the film’s exhibition in the US, citing it as “war propaganda.” “Glory for Whom? Don’t Be Fooled!” Film and Photo League and American League Against War and Fascism announcement to “boycott all war propaganda and fascist films,” 1934, Box C192, Folder 2d.1: Clippings, programs, etc. regarding movies, Leo Hurwitz Collection, Moving Images Department, George Eastman Museum, Rochester, NY; “Drive *SA Mann-Brand* Off the Screen!” picket line announcement with Film and Photo League and Anti-Nazi Federation of Greater New York, 1934, 1934, Box C192, Folder 2d.1: Clippings, programs, etc. regarding movies, Leo Hurwitz Collection, Moving Images Department, George Eastman Museum, Rochester, NY; “Soviet Pictures Protested in Two Other Texas Towns” newspaper clippings from Dallas, Texas, Jan 17, 1933 clipping from Dallas, Texas, MssCol 2100, Box 32, Folder: Little Theater Movement, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, New York, NY.

⁵⁸⁴ Letter from William Kruse to William Barrett about *The Fifth Year*, 1923, MssCol 2100, Box 32, Folder: Little Theater Movement, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, New York, NY. News films were handled “directly by the motion picture department of the Friends of Soviet Russia.”

⁵⁸⁴ “Lunacharsky on Popular Education,” *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (May 1923): 90.

protests had precedent with groups aiming to remove D.W. Griffith's "The Birth of a Nation" (1915) from theaters due to its racist content. They employed various strategies, such as holding lectures and demonstrations at theaters and distributing pamphlets, to condemn Nazi propaganda in New York and educate audiences about the fascist aims of these films. For instance, they organized actions against Paramount News' screening of *Italy's Side of the Question*, Hearst's *March of Time* and editorials, and United Artists' *Red Salute* as fascist.⁵⁸⁵ An article in *The Exhibitor* described FPL's protests in Wilmington, NC to the Superintendent of Public Safety to protect Soviet exhibitions in the US and publicly challenge "the arrest of exhibitors of the Soviet film, two of whom were fined \$100 and costs each." The article included Superintendent Black's response that, "the pair were warned that they could not exhibit pictures without a permit or license, which had been refused them and that when they persisted in showing the films he had nothing else to do but arrest them."⁵⁸⁶ Permits, reviews, and boards became embedded in film exhibition practices for local and state governments to regulate film showings in the US. Collectives transformed exhibition venues and cinemas into sites of protest and direct action. By physically occupying venues, film collectives applied labor strategies to halt the showings of certain films or fight against censorship.

Perhaps the most pronounced case of the League protesting cinemas and film exhibitions was in the summer of 1934 against New York showings of *S.A. Mann-Brand* (Storm Trooper Brand). Their goal was to ban the film from showing in New York, but also across the US. SA Mann was one of the first Nazi prop film to show in NY—second *Unsere Fahne Flatters Uns*

⁵⁸⁵ "Paramount News Attacked," *Motion Picture Herald* (Sept. 7, 1935): 28; "Call to Arms (Columbia)" Immediate Release from Educational Committee of the Film and Photo League with statement from David Platt calling for removal of film from New York theatres, MssCol 2100, Box 32, Folder: Little Theater Movement, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, New York, NY.

⁵⁸⁶ "Soviet Arrest Rapped," *The Exhibitor* (Jan 15, 1934): 27.

Voran at Yorkville Theatre about Hitler Youth.⁵⁸⁷ This 1933 German film premiered the same year Hitler and the Nazi Party assumed power in Germany. It was firmly a “Nazi film” centering anti-communism and heroizing Hitler as a savior to working-class and struggling Germans. FPL members described it as “a film saturated with venom against Communists, Jews and militant workers.”⁵⁸⁸ Directed by Ernst Gombrich and produced by the Nazi Party’s film department, *SA Mann* glorified the paramilitary SA (*Sturmabteilung*). A February 1934 edition of *The Jewish Daily Bulletin* reported, “According to persons who witnessed the film in Berlin it slanders Jews and depicts Nazis as “snow -white” angels. Heard in many places of the film is the Nazi cry “Juda Verrecke!” meaning perish Jewry.”⁵⁸⁹ *SA Mann* had showings in February and early March in Seattle, Portland, and later in Philadelphia.⁵⁹⁰ A review in *the Film Daily* recognized it as propaganda, but highlighted that “it is a well-made and dramatically interesting picture,” that was understandable to non-German-speaking audiences. As an anti-Communist film, the reviewer claimed “anti-semitic stuff is avoided.”⁵⁹¹ *The New York Times* published a similar review about *SA Mann* showing at Yorkville Theatre. With an overall positive review as technically “one of the best pictures made in Germany...many of the scenes are really thrilling,” the author emphasized that the film “has no antisemitic bias” and compares to Soviet pictures in depicting “enemies.”⁵⁹² The same author wrote in a later edition about an “Anti-Nazi Film”

⁵⁸⁷ “A Nazi Youth Film,” *New York Times* (July 7, 1934): 16; *Jewish Daily Bulletin* (June 7, 1934): 3; “To Handle Nazi Film,” *Motion Picture Herald* (March 3, 1934): 66. One protest even included a speaker Harry T. Smith.

⁵⁸⁸ “Nazi Film Agent Flees Coop; Demonstration Fizzles Out,” *Jewish Daily Bulletin* (Feb. 15, 1934): 1, 8.

⁵⁸⁹ “Pickets Protest Showing Here of Nazi Film: Object to Display of S.A. Mann Brand, Whitewash Picture” *Jewish Daily Bulletin* (Feb. 14, 1934): 2; “Oppose Nazi Film,” *The Film Daily* (Jan. 29, 1934): 2.

⁵⁹⁰ “Seattle Calls off Nazi Film Showing,” *Motion Picture Daily* (March 8, 1934): 5; *The Philadelphia Exhibitor* (July 1934): 15; “Portland’s Ban on Nazi Film Removed,” *Motion Picture Daily* (Feb. 7, 1934): 18.

⁵⁹¹ “SA MANN BRAND,” *The Film Daily* (May 29, 1934): 6.

⁵⁹² “An Anti-Nazi Film,” *New York Times* (May 28, 1934): 16; *New York Times* (Sept. 20, 1934): 20. The FPL created a film *Ernst Thaelmann: Fighter Against Fascism* that was “a series of newsreels, edited by A. Moscanne and Robert Del Duca; released by the Thaelmann Liberation Committee.” It was about Thaelmann who, a German Communist leader, put in prison by Hitler and also included exclusive footage of Nazi atrocities and camps. It raised the “necessity of mass protests all over the world for the purpose of putting pressure upon the German Government and forcing it to free Thaelmann and the other political prisoners.”

produced by Robert Del Duca of the FPL. Newsreels in this film attempted to solicit support for releasing Ernst Thaelmann, a German Communist and anti-fascist, imprisoned by Hitler. Some general reviews appear more ambiguous about the political message of *SA Mann*, whereas the FPL was clear about labeling it a Nazi film.

When *SA Mann* was set to premier in New York at a Bavarian theater, the FPL organized demonstrations against its showing in the US. Film journals, Jewish dailies, and *New York Times* included reports on FPL protests against Nazi films, as opposition evolved throughout 1934 into early 1935. Protests targeted the Bavarian Film Exchange at 489 Fifth Avenue and its leader Charles B. Herrlitz. FPL and Jewish presses announced that Herrlitz was “alleged to be a salaried agent of Hitlerites.”⁵⁹³ Since November 1st, 1933, Herrlitz was renting a mailbox from Max Teller, “an honest Jewish business man,” who rented offices, mailboxes, and other small areas out in New York City.⁵⁹⁴ As mounting protests grew, along with several organized mail deliveries denouncing the film, Teller “promptly ordered Herrlitz to vacate the premises.” Teller remarked that “Herrlitz was causing near riots” and *The Jewish Daily Bulletin* reported several times that many Americans and film collective members sent postcards, letters, and called to pressure Herrlitz to remove the “anti-Jewish, Nazi-produced movie,” *SA Mann*.⁵⁹⁵

On February 13th, 1934, FPL and allies began occupying the location. *The Jewish Daily Bulletin* reported that several men formed a demonstration starting at 12:30pm at the Bavarian Film Exchange. However, police and city officials shut down one protest one protest “after the participants had begun to unfurl several placards denouncing the picture when police demanded a permit to hold the demonstration and the permit was not forthcoming.” Sam Brody was a

⁵⁹³ “Nazi Film Agent Flees Coop,” *Jewish Daily Bulletin*, 1, 8.

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid.

leader of this protest and encouraged people to return later in the day once they had a formal permit.⁵⁹⁶ The following day, FPL organized a protest that did not occur due to shifting plans for FPL members, including Sam Brody, to attend a CPUSA march against Nazism. *The Jewish Daily Bulletin* wrote that FPL members were marching in “‘solidarity with Austrian workers,’ now engaged in a war against the Dollfuss government. The Communist sympathizers were to congregate on the corner of Fifth Avenue and 42nd street. The Austrian consulate is at 500 Fifth avenue, near the building which housed the Bavarian Film Exchange on the opposite side of the avenue.”⁵⁹⁷ While the protest shifted focus, the FPL still carved out space to complete their mission of organizing against *SA Mann*.

The League used lectures and demonstrations at theaters alongside pamphlets to condemn Nazi propaganda in New York. Pamphlets often had slogans such as “Drive SA MANN-Brand off the screen!” to urge Americans to remove its exhibitions completely and showed partnerships with other anti-Nazi organizations, such as the American Civil Liberties Union, Anti-Fascist League, and Anti-Nazi Federation of Greater New York.⁵⁹⁸ At the Communist-led march for Austrian workers, “Two or three members at headquarters of the Film League were busy making cardboard posters which they were to carry in the demonstration.” One of them read. “Stop Hitler Propaganda in America. Demand Deportation of S. A. Mann Brand, and anti-Jewish and anti-labor film.”⁵⁹⁹ Planned future efforts included FPL-made mimeographed “digests” that

⁵⁹⁶ “Pickets Protest Showing Here of Nazi Film: Object to Display of *S.A. Mann Brand*, Whitewash Picture,” *Jewish Daily Bulletin* (Feb. 14, 1934): 2.; Film and Photo League protest flyer for *SA Mann*, 1934, Box C192, Folder 2d.1: Clippings, programs, etc. regarding movies, Leo Hurwitz Collection, Moving Images Department, George Eastman Museum, Rochester, NY.

⁵⁹⁷ “Nazi Film Agent Flees Coop,” *Jewish Daily Bulletin*, 1, 8.

⁵⁹⁸ “Stop the Spread of Nazi Movies” Film and Photo League letter calling American workers and anti-fascists to boycott “Hitler movies” like *SA Mann*, 1934, Box C192, Folder 2d.1: Clippings, programs, etc. regarding movies, Leo Hurwitz Collection, Moving Images Department, George Eastman Museum, Rochester, NY; “Nazi Film Agent Flees Coop,” *Jewish Daily Bulletin*, 1, 8; “Protest Nazi Films,” *Motion Picture Herald* (June 16, 1934): 8; “Fight Use of Screen to Spread Hitlerism,” *Motion Picture Daily* vol. 35 no. 127 (June 1, 1934): 1, 16; “Oppose Nazi Films,” *The Film Daily* (Jan. 29, 1934): 2. FPL also “invited local film reviewers to a meeting at its headquarters.”

⁵⁹⁹ “Nazi Film Agent Flees Coop,” 1, 8.

would continue to educate the public about the harmful contents of the film and those behind creating and distributing it.⁶⁰⁰ Activist photographers documented the Film and Photo League's protest against *SA Mann*, capturing images of the audience, banners, and placards displaying anti-fascist messages. Photos could then reach wider audiences beyond the protest site itself. Using visual arts to expose the dangers of authoritarianism was a strategy to mobilize communities against encroaching threats. The league created documentary films that exposed fascism and provided an alternative option for community engagement to counter the propaganda disseminated by films like *SA Mann*.

However, these February protests had limited successes. At the same time the Bavarian Film Exchange and Herrlitz received protest messages from FPL and allies, "Also received were phone calls from several Yorkville movie houses relative to the showing of the film in this city..."⁶⁰¹ The FPL noted that *SA Mann* "has already been exhibited privately in this city of Nazi sympathizers, and that at present it is being shown in several cities throughout the country." Scheduled for even grander showings in New York, "The League asserts that the film is slated to open sometime this month at a prominent Broadway theatre."⁶⁰² FPL leader David Platt did, however, announce that consistent and large protests did prevent *SA Mann* screening at major theaters in New York, even though it did open on May 25th, 1934 at a Yorkville theater.⁶⁰³

As *SA Mann* had regular screenings at Yorkville in a German American neighborhood, FPL ramped up protests outside and inside the theater. In May 1934, Bernard Gordon participated in FPL protests. He recalled,

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁰¹ "Pickets Protest Showing Here of Nazi Film," 2.

⁶⁰² Ibid.

⁶⁰³ "Organized Opposition Barred German Film From Key Theatres," *Jewish Daily Bulletin* (May 31, 1934): 6; "SA Mann at Yorkville," *The Film Daily* (May 28, 1934): 2. The article stated the film did not show at major cinemas in New York "because of public protest organized by the New York Film and Photo League and the Anti-Nazi Federation of Greater New York,..."

On one occasion, though, we were warned to be ready for action. We were told to gather before a movie theater in the Yorkville area of Manhattan, which was the center of the German-American population...Of course, it was also known as a Nazi hangout. The movie theater was screening German—i.e., Nazi—films, and we were going to picket the place to protest. True, there was a chance that Nazi thugs would move in and try to beat us up, but that was a chance good progressives had to take. I was not looking forward to this encounter, but I didn't feel I could chicken out. By this time Hitler's brutal anti-Semitism was well understood, and I did feel I had to do my part.⁶⁰⁴

Even though Gordon was hesitant, this event was a turning point for him in embracing communist politics and film. That the FPL organized this protest against Nazism and in support of Jews and radicals stuck with Gordon as a positive experience and encouragement to actively challenge antisemitism and anticommunism. FPL continued to use these conflicts as educational opportunities. They organized discussions, lectures, and public forums alongside protests to engage local communities in the fight against fascism and antisemitism. On June 1st, FPL protested again at Yorkville and began protests at the FPL/WIR headquarters to bring workers, movie reviewers, and others together.⁶⁰⁵ The FPL Educational Committee of "Special News Bulletin" for June 2nd, 1934 provided a "History of SA Mann-Brand." From its June 1933 premier in Germany with "Adolf Hitler, Goebbels, Goering, and hundreds of uniformed storm troopers present..." to its showings in New York in recent days, the bulletin detailed FPL's responses to the film in trying to have it removed from the city and US.⁶⁰⁶ Because of the

⁶⁰⁴ Gordon, *The Gordon Files*, 4.

⁶⁰⁵ "Fight Showing of Mann Brand," *The Film Daily* (June 1, 1934): 8; "League Pickets House Showing Pro-Nazi Film: Hopes to Discourage Featuring of Fascist Pictures Here," *Jewish Daily Bulletin* (June 5, 1934): 6; Pamphlet describing the showing of *SA Mann* at Yorkville Theatre written in German, May 1934, Box C192, Folder 2d.1: Clippings, programs, etc. regarding movies, Leo Hurwitz Collection, Moving Images Department, George Eastman Museum, Rochester, NY.

⁶⁰⁶ Correspondence from Fox Film Corporation to Film and Photo League denying Nazi propaganda in Fox newsreel, June 6, 1934, Box. C192, Folder 2d.1: Clippings—programs, etc. regarding movies, Leo Hurwitz Collection, Moving Images Department, George Eastman Museum, Rochester, NY.; Harry Potamkin, "A Movie Call to Action!" in *The Compound Cinema*, 583; Harry Alan Potamkin, "Film and Photo Call to Action!" *Workers Theatre* (1931): 5-7. Potamkin claimed that the role of the FPL would be to "distribute suppressed films of importance, and defend artists abused by reactionary elements; re-discover and present neglected films of significance." The FPL thereafter appeared in each issue of *Workers Theatre* and this edition included a drawing of a man filming a strike.

growing Nazi threat in Europe and the US, the League and its allies increasingly found it necessary to “organize group action inside the theaters.”⁶⁰⁷ These actions challenged not only Nazi-produced films from Germany, but any sympathetic pictures from American companies, such as Paramount and Fox.

Because threats of censorship affected content and exhibition of films, film collectives relied on their independence as production, distribution, and exhibition networks to subvert government regulation. Their direct action at theaters also served to protest injustices faced by communists, workers, Jews, and other marginalized Americans, especially when films depicted them in degrading ways or appeared dangerous to their safety

Conclusion

Working-class people flowed between seeing Soviet films at the Acme to the union hall, while elites often entered radical working-class spaces to view new avant-garde works at New School and City College film-group exhibitions. Rather than just “visiting the theater,” groups like the Friends of Soviet Russia and Film and Photo League emphasized taking the experience of the theater to working people across the US. This transformed how audiences engaged with cinema and its educational, aesthetic, and political value. Watching a film in a union hall or farm schoolhouse created different notions of collective spectatorship. It also brought opportunities of access to cinemagoing for those in New York working-poor neighborhoods and rural outskirts or throughout the Midwest and South. Such exhibition practices “not only taught the public where to look and how to enjoy looking,” but they “simultaneously rekindled the pleasure of visiting the theater as an educational establishment.”⁶⁰⁸ As a collective experience, workers’ film

⁶⁰⁷ “Paramount News Attacked,” *Motion Picture Herald* (Sept. 7, 1935): 28.

⁶⁰⁸ Arthur Mellini, “The Education of Moviegoers into a Theater Public” (1910): 151 in *The Promise of Cinema, German Film Theory 1907-1933* ed. Anton Kaes, Nicholas Baer, and Michael Cowan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 151-153.

exhibitions provided opportunities for intellectual advancement and relationship building.

Film collectives leveraged the entertainment and didactic abilities of films to multiply their outreach impacts. *Workers Monthly* printed an article titled “Move the Masses with Movies” that read:

In New York as many people attend the movies EVERY DAY as visit the museums in a whole year. In New York more than 30,000 have a single working class feature film issued by our organization. In Chicago 7,000 a night! In Philadelphia 5,000 a night! And movies tell the workers’ side of the story with greatest effect and uniform quality in biggest town or smallest hamlet. Three Russian Story Features, Five Russian Topical Features, Several American Labor Newsreels. Run One! Run All!⁶⁰⁹

This advertisement for new Soviet films and WIR American newsreels showcases not only the strategic pairings of these films, but also the deep belief that film exhibitions were main cultural and political learning centers for workers and New Yorkers in general. FSR, FPL, and FSS understood the successes of films showing in theaters to strategically curate exhibitions in theaters, universities, and workers’ spaces that could increase film attendees.

Simultaneously, collectives expanded exhibitions in New York City that encouraged workers and elites to watch latest avant-garde and labor films in community. This aligned with general trends in the US, as film historian Greg Waller has noted in “Institutionalizing Educational Cinema in the United States during the Early 1920s.” Waller details the spread of film to other “institutional sites” after the nickelodeon and well into the 1920s. Training sessions, equipment resources, and screenings at various universities also increased during this period.⁶¹⁰ The New School for Social Research, City College of New York, and other institutions became key sites where higher-level intellectual activities combined with radical working-class ideas and

⁶⁰⁹ “Move the Masses with Movies,” *Workers Monthly* (June 1925): 391. The magazine regularly encouraged readers to write to them to acquire the films.

⁶¹⁰ Gregory A. Waller, “Institutionalizing Educational Cinema in the United States during the Early 1920s,” in *The Institutionalization of Educational Cinema: North America and Europe in the 1910s and 1920s*, ed. Marina Dahlquist and Joel Frykholm (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2020), 220-223.

labor mobilization. Unlike many screenings at universities or even cinemas, the educational and political motives at these exhibitions intended to leave the audience with deep emotional urges to participate in both labor organizing and creation or support of working-class film and art. Many of these exhibitions became series that importantly portrayed film histories as well as theoretical and technical arguments that at once narrated developments of cinema and provided teachings for audiences to learn to create or better understand film and its social functions.⁶¹¹

The idea that exhibitions were educational was not particular to the US or to the 1920s-1930s. German film theorist Arthur Mellini, for example, wrote “The Education of Moviegoers into a Theater Public” in 1910, in which he stated, “We have not only taught the public where to look and how to enjoy looking, we have simultaneously rekindled the pleasure of visiting the theater as an educational establishment.”⁶¹² Similar to those in the US like Jane Snow cited in the introduction of this chapter, Mellini celebrated the cinema as a space of learning rather than one of just pure entertainment. In the US, however, this emphasis on the cinema as a distinct “academy” for working people is what appears most strikingly. While many Progressives in the US understood exhibitions as opportunities to reform working classes or for them to reform themselves, more radical film collectives interpreted and leveraged this educational aspect as a political and aesthetic necessity to advance labor rights and revolutionize the unequal social structure of US society.

What this chapter has argued is that exhibitions were unique areas of intellectual, political, and aesthetic activities where social classes and film publics mixed not just to watch

⁶¹¹Most scholars have focused on exhibition entrepreneurs and independent distribution networks as economically inviable, hence their collapse by the early 1930s. Economic analysis, however, does not fully explain why these exhibitors so intensely championed art film when it was not profitable at most points. Nor does it apply to the radical cinema exhibitors here who often were poor themselves and made little to money doing this work. Investment in cultural-political values rather than economic growth drove exhibition practices amongst film collectives.

⁶¹² Arthur Mellini, “The Education of Moviegoers into a Theater Public,” 151.

films, but to leave the cinema prepared to act against injustices. Moreover, film collectives had flexible exhibition and distribution strategies to reach a variety of audiences from major city cinemas to colleges and universities to immigrant neighborhoods and rural farms or coal fields. The influence of Jewish, immigrant, and working-class identities extended to the distribution and exhibition practices of film collectives. Recognizing the limitations of mainstream distribution channels, these collectives often adopted alternative models, such as community screenings, to reach diverse audiences.⁶¹³ This decentralized approach aligned with the grassroots organizing traditions of working-class communities that carried into later decades.⁶¹⁴

As the next chapter will cover, film collectives combined physical spaces of watching films with print media to advertise shows, provide more context for films, and cultivate a reading audience informed about working-class and avant-garde cinema. Journals and magazines reported and advertised film exhibitions. From major papers like *The New York Times* to independent art cinema journals like *Experimental Cinema*, readers had access to intellectual history and contemporary information they could combine with their exhibition experiences.

⁶¹³ Thomas Elsaesser, *Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016). Elsaesser explores how film collectives have engaged with alternative modes of distribution and exhibition with community-based screenings.

⁶¹⁴ Toby Talbot, *The New Yorker Theater and Other Scenes from a Life at the Movies* (Columbia University Press, 2009), 1-7; Yingwen Huang, “Dan Talbot, a New Yorker and His Love for Independent Films and World Cinema,” *Columbia University Libraries* (2023), <https://blogs.cul.columbia.edu/rbml/2023/08/11/dan-talbot-a-new-yorker-and-his-love-for-independent-films-and-world-cinema/>. Dan Talbot, Toby’s father, opened the arthouse New Yorker Theater alongside New Yorker Films distribution in Manhattan’s Upper West Side in 1960. As a “revival house,” they screened films from the 1950s backwards, from Keaton and Chaplin screwball comedies to Bunel’s surrealist films and expressionist films like *The Golem*. Film showings included program notes to provide information about the films and their series. Talbot moved to teaching in NYC from Spanish courses at Columbia and NYU to teaching documentary film at the New School.

CHAPTER 5: SELF-STUDY AND GUIDED STUDY: INTELLECTUAL HISTORY OF FILM EDUCATION IN PRINT

In September 1927, Ralph Steiner placed a small ad in *The New Yorker*. It appeared in the back of the magazine at the bottom of the page to recruit “A young man or woman to become an assistant to a photographer doing experimental motion pictures.” Though it offered “practically no salary,” it did offer “exciting work for a person who can appreciate the possibilities of using a modern viewpoint in motion pictures.”⁶¹⁵ Jay Leyda, then seventeen in Dayton, Ohio, answered Ralph Steiner’s call, eager for an opportunity to study and practice experimental filmwork. Steiner’s ad precipitated Leyda’s move to New York and formal filmmaking training. Leyda’s willingness to travel for this “job” signifies the priorities of learning and artistic principles that often outweighed any promise of income.

However, Leyda already had some film studies underway from his subscription to *Close Up*, the avant-garde film journal based in Switzerland and Britain. He also subscribed to the Belgian art photography magazine *Variétés* and German art journal *Der Querschnitt*, which frequently included art photography and some film features.⁶¹⁶ Paid for with his after-school department store job, these journals provided global film information to Leyda. This information and opportunity to learn sparked his decision to leave Ohio for New York to work with Steiner on experimental films by 1929 at the age of nineteen. Leyda recalled that Dayton had few cinemas, and no “little cinemas” that showed premier avant-garde and foreign films. This is one reason journals and other print materials were especially important to learning film studies. Leyda recalled, “Films, for me, were just words and photographs, and I had to imagine what the

⁶¹⁵ “Advertisement,” *The New Yorker* (Sept. 10, 1927): 99.

⁶¹⁶ Jay Leyda, “Reminiscences of Jay Leyda,” transcription of interview by Barbara Hogenson, 1980, Individual Interviews Oral History Collection, Columbia Center for Oral History, Columbia University Libraries, New York, NY, 56.

films were.”⁶¹⁷ Articles, printed photographs, pamphlets, and other paper media—distributed from New York and other metropolises— created access points for young working-class people across the US to learn film studies and “see” films otherwise not available in cinemas near them.

This initial training from print to Steiner’s darkroom eventually led to Leyda’s training in the Film and Photo League, creating his first film *A Bronx Morning* in 1932, studying under Eisenstein at the Moscow State Film School, building the Film Library at MoMA throughout the thirties, and writing several major film texts, including *Kino: A History of Russian and Soviet Film* (1960). Leyda grew into a foremost American scholar of Russian and Soviet cinema, an educational feat that began with his reading of avant-garde art magazines, and ultimately, pursuing an ad he read in *The New Yorker*. As a teenager working at a department store in Dayton with little access to film borrowing or theaters, print publications opened Leyda’s possibilities to study and work in film. New York promised an exciting chance to be in the center of avant-garde art and print access points with major educational opportunities.

Journals and magazines allowed collectives to build knowledge and membership. Like historian Tobias Higbie’s analysis of “the social world of working-class reading and learning,” this chapter looks at film texts and their dissemination in the 1920s and 1930s.⁶¹⁸ It functions as an “alternative” intellectual history of cinema by foregrounding working-class, Jewish, and leftist writers in the US who contributed to building a robust landscape of film scholarship through periodicals and self-published texts. In *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* by Italian Renato Poggioli, he writes that periodicals are “one of the external signs most characteristically avant-garde: periodicals of a groups or movement; all of them were organs for a specific creative

⁶¹⁷ Ibid., 56-57.

⁶¹⁸ Higbie, *Labor’s Mind*, 9.

current and, especially, for a particular tendency of taste.”⁶¹⁹ Periodicals in radical film collectives served to communicate Marxist ideas that would inform readers about revolutionary cinema’s value to labor. They provided cutting-edge knowledge about techniques, theories, and histories while giving readers actionable steps or events to advance diverse workers’ rights.

Within this history, however, there is a key tension between top-down and lateral pedagogy. That is, writers and editors engineered what readers would learn about. However, the emphasis on working-class themes designed by working-class writers frequently prioritized engaged reading, collaborative publishing, and collective distribution chains. Working-class print culture surrounding film brought in more voices to discuss politics and art, yet it dealt with similar tensions on the left to administer learning materials versus true equal participation in learning and teaching. This chapter argues that self-edification drove film collectives’ print culture, but that a mix of self-determined selection and guided lessons characterized print’s educational strategies.

One critical component of film writing during the 1920s-1930s is that many writers began writing about other modern arts before converting to film writing or they taught themselves about film to become knowledgeable enough as a public writer. David Platt, member of the FPL known for several articles in leftist magazines and one editor of *Experimental Cinema*, has been described as “a self-educated film journalist.”⁶²⁰ He learned about film from watching films in New York and, like Leyda, learned from reading about film in modernist magazines. Many members who were involved in production or distribution also became film writers. Throughout the 1920s, Kruse penned several articles in *Soviet Russia Pictorial*, FSR’s

⁶¹⁹ Renato Poggioli, *Theory of the Avant-garde; Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), vii.

⁶²⁰ *Celluloid Power: Social Film Criticism from the Birth of a Nation to Judgment at Nuremberg*, ed. David Platt (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 1992), 3.

media outlet, about Soviet cinema and American developments in workers' film. Leo Hurwitz, David Platt, Ralph Steiner, Leo Seltzer, and several others who led filmmaking in FPL frequently contributed to *New Theatre*, *FilmFront*, *New Masses*, *Daily Worker*, *Experimental Cinema*, and occasionally other modern art or workers' journals. Though Bernard Gordon and Julian Zimet did not publish in newspapers or journals in the 1930s other than CCNY's student newspaper *The Campus*, they did collaborate with FSS members to create pamphlets, advertisements, and film programs they distributed in New York and on CCNY campus. Edward Schustack of FSS also wrote a pamphlet on American documentary cinema in 1938, which he discussed in trade journals like *American Cinematography*.⁶²¹

Film writers provided information about art and film to audiences, artists, other writers, exhibitors, distributors, and educators. Higbie notes how print provided an informal education for working people, and these publications became important to their social worlds by building trust with working-class publications and readership.⁶²² For film, publications were key during a period when little access to formal film courses existed. Literature scholar Laura Marcus claims that cinema writers became commentators to film, defining ways of seeing film as art and technology, thus providing philosophical and functional ways of experiencing film and developing language to talk about film. In *The Tenth Muse*, she posits, "Writers on the cinema in its first decades took on something of the role of the early 'film lecturer' or 'film explainer'..."⁶²³ Early cinema exhibitions usually featured lectures to accompany films while screenings into the 1920s and 1930s sometimes included film programs and discussions, more common with leftist and avant-garde cinema events. Education also came in the form of learning

⁶²¹ Edward Schustack, "Documentary Filming in America," *American Cinematographer* (March 1939): 130-131.

⁶²² Higbie, *Labor's Mind*, 22-38.

⁶²³ Marcus, *The Tenth Muse*, 15.

about latest exhibitions in the city from papers as well as individual art and films gaining notoriety around the US and across the Atlantic. For example, readers could learn about the latest film techniques as well as newest pictures coming to cinemas.

Workers' magazines and their distribution circuits experimented with scholarly training. Moreover, it is significant that communists led efforts to develop film knowledge and its circulation. Magazines and bookstores were areas where those excluded from museums or established institutions, and those who rejected capitalist institutions, could share information and build alternative venues of art education, politics, and aesthetics. Cartoonist Robert Minor drew frequently for *The Masses*, a US leftist journal that ran between 1911 and 1917 based in New York City. He labeled periodicals, "the poor man's art gallery."⁶²⁴ Deeply attuned to the history of classicism in exhibition and publishing practices, contributors and readers utilized print to textually and visually reach working-class people.⁶²⁵ Writers and editors made information accessible, while publishers and booksellers provided access points to obtain printed materials. Together, they formed cultural infrastructures essential to developing modernist and leftist culture in the early twentieth century. Writers, editors, publishers, and sellers promoted grassroots cultural-political education with self-study by providing curated information through film criticism, theoretical and technical works, and publishing-advertising-distribution chains.

American journals and magazines collaborated with European and Soviet collectives and individuals to share ideas across borders and mediums—transcending scales of local, regional, national, and global. As "the poor man's art gallery," the premise was that journals could allow anyone to create, view, or discuss art. Writing provided avenues for literate workers and other

⁶²⁴ Francis Booth, *Comrades in Art*, 24.

⁶²⁵ Sadakichi Hartman labeled museums "morgues" for controversial or experimental works. Sadakichi Hartmann, "The Esthetic Significance of the Motion Picture," *Camera Work* no. 38 (April 1912): 19-21.

American readers to study on their own time. Many also featured film stills or production photos for viewers to access original film images and gain some insight to film even if the readings were not always fully comprehensible. *Experimental Cinema* was one film journal amongst others such as *New Theatre/New Theatre and Film*, *FilmFront* and arts journals that became key learning sites for any “students of film.” As an overall ethic of publication and distribution, film collectives focused on reading to study film and social-political concepts with the drive to move beyond reading into action.

This chapter focuses on how collectives curated intellectual history of avant-garde film from working-class perspectives. It examines journals and their distribution as educational networks, viewing journals as curated resources comprising theory, techniques, images, reviews or criticism, news, reading/watch lists, and advertisements. Film collectives contributed to film theory and history with their writings and participated in intellectual culture of the left and communism, more specifically. Groups experimented with different outreach mechanisms whereby film writing provided guided study materials and the ability to learn about film at one’s own pace. Section one places workers’ film writing in a broader development of radical media culture. Developing communist and leftist film criticism is the subject of section two. Criticism and reviewing art and film provided insight to recently released works and developed language around what constituted “good” and “bad” works, particularly through a working-class, revolutionary lens. The following section expands to how techniques, theories, and translations frequently appeared in periodicals such as *New Theatre* and *FilmFront*, which provided Americans access to exclusive film materials. Collectives employed experimental self-study methods that included independent publishing and distribution practices, which rounds out the chapter. Journals and magazines became avenues to finding bookshops, readings, exhibitions,

international conferences, foreign writings, art materials, and other journals where engagers could learn more within, but also be directed to more learning spaces. Those involved in self-publishing and distribution often were excluded from other spaces or sought control over these processes to challenge capitalist-consumerist dominance.

Film collectives artfully designed print sources in opposition to Hollywood power in journals, movie trade presses, and mainstream news. They promoted self-study, but also guided study based on recommendations to readers.⁶²⁶ Working-class writers converted themselves into film historians, theorists, and technicians. In the 1920s-1930s, New York-published periodicals provided “students of the film” spaces to participate in a vibrant modernist milieu for a few cents to a dollar, while working-class film writers developed a parallel intellectual history of film.

Communist Print Media Landscapes

In America and Europe, revolutionary literature has accompanied radical labor upheavals, most notably during the 1871 Paris Commune, 1886 Chicago Haymarket rebellion, and 1905-1917 Bolshevik Revolutions. Eisenstein’s *October: Ten Days that Shook the World* (1928) features Bolsheviks using leaflets to gain support and communicate revolutionary ideas. About forty minutes into the film, a title card reads, “the Bolshevik leaflet...” followed by images of workers producing leaflets and carrying them out for distribution. The next shot shows workers reading the leaflets with a title card to finish the sentence, “...spoke our language” that references “Bread, Land, Peace, Brotherhood!” Filmic depictions print media in communist politics also appears in FPL newsreels like *Unemployment Special* (1931) with images of newspapers detailing police brutality at “Red” protests and labor advertisements for upcoming

⁶²⁶ Daniel Biltereyst and Lies Van De Vijver, “Introduction,” *Mapping Movie Magazines: Digitization, Periodicals, and Cinema History*, ed. Daniel Biltereyst and Lies Van De Vijver (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 4. They highlight “the movie magazine’s role as a cultural intermediary,” calling for more research about movie magazines’ facilitation of ideas throughout history.

marches. What these films highlight is print media's historical importance for communist workers' organizing across nations and time periods. Their didacticism manifested in their ability to "speak the language" of workers in the US.

As city demographics diversified, so did papers between 1880 and 1930. Though professionalization of news reporting and technological practices were widely adopted across the country, papers during this period underwent diversification with immigrant, women, and working-class papers. Papers reported on local news, and in Guarneri's account, this was especially important for papers to serve as "urban guides" that included shaping American behaviors and ways of participating in city life.⁶²⁷ Urban news organizations and papers multiplied, as consumers were more interested in "reading about their cities and their people" and "creating an identity for the city" that included content from sports, crimes, film reviews, advertisements, world and local events.⁶²⁸ Foreign-language and independent presses also boomed, coinciding with immigration waves in the 1870s through the 1920s. Several journals featuring German music, Italian opera, and Yiddish literature appeared in New York, as did labor newspapers printed in Russian, German, Yiddish, and various other languages.⁶²⁹ These specialized presses contributed to diverse workers engaging in labor conversations.

Workers' presses were one prominent area of specialized growing audiences and producers of media. Beginning in the 1910s, culminating in the 1920s-30s, New York had a robust culture of workers' and modernist bookshops and reading groups. Groups emphasized

⁶²⁷ Julia Guarneri, *Newsprint Metropolis: City Papers and the Making of Modern Americans* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 44; 83; 168-192; David Paul Nord, *Communities of Journalism: A History of American Newspapers and Their Readers* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 148. Progressive journalism also pushed exposes of corruption throughout the early twentieth century. New York City papers often reported on local muckraking, charity, and progressive reforms.

⁶²⁸ Guarneri, *Newsprint Metropolis*, 8; 138.

⁶²⁹ Guarneri, *Newsprint Metropolis*, 231. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 219; Linda J. Lumsden, *Black, White, and Red All Over: A Cultural History of the Radical Press in Its Heyday, 1900-1917* (Kent: Kent State University, 2014).

creating their own reading materials and learning spaces. As the Socialist and Workers' Party (later Communist Party) grew in the US in the early twentieth century, they developed party newspapers and magazines, while individual groups developed official print outlets. Friends of Soviet Russia's *Soviet Russia Pictorial* is one example. In October 1923, an article announced, "Workers Party Opens New Book Store in Heart of New York," where "thousands of new radical and Communist books, newspapers, pamphlets and magazines..." were now available for New Yorkers to purchase and read.⁶³⁰ Immigrant groups and Jews created radical publications aligned with leftist ideas and ethnic identities. Radical Yiddish papers *Forward* and *Forverts* frequently discussed communist and leftist principles.⁶³¹

Book Row in NYC peaked in the 1920s-1930s with nearly "18 miles of books" through blocks of Fourth Avenue between Union Square and Astor Place. Between the 1890s and 1960s, Book Row was central to literary life with over forty bookshops at its peak. It also became an international hub for writers, including André Breton, Jack Kerouac, and Robert Frost over the years.⁶³² Booksellers often mastered the art of self-study. Most had little formal education and opened bookstores for their love of books and providing spaces for artists. Frederick Lightfoot frequented Book Row in the 1930s. He recalled that booksellers were "people of remarkably strong individuality, probably mostly self-taught to a high degree of knowledge about many subjects as well as of the books they handled."⁶³³ Booksellers taught themselves about the artistic landscape of the time to recognize popular writers; however, they also learned those on the fringes. Booksellers curated their own collections within stores to present artistic arguments

⁶³⁰ "Workers Party Opens New Book Store in Heart of New York," *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (Oct. 20, 1923): 5.

⁶³¹ These magazines were part of a history of Jewish, specifically radical Yiddish, print culture as well as modernist little magazines.

⁶³² Marvin Mondlin and Roy Meador, *Book Row: An Anecdotal and Pictorial History of the Antiquarian Book Trade* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2019), 3-8.

⁶³³ Stephanie Geier, "4th Avenue: The History Of NYC's Lost 'Book Row,'" *Untapped Cities* (2021), <https://untappedcities.com/2015/08/26/4th-avenue-the-history-of-nycs-book-row/>.

about what styles, writers, and works they deemed important. In the mix of general avant-garde Book Row stores were the various workers' shops mentioned above. New York presented many opportunities for leftist print creators and distributors to mingle with avant-garde literature.

One major task of leftist and communist print media was to define "proletarian" or "revolutionary" writing. In the 1920s and 1930s, authors penned several arguments. Articles titled "What is a Proletarian Writer?" and similar variations peppered magazines at the same time articles about defining revolutionary cinema and art appeared.⁶³⁴ Defining proletarian and revolutionary art became important for labor movements to build a workers' culture as distinct from bourgeoisie, elite cultures. Joseph Freeman, who wrote in and edited several communist magazines, argued that proletarian art is that which "illuminates the whole of the contemporary world..."⁶³⁵ Such art needed to derive meaning from workers' experiences and attempt to show parts of daily life often overlooked or covered up by bourgeois powers, including poverty, hunger, racism, and other inequalities. Proletarian magazines, he and his staff added, should provide "uncompromising revolutionary interpretation[s] of the news."⁶³⁶ Openly propagandistic and didactic, this writing attempted to reach working-class audiences with similar experiences as well as Americans who might need information about working-class experiences. Workers' magazines expanded alongside workers' theater and film to reach working-class audiences, while workers' novels struggled to move beyond elite and middle-class audiences. There was a sense of trying to create "authentic" proletarian or workers' writing, education, and films. Proletarian culture reflected workers' points of view and experiences. It provided analyses of life, politics,

⁶³⁴ William Rollins, "What Is a Proletarian Writer?" *New Masses* (January 7, 1935): 22-23; "Lenin on Working Class Literature," trans. Anna Rochester, *New Masses* (October 1929): 7.

⁶³⁵ Joseph Freeman, "Introduction," *Proletarian Literature in the United States*, ed. Granville Hicks, et al. (New York: International Publishers, 1935), 18.

⁶³⁶ "An Editorial Statement," *The New Masses* vol. 9, no. 1 (Sept. 1933): 2.

economics, culture, and art from Marxist ideas and was rooted in workers' lived experiences.⁶³⁷

A core strategy was to produce writings that could meet these different levels of expectations. *The New Masses*, for example, mentioned that its weekly version starting in 1934 "will positively NOT be edited for a limited audience of intellectuals. It will reach out for the broadest possible circulation among all stratas of workers and professionals..." At 10 cents for weekly prices and \$3.50 for yearly, the magazine's editors attempted to multiple long-term subscribers with a goal of reaching 20,000 subscribers in three months before 1934.⁶³⁸ According to historian Harvey Klehr, *The New Masses* likely met this goal, as he reports the magazine's circulation reaching about 25,000 weekly in January 1935. This was more than *The New Republic* and *The Nation*, with greater newsstand sales than *The New Masses*' "liberal competitors."⁶³⁹ Meanwhile, *The Daily Worker*'s circulation was around 17,000 in the late 1920s and reached upwards of 35,000 by the late 1930s at its height.⁶⁴⁰ Film magazines did not reach quite as many readers, perhaps due to their specialized art focus and that *Daily Worker* and *The New Masses* featured film articles within. Magazines such as *Experimental Cinema* and others marketed themselves as supplemental revolutionary literature to encourage readers to engage with various arts. In 1933, similar to *The New Masses* weekly calling to gain more subscribers by 1934, *New Theatre* ran an ad attempting to gain 1,000 subscribers by January 1934 within two to three months.⁶⁴¹

By the late 1920s through the 1930s, the American leftist press was well-established,

⁶³⁷ Foley, "Defining Proletarian Literature," *Radical Representations*, 99-100.

⁶³⁸ "An Editorial Statement," *The New Masses* vol. 9, no. 1 (Sept. 1933): 2.

⁶³⁹ Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York, Basic Books, 1984), 350-351; Bernard Smith, *Forces in American Criticism: A Study in the History of American Literary Thought* (New York, Harper Brace, 1939), 369; Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1933), 100.

⁶⁴⁰ "Guide to the Daily Worker and Daily World Photographs Collection," New York University Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York, NY, https://findingaids.library.nyu.edu/tamwag/photos_223/

⁶⁴¹ "New Theatre Needs 1,000 Subscribers by January 1, 1934!" *New Theatre* (Sept./Oct. 1933): 1.

with centers in New York City. Growing a “workers’ press” was essential to the mission, as information sharing was a main method of organizing and of workers’ self-education. Leftists of various ethnic and racial identities developed daily papers, periodicals, and pamphlets for workers. Historian Frank Tobias Higbie underscores that “the wide array of cheap printed material . . . offered every type of reader something to think about and discuss.”⁶⁴² Publications like the Communist *Daily Worker* centered workers’ experiences, serving as a “study” space in which workers (or anyone else) learned about theory, history, art, demonstrations, and other pertinent activities for the working class. In 1934, *The Daily Worker* ran an article “Why a Workers’ Daily Press?” by C.A. Hathaway and Sam Don explaining the need for a regular news source from workers’ perspectives to worker audiences. They painted *The Daily Worker* as a “study” space where workers learned about theory, history, art, direct actions, and other pertinent activities. Hathaway and Don stated, “We provide the workers with information...To new readers of the *Daily Worker*, we ask you to study carefully this working class paper.”⁶⁴³ In the same area of the paper, one could find a stamp for a “traveling library affiliated schools for workers 302 E Thirty Fifth Street NYC.”⁶⁴⁴ Encouraging readers to study and participate, rather than just consume, became an important function of aligned periodicals that emerged into the 1930s.

Others similarly built publishing organizations, of not just journals but pamphlets and booklets, in the US to develop “education for the masses” to promote the “popularization of

⁶⁴² Tobias Higbie, “Unschooling but Not Uneducated: Print, Public Speaking, and the Networks of Informal Working-Class Education, 1900–1940,” in *Education and the Culture of Print in Modern America*, eds. Adam R. Nelson and John L. Rudolph (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press: 2010), 106, 120.

⁶⁴³ C. A. Hathaway and Sam Don, “Why a Workers’ Daily Press?” no. 2 *Daily Worker* pamphlet series (New York: Daily Worker with Workers Library Publishers, 1934), 9, Call Number: HX83 .H3 1934, Radicalism Collection, Stephen O. Murray and Keelung Hong Special Collections, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI.

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid.

education” and “democratization of literature” through mass-marketed print sources.⁶⁴⁵ Emanuel Haldeman-Julius’s Little Blue Books are one example where his company published major literary works in affordable forms, sold and for a nickel, marketed to workers. Haldeman-Julius was Jewish American and spent most of his life in Kansas within socialist circles, which inspired him to build his own publication house. Into early adulthood, Haldeman-Julius read anything he could reach, which often meant cheap socialist pamphlets. In 1913, he remarked, “Only four years ago, I was a factory hand — slaving away in a textile mill in Philadelphia. I came upon the philosophy of Socialism and it put a new spirit into me. It lifted me out of the depths and pointed the way to something higher.”⁶⁴⁶ Not only the materials inspired him, but also the ease of accessing socialist literature drove him to start his own publishing that culminated in the Little Blue Books series by 1923. Reading leftist pamphlets and periodicals led Haldeman-Julius to aspire a life beyond labor and for a world with stronger workers’ rights.

Literary historian Eric Schocket notes that “instrumental knowledge” and “self-reliant learning” were central to working-class readers of the Little Blue Books.⁶⁴⁷ These small books, in their conception and distribution, were designed to be educational, and after seeing success with his first twelve books, Haldeman-Julius deemed it “safe to experiment further.”⁶⁴⁸ Though based in Kansas, Haldeman-Julius made frequent trips to New York City throughout the 1920s until he had to limit his traveling during the Depression to support his business costs in lieu of

⁶⁴⁵ Eric Schocket, “Proletarian Paperbacks: The Little Blue Books and Working-Class Culture,” *College Literature* vol. 29, no. 4 (2002): 68, 72; Dale M. Herder, “Haldeman-Julius, the Little Blue Books, and the Theory of Popular Culture,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* vol. IV, no. 4 (March 1971): 881–92; Dale M. Herder, “American Values and Popular Culture in the Twenties: The Little Blue Books,” *Historical Papers* vol. 6, no. 1 (1971): 289.

⁶⁴⁶ E. Haldeman-Julius, “The Pessimism of Jack London (interviewed on May 28, 1913),” *The Western Comrade* (June 1913): 10, reprinted in E. Haldeman-Julius, *Jack London* (Girard: Haldeman-Julius Publishers, 1917).

⁶⁴⁷ Schocket, “Proletarian Paperbacks,” 71.

⁶⁴⁸ R. Alton Lee, *Publisher for the Masses, Emanuel Haldeman-Julius* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 105; Thomas Frank, *The People, No: A Brief History of Anti-Populism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2020).

revenue losses and inflation. He interacted with several New York artists and intellectuals during his trips. Haldeman-Julius referred to his initial project to create “The University in Print” for the working masses. He drew on a long leftist tradition of pamphleteering and printing, while helping pave new directions in publishing about avant-garde art and politics alongside *The Masses*, later *The New Masses*, *Daily Worker*, *Art Front*, *Partisan Review*, and other presses.⁶⁴⁹

Though leftist press had operated for decades, it began experimenting with more film discussion in the 1920s-30s. Starting in the 1920s and continuing through the 1930s, *The Daily Worker* frequently printed information about leftist films and filmmakers, Film and Photo League activities, and leftist film criticism. This coincided with periodicals such as the communist *Soviet Russia Pictorial*, *New Masses*, and other leftist art journals printing articles and ads about Soviet and workers’ films. Readers therefore found a wide range of interpretations of films, from earlier “news” to more specialized, technical film writing in the 1920s–1930s.⁶⁵⁰ While they did not usually have dedicated film sections, most editions at least mention communist films or review latest pictures for working-class audiences. Friends of Soviet Russia film descriptions and ads appeared alongside those for mass meetings in the early-to-mid 1920s in their *Soviet Russia* magazines and broader periodicals like *The Daily Worker* and *Workers’ Monthly*. *The Daily Worker* consistently advertised and reviewed film from 1924 through the 1930s. *Passaic Textile Strike* ads appeared regularly in 1926-1928 and then FPL shows peppered

⁶⁴⁹ John Reed Club published in *Partisan Review* in New York City, along with several other little magazines in cities across the country. Chicago, Grand Rapids, Detroit, LA, Philadelphia, Boston, Hartford, Moberly (Miss.) Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (New York: Verso Books, 1998), 1-64.

⁶⁵⁰ John Nerone and Kevin G. Barnhurst, *The Form of News: A History* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2002), 1-25; *American Movie Critics: An Anthology from the Silents Until Now* ed. Phillip Lopate (New York: Library of America, 2008); “Subscribe,” *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (May 1923): 1. *Soviet Russia Pictorial* encouraged regular subscriptions to read the paper, “for the *Soviet Russia Pictorial*, the only magazine in the United States which supplies authentic information to people interested in Russian affairs. A few hours a week or a day spent in this way will prove remunerative. Picture appeal makes subscriptions easy to get.”

the pages of *Daily Worker* throughout the 1930s. Film articles and ads frequently appeared alongside workers' education announcements and cultural projects around New York.⁶⁵¹ For example, *The Daily Worker* in 1926 printed a story titled: "Workers School Writing Class Too Popular, Need Two Sessions" about "worker writers" receiving training in news writing, journalism, and trade papers.⁶⁵² Two pages later is an article about *Passaic Textile Strike* screenings in Detroit, Michigan and its successful showings in Chicago and New York.⁶⁵³ Illustrations grew as important elements in the above journals to better reach non-English-speaking workers and artists, and to visually convey films to those who had not or could not see the full film. In *Soviet Russia Pictorial*, for example, Kruse included images of an animated film depicting the "adventures of Comrade Chervonetz" in 1924. The page article appears alongside four images from the film with explanatory caption.⁶⁵⁴ This example highlights how leftist contributors and editors thus developed pedagogical strategies to best reach audiences, paying attention to demographics and diversity of readership in the areas they published and distributed.⁶⁵⁵ These works also made space to bring in latest developments in film, including the emerging practice of animation and its uses for political ends. Such magazines served as educational scaffolds for workers as well as ways of learning history frequently marginalized. These magazines, as much as they were for contemporary artists and workers, were also ways of reframing radical history and film collectives' place within it.

⁶⁵¹ Harrison George, "The Working Class Press in Revolutionary History," *The Daily Worker* (Nov. 3, 1923): 3; "Workers Party Plans Educational Work in and Out of Party" 6 and Report of Educational Committee: "Methods of Instruction 1. Lectures 2. Reading 3. Debates 4. Examinations and Grading 5. Theses by students on subjects covered in the courses 6. Special features

⁶⁵² "Workers School Writing Class Too Popular, Need Two Sessions," *The Daily Worker* (Nov. 15, 1926): 3.

⁶⁵³ "Passaic Picture to Be Shown in Detroit on Wednesday, Dec. 1," *The Daily Worker* (Nov. 15, 1926): 5; "The Passaic Strike on Broadway!" *Daily Worker* (Nov. 29, 1926): 2.

⁶⁵⁴ William F. Kruse, "Russia Turns to Movies for Political Purposes," *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (Oct. 1924): 286.

⁶⁵⁵ Booth, *Comrades in Art*; Kristin Ross, *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* (New York: Verso, 2016), 67-90.

The Jewish Telegraphic Agency published *The Jewish Daily Bulletin* in New York, one of the few Jewish newspapers in English. This tiny paper reported on Film and Photo League activities throughout 1933-1935. FSR and FPL also utilized resources from WIR, such as access to International Publishers, and donations to produce pamphlets, journals, and film advertisements. FSS partnered with the CCNY Art Department to develop short books and film advertisements, such as their Documentary Program and *Technique of the Film*. Artists, writers, students, and others frequently engaged with materials across mediums in these spaces. Unlike exhibitions, schools, or films, one could take magazines or pamphlets with them to look at privately in their home or share readily and cheaply in public. Film, however, remained peripheral to major Communist and progressive organizations. Though works such as “Guides to Reading on Communism” and “The Workers Library Books and Pamphlets” had poetry, drama, novels, short stories, plays sections, they did not include film sections even well into the 1930s when film groups had been well-established and writing frequently in America. Though film writing and its distribution emerged within this vast culture of publishing, film was rarely squarely integrated into mass-produced Communist works. Hence, many turned to creating art film-specific journals in the US.

Lewis Jacobs discussed the origins of *Experimental Cinema*, which developed when Jacobs and other radicals wanted a more robust circulation of film writing in the US. Realizing that many American film magazines did not include much about workers’ film and that many workers’ magazines did not deal much with art film, Jacobs says, “...I thought it would be an interesting way to make contact, to start a magazine devoted to the film, because there were no magazines that I knew of outside of one magazine that had come from England called Close Up

that really dealt with the film in a serious way.”⁶⁵⁶ The development of leftist film magazines and print media emerged from an absence of art film journals in the US as well as limited film discussion in major communist and leftist media outlets.

Film writing and distribution therefore existed within a matrix of radical study cultures.⁶⁵⁷ Many labor print networks, such as Workers’ Bookshops or Workers’ Library Publishers, served as publishing and distributing organizations. Along with avant-garde bookstores, specifically Gotham Book Mart, they also sold tickets for film collectives’ exhibitions and helped publish their film writings. Experimental film writing advanced alongside infrastructures like the Workers’ Bookshop and Manhattan’s Book Row as well as radical literary and educational cultures in New York. Gotham Book Mart published *Experimental Cinema*’s last issue in 1934. Gotham was Book Row’s premier bookshop known for displaying artists such as Marcel Duchamp and carrying banned works such as D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*.⁶⁵⁸ Owner Francis Steloff relished in her bookstore’s development into a “literary salon” where artists and audiences gathered to exchange information and publications. *Experimental Cinema*’s connection to Gotham Book Mart represents how leftist avant-garde educational networks formed through print culture.

Left-Wing Film Criticism

In New York and across the US, film collectives published film criticism to educate readers about useful films but also important developments in US labor film activities. Film

⁶⁵⁶ Lewis Jacobs, 1974, Thomas Brandon Collection, 7. Jacobs stated, “There was nothing we could do with them really, except showing them among ourselves and—we got some small publicity in magazines like *The Movie Makers* or something, or *Amateur Movie-makers*.”

⁶⁵⁷ Informal and itinerant book trading was popularized in early modern Europe, as many booksellers sold on streets and at fairs or markets. Richard Abel, *Menus for Movieland: Newspapers and the Emergence of American Film Culture, 1913–1916* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

⁶⁵⁸ Thomas Brandon, “The Advance Guard of a New Motion Picture Art”: *Experimental Cinema, 1930-1933*,” *Journal of the University Film Association* vol. 30, no. 1 (1978): 27–35.

writing flourished alongside the growth of silent cinema and film culture in the United States between the 1910s and 1930s.⁶⁵⁹ Scholars, such as Sheldon Renan in 1967, note Louis Delluc as initiating serious art film criticism in 1919 in France, and many cite Vachel Lindsay's 1915 *The Art of the Motion Picture* as a formative text on film scholarship in the United States.⁶⁶⁰ Most accounts trace film writing's evolution through newspapers, mainstream magazines like *Time*, or trade journals. For instance, Eric Hoyt's *Ink-Stained Hollywood* opens with a chapter on film journalism's development in the mid-1910s. Hoyt attributes the success of trade papers to "the fall of MPPC [Motion Picture Patents Company], the rise of the feature film, and the threat of censorship policies," but also to the growth of "industrial journalism" in American publishing.⁶⁶¹ Hoyt provides important context for film journalism in the 1910s through *Moving Picture World*, *Motion Picture News*, *Motography*, and other trade and theatrical papers.⁶⁶² I build on Hoyt's analysis to show how film appeared "in ink" not just in trade presses but also in leftist, modernist journals.⁶⁶³

Though formal training for film critics did not become commonplace until the 1970s, the 1910s–1930s saw key developments in film writing without a specialized education.⁶⁶⁴ National

⁶⁵⁹ James Battaglia, "Everyone's a Critic: Film Criticism Through History and Into the Digital Age" (Senior Honors Thesis, The College of Brockport, 2010), 2; *American Film Criticism: From the Beginnings to Citizen Kane* ed. Stanley Kauffmann and Bruce Henstell (New York: Liveright, 1972).

⁶⁶⁰ Sheldon Renan, *An Introduction to the American Underground Film* (New York: Dutton, 1967), 57. Amos Vogel's *Film as a Subversive Art* published in 1974 is regarded as an innovative work of film criticism. Amos Vogel, *Film as a Subversive Art* (New York: The Film Desk, 2021 [1974]).

⁶⁶¹ Eric Hoyt, *Ink-Stained Hollywood*, 28.

⁶⁶² *Ibid.*, 25.

⁶⁶³ *Ibid.*, 13. Hoyt notes, "Motion pictures emerged, in ink, within the pages of American theatrical 'class' papers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. *The New York Clipper* (est. 1853) and the *New York Dramatic Mirror* (est. 1879), followed soon by *Billboard* (est. 1896) and *New York Morning Telegraph* (est. 1897), opened their pages to advertisements from motion picture services and reports on exhibitions." For more information on the development of art film writing in the US, see McKayla Sluga, "Art Film Writing in American Modernist Periodicals, 1910s–1930s." *The Journal of Modern Periodical Studies* vol. 14, no. 2 (2023): 159-184.

⁶⁶⁴ Patricia A. Denton, *An Analysis of The Educational and Professional Background Of Newspaper Film Critics And The Influence These Critics Wield On Readers*, MA Thesis (Michigan State University, 1976), 54, Call Number: 106 332 THS, Radicalism Collection, Stephen O. Murray and Keelung Hong Special Collections, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI. Denton draws only on the *New Republic*, *The Nation*, *Saturday Review*, and newspapers.

and local newspapers gradually developed sections for film reviews and exhibition advertisements.⁶⁶⁵ *The New Republic*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *New York Times*, and *New York Dramatic Mirror* included film writing as early as 1896 with film trade magazines emerging simultaneously. By 1904–1907, trade journals emerged to report on film much like news.⁶⁶⁶ The *New York Dramatic Mirror* established a film department, and several newspapers created film sections with hired writers. Richard Abel’s classic study *Menus for Movieland* argues that newspapers helped establish American film culture between 1913 and 1916.⁶⁶⁷ These developments were foundational to the growth of film criticism in later years. Early film writing appeared in progressive modernist journals, such as *The Seven Arts* and *The Soil* in 1916–1917. With ties to *The Masses* and various writers and artists involved in left-wing cultural politics as well as their focus on avant-garde arts, the brief, irregular film writing in their pages emerged within this progressive circle. Revolutionary John Reed published an article “The Unpopular War” about WWI in *The Seven Arts* and Theodore Dreiser, Jon Dos Passos, and others published early work in *The Seven Arts* before going on to write in or associate with *Experimental Cinema* in the 1930s. In the late 1920s, Leo Hurwitz and Harry Potamkin got their start in writing about film with features in *Creative Arts*, publishing film and book reviews.⁶⁶⁸ Many of these writers

⁶⁶⁵ Karen Leick, “Popular Modernism: Little Magazines and the American Daily Press,” *PMLA* vol. 123, no. 1 (2008): 125–39.

⁶⁶⁶ *American Film Criticism*, 5–6. Jerry Roberts, *The Complete History of American Film Criticism* (Santa Monica: Santa Monica Press, 2010).

⁶⁶⁷ Richard Abel, *Menus for Movieland*. Regular film critics in major newspapers included Carl Sandburg for *Chicago Daily News*, Alexander Bakshy for *The Nation*, and Robert E. Sherwood in *Time*. College student newspapers ran film reviews, while the *New York Times* began employing film writers by the 1920s.

⁶⁶⁸ Harry Alan Potamkin, “Review: *The Film Until Now* by Paul Rotha,” *Creative Arts* (May 1931): 382; Harry Alan Potamkin, “Film Review: *Lost Paradise, Tabu*,” *Creative Arts* (June 1931): 462–463; Harry Alan Potamkin, “A Georgian Primitive,” *Creative Arts* (Jan. 1932): 41–44; Leo Hurwitz, “Review: *Animosities* by Peggy Bacon,” *Creative Arts* (May 1932): 71; Harry Alan Potamkin, “Review: *A History of the Movies* by Benjamin B. Hampton,” *Creative Arts* (June 1932): 490; Harry Alan Potamkin, “Review: *Celluloid the Film Today* by Paul Rotha,” *Creative Arts* (Feb. 1932): 149–151; Leo Hurwitz, “Review: *A Study in Aesthetics* by Louis Arnaud Reid,” *Creative Arts* (March 1932): 499–501; Leo Hurwitz, “Mice and Things: Notes on Pierre Roy and Walt Disney,” *Creative Arts* (May 1931): 359–363; James Johnson Sweeney, “Leger and Cinesthetic,” *Creative Arts* (March 1932): 441–445; Harry Alan Potamkin, “Film Review: Pabst,” *Creative Arts* (July 1931): 74.

frequently discussed how reading Soviet and European criticism shaped their approaches.

In the 1920s, the Soviet Union became a hotbed of film theory and history. Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov authored texts that inspired Soviet, European, and American workers and elites. Eisenstein's concept of montage, explored in films like *Strike* (1925) and *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), revolutionized how scholars understood cinema's avant-garde techniques, while Vertov's documentary and newsreel approaches heavily influenced American film collectives' stylistic and political understandings of cinema. Revolutionary films and Soviet film writing became touchstones for American leftists to construct film writing in the US that could both counteract mainstream capitalist press and support experimental approaches to cinema. Other Soviet writers and filmmakers who made appearances in American journals included Lev Kuleshov, Alexander Dovzhenko, and Vsevolod Pudovkin. Lesser-known women writers included Esfir Shub and Elizaveta Svilova who importantly shaped developing documentary and revolutionary film theory alongside more recognizable Soviet men. Even if their works did not appear in magazines nor explicitly mentioned in the US, more recent histories of Soviet film reveal their works and ideas importantly flowed through Soviet revolutionary cinema and writings.⁶⁶⁹ US film collective members like William Kruse and Harry Potamkin frequently explored the interplay between reality and representation, documentary styles, and montage techniques that Soviet writers pioneered. American writers regularly referenced Soviet filmmakers and theorists in American magazines.

European ideas of cinema also importantly made their ways to American readers, including French, Italian, and British writings. French avant-garde film critics, such as Blaise

⁶⁶⁹ Anton Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). Kaes has recently expanded on this approach to argue that Weimar Cinema after WWI processed the traumas of war with expressionistic styles and horror films, while also shaping Germans' collective understanding of this postwar period.

Cendars and Jules Romains inspired Potamkin's study of art and criticism. Harry Potamkin deeply engaged with French film and writing when he visited Paris in 1926 with his wife Elizabeth Kleinman.⁶⁷⁰ Besides the Soviet Union, however, Germany became a locus of revolutionary and avant-garde cinema writing. Rudolf Arnheim and Béla Balázs in the 1930s examined film as an art, while other writers began developing auteur theories and canons of cinema directors, later championed by André Bazin and François Truffaut in the post-WWII period. Expressionism and realism also sparked discussions about collective understandings of wars, political crises, and social-cultural changes. Writers debated using realism versus abstraction or genres like horror to process national traumas, such as Germany's and Europe's collective reckoning with WWI and mass violence. Robert Weine and Ernst Angel, for example, developed definitions of "Expressionist" cinema while figures like Siegfried Kracauer and Ernst Toller wrote about cinema's social-political capacities, particularly paths to crafting German revolutionary films. German translations appeared in American journals *New Theatre* and *Experimental Cinema*, while *The New Masses* and *The Daily Worker* regularly referenced German and Soviet cinema and labor developments.

In the US, leftist film criticism increasingly probed how cinema could shape ideologies and either reinforce or challenge existing power structures. Analyzing film through the lens of class struggle, leftist and communist film critics sought to expose American injustices and spark working-class action to ameliorate them. William Kruse, Harry Potamkin, Leo Hurwitz, Leo

⁶⁷⁰ Richard Brody, "The Prescient, Essential Film Criticism of Harry Alan Potamkin," *The New Yorker* (Feb. 8, 2018), <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/prescient-essential-film-criticism-harry-alan-potamkin>; Louis Menand, *The Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War* (New York: Macmillan Publishers, 2021), 123-125. Clement Greenberg, one of the most famous modern art critics, did not have formal training in art or criticism beyond a few drawing classes. Lee Krasner introduced him to Hans Hoffman and his lectures as well as others in the New York art scene. Even Greenberg learned by being out in the New York scene rather than a formal training. Harry Potamkin's funeral was held at the Workers' Center in New York City. "Harry Alan Potamkin," *Jewish Daily Bulletin* (July 21, 1933): 3.

Seltzer, Sam Brody, Bernard Gordon, and Julien Zimet developed leftist film criticism that provided novel interpretations of avant-garde film and labor organizing. After WWI and the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, American labor organizations turned to reporting on the Soviet Union's development, which became integral to American film writing in the 1920s.

When FSR emerged in 1920 as a relief organization to aid farmers, workers, orphans, and families during the famine, members published articles in *Revolutionary Age*, *Soviet Russia Pictorial*, and *The Worker*. Reports on Soviet film as well as updates on FSR creating films in support of the Soviet Union peppered their pages throughout the first half of the 1920s. In 1920-1922, *Soviet Russia* preceded *Soviet Russia Pictorial* as the main outlet for Friends of Soviet Russia. Though there are no articles directly about cinema, mentions of films appear over a dozen times. Several pieces deal with the cultural life of Soviet Russia after the revolution, including rebuilding farming and factory work. Earlier articles in 1920 and 1921 reported on the use of cinema in the Red Army, cinema agit-trains, "extra-scholastic instruction," and as part of the broader movement to revolutionize Soviet art.⁶⁷¹ One June 1922 article about the US Agricultural Relief Unit states that FSR filmmakers created films "showing internal operation of engines and the construction and operation of farm tractors and agricultural machinery in the United States." It continues to say, "The several thousand feet of educational moving picture films are taken to assist in showing Russian farmers how the American farmer farms."⁶⁷² The text communicates the educational value of film for US workers to model technology for Soviets to take visual information from one country to another.

⁶⁷¹ "Cultural Work in the Ranks of the Red Army," *Soviet Russia* (July 3, 1920): 651-652; A. Lunacharsky, "The Soviet Power and the Preservation of Art," *Soviet Russia* (Aug. 28, 1920): 201-203; "Official Communications of the Soviet Government: Extra-Scholastic Instruction," *Soviet Russia* (Aug. 28, 1920): 222-223; "Propaganda Steamers and Trains," *Soviet Russia* (April 9, 1921): 365-366.

⁶⁷² H.M. Ware, "Our Agricultural Relief Unit," *Soviet Russia* (June 1, 1922): 293-294.

William Kruse's career and others provide context for how communist film writing evolved to be able to create specific radical, experimental film journals in the US throughout the 1930s. William Kruse mainly wrote feature pieces and updates on FSR film activities in *Soviet Russia Pictorial*. While many of Kruse's articles from 1923-1924 in *Soviet Russia Pictorial* are unreadable due to microfilm scanning, identifying the titles and dates of these articles provides a window into the development of communist film criticism. Kruse penned several articles titled: "Russian Invasion Reaches the Movies," "Soviet Movies," "Russia's Counter Revolution Answered in Film," "Kidding the Yankees in Russian Movies," and "Russia Turns to Movies for Political Purposes." He also described several journeys to the Soviet Union to capture photographs and his support of revolutionary films. One 1923 article described Kruse's travels and noted, "A large batch of high-class educational films sent abroad by the "International Workers Aid" last Summer at the time of the writer's movie-camera visit, undoubtedly helped to bring home to Russian film men the tremendous educational possibilities of this phase of their industry."⁶⁷³ This passage indicates that Kruse and other FSR members exchanged not only films but also ideas about films. Kruse's trips abroad likely yielded inside information to Soviet films that he included in his articles. Kruse's *Soviet Russia Pictorial* writings comprised several stories about Soviet cinema. Main films mentioned are *Polikushka*, *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks*, *Comrade Chervonetz*, and *His Warning*. The magazine also provided images of Moscow film studies and of Soviets making films.⁶⁷⁴ Such information

⁶⁷³ Kruse, "Russian Invasion Reaches the Movies," 70.

⁶⁷⁴ William F. Kruse, "Russia Turns to Movies for Political Purposes," *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (Oct. 1924): 286; William F. Kruse, "Kidding the Yankees in Russia's Movies," *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (Sept. 1924): 262; William F. Kruse, "Russia Counter Revolution Answered in Film," *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (July 1924): 196; William F. Kruse, "Soviet Movies," *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (May 1924): 133-134; William F. Kruse, "Russian Invasion Reaches the Movies," *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (April 1923): 70; William Kruse, "International Workers Relief in Germany," *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (Jan. 1924): 5; William Kruse, "Traveling in Russia," *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (Jan. 1924): 22; "The Fifth Year Had 102 Showings Within a Period of 3 ½ Months," *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (Feb. 1934): 69-70; "Soviet Motion Pictures," *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (Sept. 1924): 263; Wm. F. Kruse, "Red Stars," *The Workers'*

offered unique insights to Soviet and revolutionary cinema that helped establish leftist film criticism in the US.

FSR's film writings also reveal an alternative intellectual history of film criticism based in the US compared to many accounts that highlight European art cinema journals. *G* was a German avant-garde journal of art, architecture, design, and film edited by Hans Richter in 1923–1926.⁶⁷⁵ *Close Up* was a journal formed in 1927 based in Switzerland and Britain that ran through 1933 led by Dorothy Richardson, Bryher, and MacPherson. It was in a lineage of European journals such as the French *Le Film* from 1914, but *Close Up* rejected these earlier magazines for their inclusion of Hollywood and lack of avant-garde cinema content. In an October 1927 edition, editors claimed *Close Up* to be “the first to approach films from the angles of art, experiment, and possibility.”⁶⁷⁶ *Close Up*'s editors also rejected newspapers and multi-purpose journals to argue for specialized ones dedicated to film art.⁶⁷⁷ The journal also promoted amateur production and exhibition as part of “radical film culture” that distanced itself from commercial professional film industries. *Close Up* also challenged censorship and advocated for racial and sexual modernist films, as shown with their POOL and Borderline works. Despite their claims to discuss “film for film's sake,” *Close Up* coordinated with workers' film groups and various film societies engaged in radical politics. Eisenstein and Harry Potamkin, devout Marxists, were frequent contributors.⁶⁷⁸ A journal like *Close Up* displays the intersections of film

Monthly (Jan. 1926): 120-123.

⁶⁷⁵ *G: Material zur elementaren Gestaltung (G: Materials for Elemental Form Creation)* ran five-six issues that circulated around Europe and New York. *Close Up*, based in Switzerland, was headed by the Pool Group. *Close Up, 1927–1933: Cinema and Modernism* ed. James Donald, Anne Friedberg, and Laura Marcus (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); *G: An Avant-Garde Journal of Art, Architecture, Design, and Film, 1923-1926*, ed. Detlef Mertins and Michael W. Jennings (Santa Monica: Getty Publications, 2010).

⁶⁷⁶ K. Macpherson, “As Is,” *Close Up* (Oct. 1927): 6-7.

⁶⁷⁷ *Close Up, 1927–1933: Cinema and Modernism*, 15-22; Ryall, *Britain and the American Cinema*, 15-18. Foltz argues that cinema reshaped writing practices to experiment with cinematic techniques in writing, using the “close-up” to zoom in on certain characters or ideas, or expressed their writing as “literary montage.” Jonathan Foltz, *The Novel After Film: Modernism and the Decline of Autonomy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 164.

⁶⁷⁸ *Close Up, 1927–1933: Cinema and Modernism*, 270-1.

journals, film historical scholarship, theory, newspapers, and novels that became central to art cinema during the interwar period. The journal connected international avant-garde movements across styles and became a space of constructing definitions and canons of art cinema.

Close Up occasionally ran articles with American authors and films, as they had correspondents located in New York City, including Symon Gould of the Film Arts Guild and Harry Potamkin.⁶⁷⁹ Potamkin was a US correspondent based in New York for *Close Up* in the early 1930s at the same time he became a regular film writer in *Hound & Horn* while contributing to *The New Masses*, *Daily Worker*, John Reed Club's *Partisan Review*, and other magazines. He also served as the New York editor for *Experimental Cinema* until his death in 1933. *Close Up* and *Experimental Cinema* frequently featured ads for one another, which indicates attempts to build a shared readership across the US and Europe.⁶⁸⁰ International models of avant-garde film journals and the steady evolution of American film writing thus created cultural infrastructure for the advent of *Experimental Cinema* by 1930. When Potamkin suddenly died from health complications in 1933, ending his illustrious career, one of Potamkin's many obituaries appeared in *New Theatre* in October 1933. Before it was *New Theater* in 1934, it was *Workers Theater*, in which Potamkin served on the editorial board and continued writing in the journal until his death. The editorial board wrote, "He was a brilliant film critic, unequalled in

⁶⁷⁹ Back cover, *Close Up* vol. 4, no. 1 (January 1929): 94; Louis Kane, "Little Magazines, Postwar Internationalism, and the Construction of World Cinema," in "International Cinema in the Space Between: The Long Decade of the 1930s," ed. Sarah E. Cornish and Alexis E. Pogorelskin, special issue, *The Space Between: Literature and Culture 1914–1945* vol. 16 (2020), https://scalar.usc.edu/works/the-space-between-literature-and-culture-1914-1945/vol16_2020_kane; Symon Gould letter to William Barrett and the National Board of Review printed on *Close Up* letterhead noting Gould's role as a correspondent, MssCol 2100, Box 3, Folder: Film and Photo League, MssCol 2100, Box 32, Folder: Little Theater Movement, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, New York, NY.

⁶⁸⁰ Both also advertised *The New Masses* and similar periodicals that featured art film. Thomas Brandon, "'The Advance Guard of a New Motion Picture Art': Experimental Cinema, 1930–1933," *Journal of the University Film Association* vol. 30, no. 1 (1978): 27–35; Harry Potamkin, "Film Novelties, Etc.," *Close Up* vol. VII, no. 4 (Oct. 1930): 318–319; Harry Alan Potamkin and Workers' Film and Photo League, "Film and Photo Call to Action!" *Workers' Theatre* (July 1931): 5–7.

America and with few peers anywhere. He left behind him a body of Marxist film criticism of great value for understanding the development of the film in America and in the Soviet Union....”⁶⁸¹ Potamkin as a foremost American film critic was important for the development of international writing and instrumental for the global culture of film magazines and criticism.

The Film and Photo League partnered with International Publishers to publish Harry Alan Potamkin’s *Eyes of the Movie* in 1933 posthumously.⁶⁸² An article in Chicago’s *Left Front* reviewed Potamkin’s work as “the finest pamphlet ever written on the political and social significance of the cinema.”⁶⁸³ In response to the contentious climate of the 1930s, Harry Potamkin called for increased action in 1933, exclaiming, “The Film and Photo Leagues, the John Reed Clubs, and other workers’ cultural organizations through revolutionary film criticism and through their own revolutionary films must instruct this film audience in the detection of treacherous reaction of the bourgeois film. We must build—On the Left—the Movie!”⁶⁸⁴ Not only did filmmakers need to document the masses, but they also needed to teach the masses who they argued were being manipulated by bourgeois media. The John Reed Club of New York’s *Partisan Review* in 1934 included in its second volume Leo Hurwitz’s review of Harry Alan Potamkin’s *Eyes of the Movie*. Hurwitz labeled his friend’s short book “the most important piece of film criticism published in America.”⁶⁸⁵ Hurwitz and Potamkin often had pieces appear in similar editions of magazines in the late 1920s-early 1930s. In *Creative Arts* in 1930-1932, Hurwitz and Potamkin published several book reviews: Hurwitz reviewed *A Study in Aesthetics* and Potamkin of *The Film Until Now* and *A History of the Movies*. Hurwitz and Potamkin

⁶⁸¹ “Harry Alan Potamkin,” *New Theatre* (Sept.-Oct. 1933): 3, 9. One phrase used to describe Potamkin’s work is “a masterpiece of film criticism.”

⁶⁸² “Movie Pamphlet Published,” *Film Daily* (Feb. 19, 1934): 4.

⁶⁸³ W. W. H., “Review,” *Left Front* (May-June 1934): 15.

⁶⁸⁴ Harry Alan Potamkin, “Eyes of the Movie,” 1934, in *The Compound Cinema: The Film Writings of Harry Alan Potamkin* ed. Lewis Jacobs (New York: Teachers College Press, 1977): 243-269.

⁶⁸⁵ Leo Hurwitz, “Review: *Eyes of the Movie*,” *Partisan Review* vol. 1, no. 1 (Feb-March 1934): 59-60.

frequently aligned on their criticisms of film texts, as they were both critical of Rotha's works, noting that as comprehensive histories of film that they fall short without deep analysis of workers' films or avant-garde works. Potamkin also reviewed movies and appeared in similar issues as Ralph Steiner, Paul Strand, and articles about Leger, Man Ray, and Eisenstein.⁶⁸⁶ Potamkin was one figure in a growing culture of leftist film criticism.

Once *Experimental Cinema* began in 1930, contributors helped fashion a repertoire of Marxist film criticism in the US. *Experimental Cinema* led with an educational mission since it intended to serve as the premier source of information on art cinema in the US. Its second issue stated in 1930 that one of its goals was to "introduce to film students and laymen the films, criticism, theories, stills, etc." of avant-garde and leftist creators.⁶⁸⁷ Sergei Eisenstein, Man Ray, Robert Flaherty, F. W. Murnau, Alexander Bakshy, Béla Balázs, László Moholy-Nagy, and others appear inside the front cover as examples of the authors readers could find in *Experimental Cinema*. Self-proclaimed by editors Lewis Jacobs and David Platt as the "only magazine in America devoted to the principles of the art of the motion picture," it was the first journal in America focused solely on art cinema. Tom Brandon's *Film Forum* in 1933 and a few other pockets of film journals existed, but very briefly.

An experiment with avant-garde film discussion in the US, it ran irregularly for five issues between 1930-1934. The journal's pedagogical emphasis functioned as political recruitment but also aesthetic, theoretical, and historical education. Moving from publication in Philadelphia to Hollywood, the editorial board settled mainly in New York by 1931 as the

⁶⁸⁶ Potamkin, "Review: *The Film Until Now* by Paul Rotha," 382; Potamkin, "Review: *A History of the Movies* by Benjamin B. Hampton," 490; Potamkin, "Review: *Celluloid the Film Today* by Paul Rotha," 149-151; Hurwitz, "Review: *A Study in Aesthetics* by Louis Arnaud Reid," 499-501; Hurwitz, "Mice and Things: Notes on Pierre Roy and Walt Disney," 359-363.

⁶⁸⁷ *Experimental Cinema* vol. 1, no. 2 (1930): 2.

official organ for the New York Film and Photo League. *Experimental Cinema* and similar emerging film magazines collaborated to build an intellectual history of film with short-form analysis more accessible than longer books. Magazines and distributors made film stills, theories, histories, and techniques available to publics for study.⁶⁸⁸ Based in New York City, the editors stated the motivations for their magazine thusly:

Experimental Cinema covers all the basic forms and activities of the cinema, considering film-art as one of the most powerful ideological weapons in the struggle for the emancipation of the working classes and oppressed nationalities . . . *Experimental Cinema* will endeavor to make possible in the United States that production of artistic films that will reveal the American scene as it is, without disguising, as the case may be, its brutalities, inequalities and sharp class division.⁶⁸⁹

Experimental Cinema helped craft a definition of art cinema that combined working-class revolutionary principles with avant-garde aesthetic forms and styles. Art film writing produced through this lens viewed politics and aesthetics as inextricably linked to analyze (and centralize) films' political arguments. Moreover, by 1930, writers in *Experimental Cinema* dealt more with modifying art cinema's definition into one that emphasized experimental forms and revolutionary politics.

Worries about Americans' receptivity to art cinema bled through *Experimental Cinema's* pages. Europeans, even those of the friendly journal *Close Up*, were skeptical that art film and writing could succeed in America. In a July 1930 announcement for the start of *Experimental Cinema*, Charles Stenhouse wrote,

Will it be necessary for *Close Up* to change its descriptive title to "The first Magazine Devoted to Films as an art," for we have before us the first number of a new American monthly *Experimental Cinema*...which describes itself as the only magazine in the United States devoted to the principles of the art of the motion picture... Best wishes for

⁶⁸⁸ Publication began in Philadelphia, moved to New York City in 1931, and expanded editorial offices to Hollywood. Barnaby Haran, "Machine, Montage, and Myth: Experimental Cinema and the Politics of American Modernism During the Great Depression," *Textual Practice* vol. 25, no. 3 (2011): 563–84.

⁶⁸⁹ David Platt, Lewis Jacobs, Seymour Stern, Alexander Brailovsky, Bernet G. Braver-Mann, "Editorial Statement," *Experimental Cinema* vol. 1, no. 4 (1932): 3.

the future of *Experimental Cinema*, which is attempting to establish the Cinema as an art in a country which recognizes it almost solely as an industry.⁶⁹⁰

Stenhouse here whimsically addresses the belief that art cinema in the United States and its appreciation lagged behind that of Europe and the Soviet Union. While earlier film writers shared this concern, the Hollywood industry had yet to dominate the film market and magazines in the mid-1910s as it had by the mid-1920s. For US cineastes, *Experimental Cinema* was necessary to encourage discussion and production of art cinema to challenge the capitalist Hollywood behemoth.

Theodore Dreiser appeared in *Experimental Cinema* in the early 1930s. One of Dreiser's statements, printed early in the fourth issue, lauded the editors' mission to advance labor movements with films.⁶⁹¹ All sought answers to the question "What makes the film a fine art?" in Soviet and European films, turned off by Hollywood's dominance in America.⁶⁹² Amkino, a Soviet-American film distribution company, provided Soviet film stills in *Experimental Cinema*'s 1932 issues and after. Soviet films *Battleship Potemkin*, *Ten Days That Shook the World*, *Turksib*, *¡Que Viva México!* and *Mother* all received celebratory analysis as examples of artistic and political genius. Juxtaposing workers' art cinema against Hollywood productions became key to defining art cinema for *Experimental Cinema*. Several articles directly chided Hollywood, such as Hollywood editor Seymour Stern's "Hollywood and Montage: The Basic Fallacies of American Film Techniques" and J. M. Valdés -Rodriguez's "Hollywood: Sales Agent of American Imperialism."⁶⁹³ Stern, Valdés-Rodriguez, and others emphasized

⁶⁹⁰ Charles E. Stenhouse, "Book Reviews, From America," *Close Up* vol. VI, no. 1 (July 1930): 69–70.

⁶⁹¹ "Editorial Statement," *Experimental Cinema* vol. 1, no. 4 (1932): 3; Paul Strand, "Photography," *The Seven Arts* vol. 2, no. 4 (August 1917): 524–26.

⁶⁹² *Experimental Cinema* vol. 1, no. 5 (1934): 65.

⁶⁹³ Seymour Stern, "Hollywood and Montage: The Basic Fallacies of American Film Techniques," *Experimental Cinema* 1, no. 4 (1932): 47–54; J. M. Valdés-Rodriguez's "Hollywood: Sales Agent of American Imperialism," *Experimental Cinema* vol. 1, no. 4 (1932): 18–21.

Hollywood's "bourgeois" methods that were detached from social issues and falsified working-class experiences; creators—even King Vidor and Josef von Sternberg—chose "fallacious" subjects, which "corrupt[ed] notion[s] of the film-technique" and hindered artistic novelty.⁶⁹⁴ Hollywood film, in this sense, was irredeemable because of its capitalist, profit-seeking nature. *Experimental Cinema's* authors attempted to build a philosophy and practice of filmmaking that rejected capitalist consumerism in favor of advancing political revolution. Leftist film criticism, therefore, often became defined as an antithesis to Hollywood and trade press media.

Contributors and editors understood *Experimental Cinema* as a necessary organ for progressing the labor movement. *Experimental Cinema* developed within a culture of arts magazines and workers' presses that historically combined strategies and ideologies across dime novels, little magazines, and workers' pamphlets. In the 1910s through the 1930s, leftists increasingly developed little magazines about art and politics.⁶⁹⁵ Though it was the only film-specific title, *Experimental Cinema* was not the only US journal that covered working-class art cinema in the early 1930s. *Workers' Theatre* began in 1931, was renamed *New Theatre* in 1933 and then *New Theatre and Film* in 1934–1937 before becoming *New Theatre News* and ceasing publication by the end of the decade. *New Theatre* included a special film section in each issue and advertised film on the front cover. Editor Herbert Kline recalled the motivations and struggles of the journal:

We had strong "convictions" and edited *New Theatre* with "Crusader's zeal." Leading American and European writers contributed even though our magazine could not afford to pay them. Staff work was done gratis by talented, part-time volunteers... Somehow we managed to get by on subsistence wages of twenty dollars a week from magazine sales at

⁶⁹⁴ Stern, "Hollywood," 47–54, 49. Montage theory emphasizes that a "false" subject corrupts technique, form, and argument. See Bernet G. Braver-Mann, "Josef von Sternberg," *Experimental Cinema* vol. 1, no. 5 (1934): 17–23, and "Vidor and Evasion," *Experimental Cinema* vol. 1, no. 3 (1931): 26–29.

⁶⁹⁵ *The Masses*, later *The New Masses*, *Daily Worker*, *Art Front*, and *Partisan Review* are examples. See Denning, *The Cultural Front* and Denning, *Mechanic Accents*; R. Alton Lee, *Publisher for the Masses, Emanuel Haldeman-Julius* (Lincoln: Bison Books, 2018); Eric Schocket, "Proletarian Paperbacks: The Little Blue Books and Working-Class Culture," *College Literature* vol. 29, no. 4 (2002): 67–78.

ten cents a copy and subscriptions at one dollar a year.⁶⁹⁶

Writing about leftist art cinema was not a lucrative field; unwavering dedication to disseminating information to prompt action drove the labor of those involved. Originally imagined to be more of a monthly or quarterly magazine, *Experimental Cinema* shared the struggles of *New Theatre*, as editors revealed after a brief hiatus in 1930–1931 that their “financial and other difficulties” prevented regular publication.⁶⁹⁷ *New Theatre* and *Experimental Cinema* functioned as official organs of the Film and Photo League and film workers’ movements in America until another leftist journal, *FilmFront*, took over the role in 1935. For them, writing about art film was a deep political engagement in opposition to global capitalist industries, a venture that not only could create better films, but also equalized, healthier daily living conditions.

Experimental Cinema provided aesthetic, theoretical, and historical art education in addition to political education. Earlier writers, like J. P. McGowan, regarded film as an “educator” and writing as a mode to inform Americans’ appreciation of it.⁶⁹⁸ Kenneth MacGowan in *The Seven Arts* similarly referred to readers and film audiences as “students of the screen.”⁶⁹⁹ Film’s ability to influence audiences was a major controversy in the first decades of the twentieth century. Writers and institutions attempted to curate public interactions with films, while most writers understood themselves as educators on how to read and evaluate films. But *Experimental Cinema* developed a more coherent film education around leftist, workers,’ and avant-garde values that had been implicit, inchoate, or peripheral in earlier writing. *Experimental Cinema* regularly noted that they wrote to “students of the film” in their pages, informing them

⁶⁹⁶ Herbert Kline, “‘1984’: Reflections of a Half Century Ago,” in *New Theatre and Film, 1934–1937*, ed. Herbert Kline (Boston: Harcourt, 1985), 8–9.

⁶⁹⁷ David Platt, Lewis Jacobs, and Seymour Stern, “Statement,” *Experimental Cinema* vol. 1, no. 3 (1931): 3.

⁶⁹⁸ McGowan, “The Motion Picture,” *The Soil*, 176.

⁶⁹⁹ Kenneth MacGowan, “As the Movies Mend,” *The Seven Arts* vol. 2, no. 5 (1917): 665–67.

and announcing participatory opportunities.⁷⁰⁰

Film writing was an experimental craft long before it became a profession. Contemporary film critic John Simon describes a critic as “first and foremost a teacher and secondly an artist.”⁷⁰¹ Connecting journals like *Experimental Cinema* to writings across modernist periodicals brings together often-compartmentalized studies of leftist culture, film, art, and periodicals. It similarly shows a gradual building of art cinema writing— an endeavor that required practice and creative engagement with diverse works. Taking seriously the processes in which Marxist film criticism became integrated into the modernist press addresses how film presented challenges—but also new possibilities—for modern art and politics in the early twentieth century. The transformation of leftist film criticism from short pieces in general Marxist publications to full-scale leftist film journals indicates the rise of leftist film criticism during the interwar period.

Techniques, Theories, Translations: Bringing Information to Americans

Building theory from below became an important project of working-class journals and magazines. Journals became central sites for learning about film techniques and theories. American writers and writers from abroad shared latest conceptual and practical scholarship, as Workers Book Clubs intended to “spread Marxist theoretical and creative work.”⁷⁰² Since many leftist journals understood themselves as international in scope, American-based journals frequently printed articles from Soviet, French, German, and other foreign correspondents. They printed English translations that were frequently the first time works had been available for American readers. Journals such as *Experimental Cinema*, *FilmFront*, *New Theatre and Film*

⁷⁰⁰ “Statement,” *Experimental Cinema* vol. 1, no. 3 (1931): 2.

⁷⁰¹ Denton “An Analysis,” 1.

⁷⁰² “National John Reed Club Conference,” *Partisan Review* Vol. 1 no. 4 (Nov.-Dec. 1934): 61.

became locales of dynamic conversation and educational materials. Without formal courses or ability to travel, journals were primary areas where people could access theories, techniques, and translations.

Though earlier journals explored leftist politics, *Experimental Cinema*'s linking of working-class politics and film created a more concentrated analysis of the latter. It branded itself as an official outlet and educational source of the labor film movement. The first issue announced: "Experimental Cinema . . . will reveal to students of the film, through important articles, essays, photographs, stills, etc., the means and methods whereby films of the life of the American workers will be adequately produced and presented for working-class audiences."⁷⁰³ *Experimental Cinema* developed film writers and film experts for audiences to rely on. Higbie notes how print provided an informal education for working people. These publications became important to workers' social worlds by building trusted information and readership networks.⁷⁰⁴ Affordable publications were key at this time, when little access to formal film courses existed, especially for working Americans.⁷⁰⁵ Even if *Experimental Cinema* and other avant-garde periodicals were not as widely circulated as trade presses, they provided valuable information for readers to learn about the latest film developments and movie-show schedules.

Experimental Cinema included histories of Soviet film and workers' film, while providing international labor news and some of the first English translations of film theory. Articles covered new movies playing, updates on the industry, news about filmmakers, debates about films, and evaluations of styles and techniques. The opening pages of the fourth issue read, "*Experimental Cinema* will struggle . . . To render accessible to film students important

⁷⁰³ "Statement," *Experimental Cinema* vol. 1, no. 3 (1931): 3.

⁷⁰⁴ Higbie, *Labor's Mind*, 22–38.

⁷⁰⁵ Marcus, *The Tenth Muse*, 15.

theoretical and technical writings on film problems, with special emphasis on the theoretical and practical work now being carried on by the film workers in the Soviet Union and independent groups of cinematographers in other countries.”⁷⁰⁶ Articles also portrayed brief histories of silent cinema, such as French critic Leon Moussinac’s article “From George Méliès to S. M. Eisenstein,” translated by Vivian Chideckel.⁷⁰⁷ Writings by Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Cavalcanti appeared across the five issues. Writers informed readers how to identify “good” social films with shots of masses and montage editing, as opposed to Hollywood’s stagnant, individualistic, escapist movies.⁷⁰⁸ As early iterations of film history and theory, these articles provide an alternative stream of intellectual history that affected film writing aesthetically and politically. A major asset of periodicals was translating European and Soviet theories, film critiques, and news to English-speaking American readers. Translations printed in journals and magazines provided readers with information they otherwise would not have access to without attending physical lectures abroad or learning languages on their own. For example, journals brought information about conferences and events across Europe and the Soviet Union to American readers. Soviet director Dziga Vertov’s film theories, for example, appeared in *FilmFront* in 1935. Sam Brody translated excerpts of Vertov’s lecture given in Paris. *FilmFront* announced, “this article, to our knowledge, is the first of any utterances or writings by Dziga Vertov to appear in the English language.”⁷⁰⁹ Translations frequently included a preface about the translation or exuberantly noted this was a writing’s first time in English. Christel Gang translated German pieces to English for *Experimental Cinema*. Other women translators

⁷⁰⁶ “Editorial Statement,” *Experimental Cinema* vol. 1, no. 4 (1932): 3.

⁷⁰⁷ Leon Moussinac, “From George Méliès to S. M. Eisenstein,” trans. Vivian Chideckel, *Experimental Cinema* vol. 1, no. 2 (1930): 21–22.

⁷⁰⁸ “America Versus American Reality: The Bowery,” *Experimental Cinema* vol. 1, no. 5 (1934): 23.

⁷⁰⁹ “Dziga Vertov on Kino-Eye: Excerpts from a Lecture Given in Paris in 1929,” *FilmFront*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Jan 7, 1935): 6.

performed such work and were instrumental to new foreign-language pieces' availability to American audiences. The first edition included "Film Direction and Film Manuscript" by Pudovkin, translated by Christel Gang from German.⁷¹⁰ Translated by Christel Gang, Samuel Brody, and others, pieces had appeared originally in German, Russian, and French. *Experimental Cinema* published translated excerpts of Pudovkin's *Film Direction and Film Manuscript* across several issues as well as his "Scenario and Direction."⁷¹¹ *New Theater* included pieces by Eisenstein on "The New Soviet Cinema" and "Film Forms: New Problems," Dovzhenko on Soviet sound films, and Pudovkin on "Directing the 'Non-Actor'"—all translated from original Russian.⁷¹² Sam Brody also became a specialist in translating Eisenstein, Vertov, Dovzhenko, and Pudovkin articles printed in French from *L'Humanité*, which often appeared in *FilmFront* in the mid-1930s.⁷¹³ Without translations in leftist film magazines, access to Soviet and European film criticism would have been restricted to a select few multilingual Americans.

These articles allowed for other writers to discuss Soviet and European theories and techniques. In *Experimental Cinema*, Lewis Jacobs drew on earlier publications of the magazine and translated works to discuss Dovzhenko's work and form an analysis about Soviet cinema's educational value. He wrote, "Dovzhenko's films are utilitarian and practical; a methodology of

⁷¹⁰ *Experimental Cinema* vol. 1, no. 1 (1930): 5-10.

⁷¹¹ Vsevolod Pudovkin, "Film Direction and Film Manuscript excerpts," trans. Christel Gang from German of Georg and Nadja Friedland, *Experimental Cinema* vol. 1, no. 1 (1930): 5-7; Vsevolod Pudovkin, "Film Direction and Film Manuscript excerpts, Part II," trans. Christel Gang from German of Georg and Nadja Friedland, *Experimental Cinema* vol. 1, no. 2 (1930): 7-11; Vsevolod Pudovkin, "Scenario and Direction," trans. Elenore Erb, *Experimental Cinema* vol. 1, no. 3 (1932): 16-21.

⁷¹² Sergei Eisenstein, "The New Soviet Cinema: Entering the Third Period," *New Theatre* (Jan. 1935): 9, 21; Erwin Piscator, "A Theatre Director in Soviet Cinema," *New Theatre* (Jan. 1935): 14; "New Soviet Movies: Films of the National Minorities," *New Theatre* (Jan. 1935): 20-21; "What They Said About Cinema," trans. Leon Rutman, *New Theatre* (Jan. 1935): 21; V.L. Pudovkin, "Directing the 'Non-Actor'," *New Theatre* (Sept. 1935): 18-19; Ralph Steiner and Leo Hurwitz, "A New Approach to Film Making," *New Theatre* (Sept. 1935): 22-23; Robert Gessner, "Movies About Us," *New Theatre* (June 1935): 20; Sergei Eisenstein, "Film Forms: New Problems" (June 1936): 27-29; Robert Gessner and Peter Ellis, "Are Newsreels News?" *New Theatre and Film* (April 1937): 12-15; "Program of the International Cinema Bureau," *New Theatre* (May 1934): 15.

⁷¹³ "Russian Cinema Before the Revolution," trans. Sam Brody, *FilmFront* vol. 1, no. 3 (Jan. 28, 1935): 3-6; "Dziga Vertov on Film Technique," trans. Sam Brody, *FilmFront* vol. 1, no. 3 (Jan. 28, 1935): 6-9.

struggle and construction, teaching the audience, educating them, organizing them into proper directions and assuming an *active* role in their working-class lives.”⁷¹⁴ Dovzhenko’s films taught viewers about political themes and filmic techniques that could help them advance the labor movement, and Jacobs’s article taught readers about Dovzhenko’s ideas to reiterate the pedagogical pull of cinema. Other writers developed original pieces influenced by previous authors, but focused on techniques and concepts for American revolutionary cinema. Leo Hurwitz and Leo Seltzer, for example, published several articles in *Experimental Cinema*, *New Theatre*, and other journals detailing how they technically approach making American revolutionary films and how to center workers’ experiences in art. In *FilmFront* in 1935, Leo Seltzer published a series titled “Technically Speaking” that covered basic topics, such as how long to keep a camera running, the value of using a tripod, negative versus positive film recording, and equipment needed for indoor filming.⁷¹⁵ The series was designed so that readers could pick up basic skills from reading to be able to apply to their own filmmaking and learn techniques at a basic level. *FilmFront* sold for five cents a copy, which made it affordable to most workers and American readers.

Other authors took a similar approach to providing valuable international film information and technical advice for aspiring or evolving filmmakers. Members of the Film and Photo League published several articles in *New Theatre* that spoke directly to filmmakers, while others crafted writings outlining concrete next steps for growing workers’ cinema production, exhibition, and distribution as well as overall labor organizing.⁷¹⁶ Hurwitz teamed up with

⁷¹⁴ Lewis Jacobs, “Dovzhenko,” *Experimental Cinema* vol. 1, no. 5 (1934): 37.

⁷¹⁵ Leo Seltzer, “Technically Speaking,” *FilmFront* vol. 1, no. 2 (Jan. 1935): 8-9.

⁷¹⁶ Maria Baker, “Film Conference,” *New Theatre* (Sept./Oct. 1933): 24-25; Ralph Steiner, “Revolutionary Movie Production,” *New Theatre* (Sept. 1934): 22-23; Béla Balázs, “The Films of the Bourgeoisie,” *New Theatre* (Sept. 1934): 23-25; David Platt, “The March of the Movies,” *New Theatre* (June 1934): 18; Leo Hurwitz, “No Greater Treachery,” *New Theatre* (June 1934): 13; Leo Hurwitz, “The Revolutionary Film—Next Step,” *New Theatre* (May 1934): 14-15; “Dovzhenko: Soviet Cinema Director,” trans. Claire Brody, *New Theatre* (April 1934): 6; Vsevolod

Steiner to write “A New Approach to Film Making” that detailed steps to making socially-conscious films.⁷¹⁷ Gessner also discussed the role of newsreels in the US and the importance of creating films about workers for workers to see themselves depicted on screen. A *New Theatre* ad highlighted the value of the magazine for providing innovative film knowledge to readers. It states, “Leaders in every field of the theatre, dance and cinema contribute to your information and technical knowledge within the covers of this new revolutionary monthly.”⁷¹⁸ Articles served as instruction manuals for making films of artistic and social quality, and the creators of radical film journals specifically crafted their publications to serve as accessible learning tools.

The Film and Sprockets Society also created their own materials to construct film theory and history as college students. On April 16th, 1937, FSS published Program III for their Spring Film Appreciation Series. This showing focused on *The Love of Jeanne Ney*. Gordon and Zimet provide a history of Pabst’s works in relation to expressionism and other major films *Intolerance*, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, and *Battleship Potemkin*. They relate the film’s lighting and set design to expressionist cinema and its editing and cutting to montage and Eisenstein’s “intellectual” cinema, but with a more seamless transition between shots.⁷¹⁹ Gordon and Zimet also published *Technique of the Film*, a pamphlet that detailed various approaches to

Pudovkin, “Youth of Maxim,” trans. Leon Rutman, *New Theatre* (March 1935): 8; Sergei Eisenstein, “The New Soviet Cinema,” trans. Leon Rutman, *New Theatre* (Jan. 1934): 9, 21; Leo Hurwitz, “Survey of Workers’ Films,” *New Theatre* (Oct. 1934): 27-28; Ralph Steiner and Irving Lerner, “Technical Advice to Movie Makers,” *New Theatre* (Nov. 1934): 27.

⁷¹⁷ Ralph Steiner, “Revolutionary Movie Production,” *New Theatre* (June, 1934): 22-23; Béla Balázs, “The Films of the Bourgeoisie,” *New Theatre* (June, 1934): 23-25; Béla Balázs, “Film into Fascism,” *New Theatre* (Oct., 1934): 6-8; “The Movie Front,” *New Theatre* (June, 1934): 30; Leo T. Hurwitz, “Survey of Workers Films: A Report to the National Film Conference,” *New Theatre* (Oct., 1934): 27-28; “Movies on the Left,” *New Theatre* (Oct. 1934): 29; Richard Watts, Jr., “Hollywood Sees Pink,” *New Theatre* (Nov. 1934): 14-15; Leo Hurwitz, “Hisses, Boos and Boycotts,” *New Theatre* (July-Aug. 1934): 10-11; David Platt, “Sin and the Cinema,” *New Theatre* (July-Aug. 1934): 18-19; Steiner and Lerner, “Technical Advice to Movie Makers,” *New Theatre*.

⁷¹⁸ “New Theatre” front ad, *New Theatre* (May 1934): 1; The magazine sold for 10 cents per copy or one dollar per year. The headquarters was located at 5 E. 19th St. in New York.

⁷¹⁹ Film and Sprockets Society Film Appreciation Series Film Program III: *The Love of Jeanne Ney* by G.W. Pabst, April 16, 1937, 1-3, uncatalogued, City College of New York Special Collections, New York, NY, retrieved by Prof. Sydney Van Nort.

cinema from lighting to montage. The back includes suggested readings: Arnheim's *Film*, Nicoli's *Film and Theatre*, Pudovkin's *Film Technique*, Rotha's *Celluloid: The Film Today*, Spottiswoode's *A Grammar of the Film*, and references to Vachel Lindsay.⁷²⁰ Gordon and Zimet highlight the film as a "succinct and powerful exposition of ideas." This twenty-four-page booklet explores "expressive uses of the camera," "Montage," and "Sound" as its main categories. Within these main three are subsections, including "Enlarging the Film Vocabulary," "Alternatives to the Cut," and "Contrastive Use of Sound." They discuss the labor film *Millions of Us* and how shots can contrast the conditions of an unemployed Americans and his dreams of plentiful foods and wealth.⁷²¹ As college students without their own film courses, they applied their CCNY art-course knowledge to their amateur experience with film and what they picked up from meetings at the Film and Photo League sessions.

Before Gordon and Zimet even created a film, they articulated their own ideas and concisely explained materials they had been studying for a few years. Gordon recalled, "We wrote a booklet, *The Technique of Film*, although neither of us had ever touched a film camera."⁷²² This booklet outlined understanding the film as art, camera techniques, montage, and sound. One of the major points FSS publication sought to communicate was the film as art form and documentary tool. Contrary to several definitions that pinned cinema as either a fictional art or capturer of reality, FSS determined to craft an understanding of film as more complex than this dichotomy. In *Technique of Film*, Gordon and Zimet wrote, "On the ground that the film can serve no other function than recording, it has sometimes been denied serious consideration by the academically cultured. The conservatives in the ralm [sic] of aesthetics have attributed to the

⁷²⁰ Ibid., 11.

⁷²¹ Gordon and Zimet, *Technique of the Film*, 1937, City College of New York Special Collections, 6.

⁷²² Gordon, *The Gordon Files*, 27-28.

cinema, as sole function for its existence, an ability to make facsimiles. On that basis, they have condemned it. The purpose of this paper is to establish a contrary premise.”⁷²³ FSS saw film’s many purposes as its advantage to educate on art, documentary, and history.

In 1938, the Film and Sprockets Society published its second book *The Documentary Film, History, and Principles* written by Edward H. Schustack, then president of FSS. Louis Biderman, Cyrus Harrison, and Vincent Buonamassa of FSS helped edit the pamphlet.⁷²⁴ *The Educational Screen* reported in April 1939 that it was the first US book on documentary cinema. Schustack’s book seems to have taken a more historical approach than Gordon and Zimet’s by covering American documentary cinema as well as European and Soviet documentary and avant-garde masterpieces of the time. *The American Cinematographer* also reported on Schustack’s publication in January 1939, running a two-page spread titled “Documentary’s Achievements Told by Schustack.” This review details Schustack’s film history that was likely informed by FSS’s 1938 “Documentary Film Series,” noting that it would be useful for “educators” with promise to “entertain and instruct.”⁷²⁵ The pamphlet included the following chapters:

“Naturalism and the Documentary,” “Continental Realism,” “Newsreel and Documentary,” “Documentary in the U.S.S.R.,” “Joris Ivens,” “British Documentary,” “Rising American Documentary,” “Developmental Documentary,” “Modern Documentary and The Future of the Documentary.” One main idea that Schustack conveyed is that “Most people conceive of

⁷²³ Gordon and Zimet, *Technique of the Film*, 1937, City College of New York Special Collections, 18-21. Zimet and Gordon continued working together on films throughout the 1950s-1970s. Zimet also authored a book *The Young Lovers* under a pseudonym in 1955 due to his surveillance by the FBI. Gordon’s films also frequently appeared with false names because of being Blacklisted. Some of FSS’s concern with self-documentation and self-historicizing was because they knew historically and presently, left-leaning groups faced repression or misrepresentation. Knowing that various laws as well as federal and local officials have desecrated gathering spaces and materials of leftists, those in the interwar period were keen to protect their narratives.

⁷²⁴ “Documentary’s Achievements Told by Schustack,” *American Cinematographer* (Jan. 1939): 40-41; “Review of *The Documentary Film: Documentary Filming in America*,” *American Cinematographer* vol. 20 (March 1939): 130-131.

⁷²⁵ “Documentary’s Achievements Told by Schustack,” *The American Cinematographer*, 40-41.

propaganda in the narrow political sense, neglecting the wider social propaganda of which documentary makes use. The need for soil control, for planned civil communities, for farm and farmer rehabilitation and the problems of unemployment are all the concerns of the documentalist.”⁷²⁶ An issue following Schustack’s article includes a letter to the editor of *American Cinematographer*. In it, Harry Kleinman argues that Schustack’s history should highlight the FPL and film clubs as “a documentary center here in America.”⁷²⁷ Even without this absence, FSS knew about FPL and had origins working with the film collective. And like FPL, FSS created important print materials that developed key ideas about film technique, theory, and history. As the CCNY *Alumnus* magazine noted in 1937, “The club issued programs containing historical and interpretive notes and handbook of the motion picture art.”⁷²⁸ Even in their own time, many recognized the value of their scholarship. As working-class students at CCNY, FSS members studied films they brought in themselves and wrote critical works based on what they learned and taught one another.

Formal and Informal Publication: Self-Study Methods

Self-study was a practice integral to the left. Print networks comprised of writers, editors, publishers, and distributors, who all promoted cultural-political education via self-study by providing curated information. Figures like Sergei Eisenstein, Iris Barry, Harry Potamkin, and others created a vocabulary for film evaluation.⁷²⁹ Rudolf Arnheim’s *Film as Art* (1930) and Paul Rotha’s *The Film Till Now* (1930) from Germany and Britain respectively, were important books that shaped understandings of art cinema. In the US, journals like *Experimental Cinema* were

⁷²⁶ Paul Rotha’s 1936 *Documentary Film* was the only other book on documentary cinema at this time. Paul Rotha, *Documentary Film* (London: Faber and Faber, 1935).

⁷²⁷ Kleinman, “Trace Documentaries’ Beginning Back to 1932,” *American Cinematographer* (May 1939): 226.

⁷²⁸ “Film and Sprockets Society,” *City College Alumnus* vol. 33, no. 5 (1937): 61, uncatalogued, City College of New York Special Collections, New York, NY, retrieved by Prof. Sydney Van Nort.

⁷²⁹ Battaglia, “Everyone’s a Critic,” 12-14.

key arenas where international theories and histories of art cinema combined in its pages. Lewis Jacobs and David Platt later wrote and edited books that became influential to cinema studies—Jacobs’s *The Rise of the American Film* (1939) and Platt’s *Celluloid Power* (1992).⁷³⁰ Though books are often acknowledged for their educational merit, these works culminated from articles done in *Soviet Russia Pictorial*, *Experimental Cinema*, *New Theatre*, and *FilmFront*. Texts and authors that appeared in in these journals remain present in film courses today, as they became a key basis for film theory, history, and filmmaking throughout the twentieth century. What this meant, however, is that tensions emerged between top-down pedagogy and providing tools for others to access and build their own ideas or products from. Authors promoted the self-study of film, but not without curated publications or dissemination of materials.

Editor of *New Theater News* Mark Marvin penned a piece “Training Begins with Self-Training.” Though he focused on theatre, Marvin’s idea of self-training and study was expansive. Artists, intellectuals, and workers should not limit themselves to studying one topic or art. Rather, they should read widely and study in various spaces. He defined self-study as such:

Self-study means the careful and systematic reading of the best books in theatre—but books on the theatre alone are not enough. To understand the theatre, to be worthy of its increasingly higher standards, the theatre worker must understand the world he seeks to interpret on stage. Books on politics, economics, history—yes, and a careful reading of the daily newspaper, the weekly or monthly magazines, pamphlets, etc., must become habit. The best theatre workers will go beyond this: they will frequent the art galleries, the public museums, the concert halls, the lecture rooms. The New Theatre League, through its publications, schools, conferences, and other activities has given concrete form to this thirst for knowledge, which has welled up from the ranks of the new theatres. The task today is to keep it ever alive and to guarantee its extension to every person in every progressive theatre.... We must insist that every person, every theatre set in motion

⁷³⁰ Robert Brasillach and Maurice Bardèche, *The History of Motion Pictures* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1935); F.A. Talbot, *Moving Pictures: How They are Made and Worked* (New York: Lippencott, 1912). Iris Barry translated the French *Histoire du Cinéma* into English as *The History of Motion Pictures* in 1938. Leo Seltzer owned copies of both books, and he donated them as part of his collection at MoMA. These books indicate Seltzer studied these texts to learn on his own and they may have informed his approaches to cinema. Leo Seltzer Collection Finding Aid, unprocessed, Leo Seltzer Collection, Film Study Center, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/learn/filmstudyc/enter/Seltzer_finding_aid_MoMA.pdf.

habits and facilities for study.⁷³¹

Self-study, then, involved encountering knowledge through meditative reading and collective learning experiences. Moreover, it meant cultivating a curiosity about a wide array of subjects. Marvin increasingly included film discussion in *New Theatre*, and others recognized the importance of film and film magazines to workers' movements. While promoting self-study was an effort to develop workers' intellectual skills, it was also an effort to shape workers' tastes to prioritize revolutionary films and ideas.

Communist bookshops were in multiple cities by the mid-1930s, from NYC to Pittsburgh to Chicago and several in Europe. One official outlet of the Communist Party was the Workers' Bookshop on 13th Street in New York City, which also had locations in several US and European cities. It was a space where leftists gathered to purchase or borrow books; it also was a gathering area for reading groups and local political conversations. Its publishing branch, the Workers Library, developed in 1923 out of the Workers Party of America Literature Department and transitioned into CPUSA and their literature publishing branches.⁷³² Workers' Library Publishers published over 250 of its own booklets and reading guides between 1927 and 1944, including catalogs of works they suggested people read with thematic sections, authors, and short descriptions.⁷³³ Essentially, they provided readers with syllabi or programs for self-study, such as book notes in magazines and reviews of new films, books, plays, and art. Those involved also became part of building the New York Workers' School where they used these published materials in courses.

⁷³¹ Mark Marvin, "Training Begins with Self-Training," *New Theater News* vol. 1, no. 3 (1939): 3-4.

⁷³² Jay Lovestone, *The Government Strikebreaker: A Study of the Role of the Government in the Recent Industrial Crisis* (New York: Workers Party Library and Workers Party of America, 1923).

⁷³³ "Workers Library Publishers: Publishing History," *Open Library* (2024), https://openlibrary.org/publishers/Workers_Library_Publishers.

The Workers' Bookshop published 27,000 copies of the 1930 "Guide to Readings on Communism" by Murray Blyne that included dozens of books and pamphlets.⁷³⁴ Categories related to women, African Americans, and religion appeared alongside list prices, number of pages, and short abstracts about the works. Group XI included novels, short stories, literary criticism, plays, poetry, and other arts suggested to readers to study and provide feedback on this list to strengthen it. Blyne stated the intent of the pamphlet:

This guide has been compiled to help those workers, students and intellectuals who are finding their way to Communism. The titles of books and pamphlets included in this pamphlet are by no means complete. What we have attempted to do here is to list the minimum required readings for an understanding of the fundamental theoretical and practical questions facing the international as well as the American revolutionary movement.⁷³⁵

Such publications taught how to read listed materials. They also pointed readers toward bookshops, primarily the Workers Bookshop, to purchase included readings. At the end of the "Guide to Readings on Communism," pamphlet, it states one could view these works through the New York Workers Bookshop circulating library as well. Other shops had circulating libraries, as noted by the back page pointing to other local shops and literature centers or circulating libraries. With a goal to advise people to "Build a Marxist-Leninist Library and continue your study of Communism," reading selections could function as communication tools for expanding working-class writing and reading.⁷³⁶ The materials available for self-study were therefore suggested and carefully chosen by publishers and political leaders.

In the pamphlet *The Workers' Library: Books and Pamphlets* from 1938, they discussed

⁷³⁴ Georgi Dimitroff, *Spain's Year of War* (New York: Workers Library Publisher, Inc., Aug. 1937); A. Kanatchikov, *The Revolt on the Armoured Cruiser Potemkin* (New York: Workers' Library Publishers, 1930). This gives account of 1905 revolt that was instrumental to 1917 and revolutionary movements now.

⁷³⁵ Murray Blyne, *Guide to Readings on Communism* (New York: Workers Book Shop, c. 1930s), 2, Call Number: Z7164.S67 B55 1930z, Radicalism Collection, Stephen O. Murray and Keelung Hong Special Collections, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI.

⁷³⁶ Blyne, *Guide to Readings on Communism*, 21-23, Stephen O. Murray and Keelung Hong Special Collections.

the role of publishing and distribution. Democratizing publishing and distribution were important to workers' movements, as was democratizing access to information about the arts and literature.

Workers Library Publishers serves the labor movement by publishing, in pamphlet form or in low-priced paper-covered editions, the literature most essential to the clarification of the vital problems facing society today... These publications deal with the American scene, including the struggle of the unemployed, workers in basic industries, farmers, sharecroppers, Negro people, professionals and white-collar workers, women and youth; with world affairs, including the people's movements in France, Spain, and China, the building of socialism in the Soviet Union, and the provocations and aggressions of international fascism; with the theory of Marxism-Leninism, politics, economics, trade union and general labor problems, and the progressive contributions to philosophy, science, history, literature and art. Workers Library Publishers urges every progressive-minded person to read the publication and aid in their widespread distribution.⁷³⁷

They included books one could buy to see and learn about rising art in the Soviet Union, American artists, and others. Advertisements for where to find materials or engage in activities were also crucial to facilitating information. By 1936, there were several Workers' Bookshops in NYC, one in Manhattan and two in Brooklyn. People's Bookshops were also scattered around Manhattan. Advertisements for these shops were printed in Workers' Library Publishing materials that encouraged readers to order Earl Browder's *What is Communism* and other works "through your union's educational department or from" the six listed Workers and Peoples bookshop locations.⁷³⁸ The back page also urged readers to self-distribute the pamphlet, noting they could pick up copies from the Workers Bookshop to aid the labor movement. Bookshops were therefore a main institution that facilitated study materials for radicals.

Bookstores are part of film history, and art history more broadly. "No formal education was an advantage," Frances Steloff, owner of The Gotham Book Mart (GBM) in New York City,

⁷³⁷ *The Workers' Library: Books and Pamphlets* (New York: Workers Library Publishers, 1938), 43-44, Call Number: Z1217. W6 1938, Radicalism Collection, Stephen O. Murray and Keelung Hong Special Collections, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI.

⁷³⁸ Communist Party of the United States of America Central Committee, *For a Powerful United A.F. of L.* (New York: Workers Book Shop, 1936), 209, Call Number: HD8055.A6 C6 1936, Radicalism Collection, Stephen O. Murray and Keelung Hong Special Collections, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI.

recalled in 1987. Outside formal education, Steloff found experimental freedom to create modern art communities in NYC that transcended mediums, politics, and intellectual circles. Steloff was from Saratoga Springs, NY of a family of poor, working-class origins. Mourning her mother's death and ditching education by seventh grade, Steloff learned early on to make it on her own. She moved to NYC at the age of nineteen, where she picked up jobs in department stores and bookshops. As she describes it, she finally had a breakthrough that she should start her own bookstore that would support experimental literature and art. She bought the shop in December 1919 on a Liberty Bond for about \$100 and stocked it with her private collection of books. Gotham Book Mart was not simply a place to buy the latest experimental literature, but a gathering place for artists' events, exhibitions, and publishing radical magazines like *Experimental Cinema* (1934) throughout the 20th century. As the premier bookshop on Book Row in the interwar period, GBM was multi-functional for NYC artists' circles. Steloff also defied censorship protocols by bringing in banned literature and illegal copies. Her amateur bookstore was fueled by her desire to hold space for modern art, particularly art that was relegated to the margins of American society. In bookstores like Steloff's, visitors had rare access to experimental artworks, latest developing theories and histories of modern art, and could also encounter other artists to form networks. She held artist exhibitions such as of Marcel Duchamp and other Dadaist, Surrealists, and avant-garde artists. Those who visited such spaces became scholars of modern art by virtue of learning and telling information here to audiences of customers and visitors.⁷³⁹

Bookshops were "climate[s] for others to meet," Frances Steloff remarked.⁷⁴⁰ It was not

⁷³⁹ Thomas J. Linneman, "Representing Social Movements: Advocacy and Activism in Northwest Bookstores," *Sociological Perspectives* vol. 42, no. 3 (1999): 459–80.

⁷⁴⁰ Francis Steloff, *Francis Steloff: Memoirs of a Bookseller*, Dir. Deborah Dickson (Direct Cinema Limited, 1987).

simply a place to buy the latest experimental literature, but a place for artists to gather for parties and events. Friends also sent friends to the shop as word about the shop's holdings circulated around the city by word of mouth. Papers also ran stories about Gotham and artists exhibited or sold there. Dogster Evenings in the 1930s were reading and discussion groups as well as events to promote artists and new works. "Customers built up book mart," while criticism and discussion about good or poor works occurred in the shop itself amongst customers. What people bought factored into Steloff's merchandise as well as who stood out in the art scene or gained readership. Some who went into bookstores did so to buy books, others to simply look, and still others who went for social interaction with those in the store. Information spread in bookstores from customer to customer, from owner to customer, and customer to owner. Steloff remarked that she paid attention to what works sold, which people browsed, and which ones no one touched. Promoting an artist in a bookstore could accelerate their career by advertising their work to the public.

Gotham Book Mart published the last edition of *Experimental Cinema* in 1934 focused on Eisenstein's *Que Viva Mexico* amongst other articles celebrating Soviet film and analysis of avant-garde developments. Though the fifth and final edition is not too different from the previous four, it is notable that the business and editorial offices of *Experimental Cinema* moved to 51 West 47th Street, NYC—Gotham Book Mart's address. Owner Francis Steloff is listed as the Business Manager. As a premier location for the city's avant-garde, Gotham Book Mart's close ties to *Experimental Cinema* are an important connection across modernist literary and visual arts worlds. Alongside Workers' Bookshop, Gotham Book Mart is also listed as a location to buy both Film and Photo League and Film and Sprockets Society tickets for exhibitions throughout the 1930s. Steloff's efforts in distributing key print materials for the left, mainly

Experimental Cinema and exhibition tickets, are important for understanding how materials circulated in NYC for film events and publications. Steloff is frequently absent in histories of radical cinema or *Experimental Cinema*.⁷⁴¹ However, she played a vital role in selling tickets, hosting events, and printing and circulating written materials for these groups. Like the women translators Christel Gang in *Experimental Cinema* and Naumburg's production of two League films, women were part of these collectives as *creators* and key intermediaries for men's work to circulate and to circulate their own work.⁷⁴²

Even without formal publishing houses, film collectives printed and disseminated their own works.⁷⁴³ The Film and Sprockets Society also self-published with help from the City College of New York Art Department.⁷⁴⁴ These included Edward Schustack's text on documentary in 1938 and Bernard Gordon and Julian Zimet's *Film Technique* in 1937. Collaboration between various cultural institutions was also a crucial way FSS connected with more people, including those from libraries, museums, bookstores, academic departments, newspapers, and journals. Tickets for shows, for example, were sold around the city: Columbia University Bookstore, CCNY Art Department, Gotham Book Mart, and Workers Book Shop.⁷⁴⁵ FSS had ties to Columbia students, often receiving features in *The Columbia Spectator* student

⁷⁴¹ Patti Smith attended Gotham Book Mart in the 1990s and the space that was previous the Film Arts Guild Cinema. Jonas Mekas did an interview and reading at the Gotham Book Mart in the 1950s. Box 67, Item 4, Series IX. Audiovisual Material Gotham Book Mart at UPenn, 1992 and Patti Smith reading, 1995) Patti Smith and Bruce Smith events at Gotham Book Mart, 1992, Box 67, Item 4, Gotham Book Mart records, 1723-2006 (bulk: 1967-2006), Ms. Coll. 1025, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA; Patti Smith reading at Gotham Book Mart, 1995, Box 11, Item 10, Gotham Book Mart records, 1723-2006 (bulk: 1967-2006), Ms. Coll. 1025, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.

⁷⁴² FBI agents have notoriously conducted investigations and repression of Black bookstores throughout this period. Joshua Clark Davis, "The FBI's War on Black-Owned Bookstores," *The Atlantic* (Feb. 19, 2018), <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/02/fbi-black-bookstores/553598/>; Vaunda Micheaux Nelson and R. Gregory Christie, *No Crystal Stair: A Documentary Novel of the Life and Work of Lewis Michaux, Harlem Bookseller* (New York: Lerner Publishing, 2018).

⁷⁴³ Gordon and Zimet, *Technique of the Film*, 1937, City College of New York Special Collections.

⁷⁴⁴ Brandon, "The Advance Guard," 27.

⁷⁴⁵ "City College Society to Show Old Films," *New York Times* (7 March 1937): 84.

newspaper, and thus their programs reached across educational institutions. Their ties to Gotham Book Mart and Workers Book Shop reveal how booksellers were also involved in brokering the value of film and supporting its educational development. The Film and Photo League also hosted a Motion Picture Costume Ball in 1934 that gathered leftists across arts. Hosted on April 27th at Webster Hall in New York, tickets costed \$1.00 in advance or \$1.50 at door at the door. Not only could one purchase tickets through FPL, but also *New Masses*, Workers Book Shop, *New Theatre*, and Gotham Book Mart.⁷⁴⁶ Leftist and avant-garde bookshops were places where left-wing artists and writers to network and sell materials other shops frequently rejected.

Journals created circular reference networks, frequently including ads for one another to direct readers to similar reading materials. While relatively insulated, this created a consistent messaging and robust network. Print allowed film collectives and members to form broad intellectual modernist networks across media and class. Journals, papers, and bookshops provided structured study materials that encouraged readers to actively analyze film ideas to develop “new ways of seeing” the world and translate those ideas into making their own works.⁷⁴⁷ Leyda seeing Steiner’s ad in *The New Yorker* represented a collision of media in one ad: photography, film, and print from New York City to Dayton, Ohio. Print had the ability to

⁷⁴⁶ Film and Photo League Motion Picture and Costume Ball flyer with photo exhibit list and sponsors, April 27, 1934, Box 24, Folder 232, Series II. Documents and Correspondence, Browning Photograph Collection, circa 1920-1938, New York Historical Society Museum and Library, New York, NY; Film and Photo League “An Illustrated Lecture of the Camera and its Possibilities featuring Irving Browning, Dec. 23, 1934, Box 24, Folder 232, Series II. Documents and Correspondence, Browning Photograph Collection, circa 1920-1938, New York Historical Society Museum and Library, New York, NY; Film and Photo League letter written by Frank Ward inviting Irving Browning to participate in the Motion Picture and Costume Ball, April 18, 1934, Box 24, Folder 232, Series II. Documents and Correspondence, Browning Photograph Collection, circa 1920-1938, New York Historical Society Museum and Library, New York, NY.

⁷⁴⁷ “A New Way of Writing and Seeing” advertisement for *Left Front*, *New Theatre* (April 1934): 24. The ad said *Left Front* was sponsored by Sidney Howard, Bourke-White, Ralph Steiner, Reginald Marsh, George Gershwin, etc. and read, “Tired of the fairy-tales of some magazines and the sophisticated half-truths of others, thousands upon thousands are turning to the growing revolutionary press. Strikes, demonstrations, and the day-by-day struggles of the workingclass are no longer ‘propaganda;’ they are the stuff of literature and art, the working material for young revolutionary writers and artists.”

connect and build film collectives without means to physically visit other collectives or view workers' activities happening nationally or globally.

Conclusion

Collectives' members and reading audiences studied written works like they would textbooks. Journals and magazines outlined various learning opportunities for those interested in film. In 1946, Jay Leyda remarked that the "major work" of film education "is managed by the printed word." Essays, written volumes, pocket pamphlets, and magazines all provided "audience education" through historical, theoretical, and critical analyses of film. Leyda recognized that by the mid-twentieth century, film collectives had established intellectual print networks across the Soviet Union and parts of Europe. On the contrary, he also noticed that little coordination existed in America between writers and filmmakers. Pudovkin, Eisenstein, and Vertov connected writing and filmmaking in their careers to produce key historical, theoretical, and analytical texts that formed the foundation of film studies across the globe. Leyda highlighted that Soviet film scholars and students wrote several major pieces that grew their careers and endured beyond to remain central to film studies. Whereas in the US, there have been only a few authors who have written one or two major works.⁷⁴⁸ American authors rarely wrote more than one work or consistently made film writing central to their careers. While this may be true of published books or the volume of film writing, this chapter has shown that film writing played a leading role in American film collectives developing working-class education that formed the foundation of film studies. Moreover, it invites us to think more intentionally about how we create hierarchies of types of publications and their cultural meaning in society; in this case: books compared to scattered articles or ephemeral journals.

⁷⁴⁸ Leyda, "Advanced Training for Film Workers: Russia," 284.

This chapter therefore sets up an alternative intellectual history centered in ephemeral self-created texts. Most of the writers never make it into general film studies, art history, or cultural history courses to discuss how they created intellectual traditions and writing that developed definitions of art film as well as class politics and educational philosophies. It shares a parallel or alternative development of film theory and film history to those traditionally taught in courses. Lewis Jacob's *The Rise of the American Film* (1939), that has been hailed as a seminal film history, was a culmination of his writing in magazines and journals for years. Rather than studying in lecture halls at school, Jacobs cultivated his writing career through articles in *Experimental Cinema*, *FilmFront*, and other small publications. Journals, magazines, and their publishing routes were, and remain, a cultural infrastructure necessary for the dissemination of information about avant-garde film. Historians can study periodicals as vessels of information, but this chapter takes seriously the history of journals themselves and their meaning to the labor-arts movements of this period. Why were journals key sites of film writing for leftists and what did they want audiences to know?

Students could be anyone who picked up a journal like *Experimental Cinema* or *Soviet Russia Pictorial*. People who never touched a camera now had access to information about filmmaking and its surrounding activities. Several contemporary filmmakers and writers have articulated that “In the education of aspiring filmmakers... [a] vital role was played by countless prize film magazines... Magazines proved an invaluable source of knowledge.” Periodicals “inspired thousands of people to dedicate their lives to filmmaking” and collaborate with others interested in studying and teaching film alongside direct labor action.⁷⁴⁹ While print provided

⁷⁴⁹ “In the Times Before the Idea of the Internet Was Conceived, Film Magazines Proved an Invaluable Source of Filmmaking Knowledge,” *Cinephilia and Beyond* (2022), <https://cinephiliabeyond.org/times-idea-internet-conceived-film-magazines-proved-invaluable-source-filmmaking-knowledge/>.

invaluable information for middle and upper classes, it was often the only film access point for working-class Americans besides the cinema itself or spaces film collectives designed.

Scholars have studied little magazines and more studies on film publication continue to arise such as Eric Hoyt's *Ink-Stained Hollywood* and the latest issue of *Journal of Modern Periodical Studies*, a special edition on silent cinema and periodicals edited by Jonathan Cranfield. Such studies are positive steps in analyzing film writing as historical, social, cultural, political, and intellectual sources. Higbie's attention to the intellectual lives, mainly via print, of American working-class people importantly shows how intellectual and educational histories of workers intersect with broader social-political changes. What the chapter here does is combine the too-often segmented paths of analyzing film periodicals and workers' intellectual history to emphasize *workers' intellectual history of film*. In *Mapping Movie Magazines*, scholars Biltreyst and L. Van De Vijvner insightfully assess that

A key aspect, which needs to be excavated more thoroughly, we think, is the movie magazine's role as a cultural intermediary. Given the magazines' central position in the circulation of evaluative reviews, background stories and other types of symbolic services in the context of cinema as a key twentieth-century cultural economy, they played a significant role in linking industry and audiences, and in their link with the film and entertainment industry.⁷⁵⁰

This chapter offers one way of reading movie magazines as cultural intermediaries: educational resources. Film writing also opens a way of studying the social worlds of radical film collectives and information sharing in New York in the early twentieth century. The communities built through print and circulation in the 1920s-1930s created important foundations for growing intellectual, artistic, and political dynamics of New York. Much like other cultural hubs in New York, journals transformed "into a lively social space for Jewish activists and professionals."⁷⁵¹

⁷⁵⁰ Daniel Biltreyst and Lies Van De Vijvner, "Introduction," *Mapping Movie Magazines: Digitization, Periodicals and Cinema History* ed. Daniel Biltreyst and Lies Van De Vijvner (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 4.

⁷⁵¹ "Chomsky Newsstand, 1940," *Mapping Working-Class History* (2022),

Film collectives' journals and their distribution sites in the 1920s-1930s made intellectual exchanges and political action possible intersecting avant-garde and working-class circles.

Print provided portable education workers and others could find on the streets of New York. Magazines had the unique advantage of postal services to send ideas and images around the US and other countries. While the "poor man's art gallery" served well for labor organizers and film students, film collectives desired more permanent avenues of learning for working-class Americans. Self-study remained encouraged, but more formalized studies with courses and schools also emerged throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

Film writing became professionalized by the mid-twentieth century as degree-granting programs emerged at select higher-education institutions. In addition to providing interpretations of cultural and political changes, "[a]s referees of the muses, arts critics are on the front line of the arts themselves. Their writing and commentary facilitate exposure to the arts. Their insight shares and spreads art appreciation and education."⁷⁵² Despite their ephemerality, the journals discussed here served their functions, as avant-garde periodicals were designed as such: "It was the nature of these periodicals to be short-lived yet timely. They were the result of ephemeral groupings of artists and architects rather than the sustained products of commercial publishing houses."⁷⁵³ For contemporary scholars, film writers' activities and publications remind us how intellectual film studies can occur in offbeat, ephemeral periodicals.

<https://map.workingclasshistory.com/?event=7684#map=0.62/-13.7/-40.1>.

⁷⁵² Bob Ableman and Cheryl Kushner, *A Theater Criticism/Arts Journalism Primer: Refereeing the Muses* (New York: Peter Lang Publishers), xii.

⁷⁵³ "Forward," *G: An Avant-Garde Journal of Art, Architecture, Design, and Film, 1923–1926*, vii–viii; 89.

CHAPTER 6: “A GREAT SCHOOL OF STRUGGLE AND FILM MAKING”: WORKING-CLASS SCHOOLING

In November 1933, the Harry Alan Potamkin Film School opened in New York City at 116 Lexington Avenue. This was the Film and Photo League’s headquarters at the time. Potamkin is mostly remembered as a film critic. He was, however, also an educator. He drafted proposals for a film school with curricula for a Bachelor’s degree-granting program before his abrupt death due to stomach ulcers from starvation complications in July 1933.⁷⁵⁴ Fellow FPL members began a school to make their shared plans for a film school reality. While Potamkin’s proposal was for a comprehensive film education targeted to both radical working-class and industry film students, FPL’s Harry Alan Potamkin Film School was oriented towards training working-class students interested in FPL-type projects. Tailored to working-class students, the school structured programs around workers’ schedules to train workers in artistic production, history, and theory. Arts schooling became increasingly important to the labor movement in the 1920s and 1930s for workers to hone intellectual and artistic skills that allowed them to analyze and create from their lived perspectives. Film workers’ schools and courses were important because they promoted the serious study of film, which unlike arts like painting or literature, was not yet standard practice. Beyond this, the purpose and organization of courses focused on working-class education to make schooling conducive to workers’ needs regarding time, content, costs, administration, teachers, and student-learning objectives.

Moreover, film schooling that prioritized leftist working-class learning and social issues offered an arts education rooted in democratic classroom participation—still with structure, but focused on collaborative projects rather than master-pupil knowledge transmission. Courses

⁷⁵⁴ Harry Potamkin, “A Proposal for a School of the Motion Picture,” *Hound and Horn* (Oct. 1933): 140-143, in *The Compound Cinema*, 587-592.

designed by radical film collectives, because of their improvised, sporadic nature and documentary focus, allowed their schooling to respond to rapidly shifting aesthetic and political concerns in the interwar period. Groups' independence also permitted them to explore a range of immediate radical political topics that city schools and private or public colleges could not.

This chapter highlights flourishing experimental film training programs in interwar New York City, led by communist and leftist collectives. During the interwar period, degree-granting higher-education film programs were not yet available, and any classes that did exist were sparse and irregular. Though the University of Southern California Cinematic Arts program emerged in 1929, it focused on Hollywood industry training. Actors Mary Pickford, Cedric Gibbons, Irving Thalberg, Clara Beranger, Ernst Lubitsch, Douglas Fairbanks Sr., and William DeMille were all part of teaching its founding courses, such as "Introduction to the Photoplay." Classes were not just about learning technical skills for production, but studying film seriously as an art to earn a full Bachelor's degree. Tied directly to Hollywood and the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, it became an appealing school for those interested in feature film industries.⁷⁵⁵ For those who rejected Hollywood and film as a capitalist profit machine, USC likely seemed unappealing. And for poor, working-class folks settled in NYC, traveling to California was untenable and USC was likely difficult to receive admittance.

Film collectives' courses and schools in New York, in contrast, were largely anti-Hollywood and oriented towards leftist and labor cultural-politics. The Depression was catastrophic financially and politically; however, it also opened possibilities for many working-

⁷⁵⁵ Dana Polan, *Inventing Film Studies*, 33-81. In 1915, Columbia offered a course on film called "Photoplay Construction." As early as September 1926, The New School began a "movie course" on the history and art of cinema. The New School for Social Research Announcement, Spring 1926, NS050101_ns1926sp, General course catalogs, Series 1. Schools of Public Engagement, New School Course Catalog Collection, New School for Social Research Archives, New York, NY.

class and poor folks to pursue artistic careers as “cultural work” became more legitimate to address social ills.⁷⁵⁶ Schools and classes created by working-class collectives, such as the Film and Photo League and student-led Film and Sprockets Society, not only featured avant-garde films, but were avant-garde themselves. They were radical: aesthetically, politically, and pedagogically. Many of the first teachers of modern art film were amateurs in the sense that although they were sometimes trained artists or attended college, they rarely had formal training in film or teaching. Most learned by seeing others create art and through creating art themselves.⁷⁵⁷ They created and curated study materials themselves and used those donated by members or affiliates. As self-trained teachers influenced by American workers’ collectives and Soviet film institutions, their courses focused on participatory learning and art’s revolutionary potential.

This approach borrowed from and emerged alongside those of radical art and labor schools in New York throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The Rand School with socialist affiliates opened in 1906, while the anarchist Ferrer Modern School opened in 1910 in New York and remained close in New Jersey until the 1950s. Namely, the New York Workers’ School opened in 1923 that communists and CPUSA led. Radical schools specializing in various creative arts evolved from a few in the 1920s to national branches and dozens of individual schools. In 1932, the John Reed Club School of Art opened and, once JRCs dissolved with the onset of the Popular Front, became the American Artists’ School in 1936. Harry Potamkin and Sam Brody were helped found the original New York branch in 1929 and notably led several projects. Leo Hurwitz, Leo Seltzer, Irving Lerner, Bernard Gordon, and William Kruse all mentioned knowing

⁷⁵⁶ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, xxi-3. Other texts discuss the overlap of modernism and work as well as the differences between “work” and “labor” in cultural spheres for more theoretical discussion.

⁷⁵⁷ Dewey, *Experience and Education*; John Dewey, *Art as Experience*.

select JRC members and participating in JRC events in the early 1930s. Radical film schools thus emerged in New York within a dynamic, growing leftist interdisciplinary educational community.

Before his death and while drafting a film school proposal, Harry Alan Potamkin saw the opening of the “John Reed Club School of Art” in New York City at 450 Sixth Avenue in 1932. This school likely influenced his pedagogical theory and film school plans.⁷⁵⁸ Potamkin was the Secretary of the John Reed Club in addition to an active member of the Film and Photo League. As a devout Communist and avant-garde advocate, Potamkin devoted his life to discussing the needs of both modern art and film to engage social-political issues and contribute to transforming society.⁷⁵⁹ Potamkin’s mobility between modern art and film circles was not an anomaly, but rather a practice many interwar leftists embraced. His dedication to building arts education— “on the left”—in the US and democratic expansion of arts creation, learning, teaching, exhibition, distribution, review, writing, and archiving was militant yet not out of step with other collectives at the time. Creating schools and curriculums, Potamkin and his comrades believed, would allow more Americans to learn about modern art techniques as well as contemporary and historical social-political issues. At the same time courses taught close-ups, angles, and lighting, they also taught antifascism, antiracism, Marxism, sociology of film and art, and film history and theory.⁷⁶⁰ Opening workers’ schools allowed for more Americans—often those excluded from traditional academic institutions—to receive training in the arts and motion pictures. Collectives created spaces and curriculums championing modern art and film as worthy of study and this

⁷⁵⁸ List of supporters of the John Reed Club that includes Harry Alan Potamkin, 1930, Vertical Files Series, ca. 1920s-1980s Part IV, John Reed Clubs of the United States, 1930-1936, Box 304, Folder 9, J. B. Matthews Papers, 1862-1986 and undated, Duke University Library Archives and Manuscripts, Durham, NC.

⁷⁵⁹ Potamkin, *Eyes of the Movie*, no. 38 (New York: International Pamphlets, 1934), 3-7.

⁷⁶⁰ “A Proposal for a School of the Motion Picture,” *Hound and Horn*, in *The Compound Cinema*, 587-592.

study as politically necessary for advancing labor and social causes.

While many workers' schools offered training in social sciences, humanities, and arts, they did not include direct film instruction or more than an isolated lecture. Hans Richter, who headed the Documentary Institute at City College started in 1941, noted in a 1960s article "Films: A Fighting Weapon" that film courses in universities and documentaries were not taken seriously until they became central to war efforts during WWII.⁷⁶¹ Though this largely tracks, Richter's comment focused on established institutions and elites' popularization of film. For those in workers' groups during the 1920s and 1930s, they took film courses and documentaries very seriously—enough to dedicate their lives to film training and creation while living in low-income and poverty conditions themselves. Serious film training and studying in school settings did occur as early as the 1920s, even if these were limited to radical film collectives in New York. Such independence proved productive for collectives to experiment with participatory schooling methods. It also allowed collectives to actively respond to immediate working-class community needs, including hours of operation, costs, and subjects offered.

Whereas other chapters explore the numerous ways teaching threaded through practices of writing, exhibition, distribution, and production, this chapter examines independent film schools and developments of actual classes. This chapter is organized into sections that chart the evolution of film education in the early twentieth century within the context of modern arts and workers' education in New York. Section one focuses a short history of arts schools in the US with New York City as a center of cutting-edge arts education dating back to the early Republic that established an artistic and intellectual culture here. Section two contextualizes workers'

⁷⁶¹ Hans Richter, "Film as a Fighting Weapon," 1941, uncatalogued, City College of New York Special Collections, New York, NY, retrieved by Prof. Sydney Van Nort; The City College of New York Publicity Office release "Films Can be a Strong Force for Labor Film Institute Head Declares," Sept. 16, 1945, uncatalogued, City College of New York Special Collections, New York, NY, retrieved by Prof. Sydney Van Nort.

schooling and leftist art schools in relation to burgeoning film courses in the 1920s-1930s. The third section traces how film collectives built “working-class film studies,” while the fourth section details the Harry Alan Potamkin Film School as a comprehensive, unique school. Concluding the chapter is an examination of how film collectives’ schooling influenced the openings of university programs and courses in New York, mainly the New School for Social Research and City College of New York.

A Brief History of American Urban Arts Schools

Arts education developed during the early Republic, primarily with private instruction until it became integrated into public education in the 1820s for children, but adult classes remained mostly private. New York, along with urban centers like Boston and Philadelphia, grew into innovative art centers in the nineteenth century. American arts schools opened across the Northeast to continue growing cultural production in the US. In 1805, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA) opened with Charles Wilson Peale’s leadership as the first official American art school that was linked to a museum. As a highly elite and prestigious institution, doors were closed to many Americans. Women slowly gained access to the school by the late 1800s when they could take full classes, teach, and build careers here. Classes focused on painting, drawing, and architecture throughout the nineteenth century with folks contributing to independent art careers and industrial projects.⁷⁶² Many early arts courses focused on developing refined artists who could create beautiful, more skillful art that in turn, would also inspire more refined American citizens. Neil Harris writes of the early nineteenth century, “Pedagogy is most vulnerable in a democratic society.”⁷⁶³ Political leaders believed arts

⁷⁶² “Schools” of painting developed in mainly upstate New York with groups such as the Hudson River School of painting. Although this was not a tangible school or building, but more of a movement of style for nature and wilderness painting, it’s important to recognize this use of “school” within the context of art education.

⁷⁶³ Neil Harris, *The Artist in Society: The Formative Years, 1790-1860* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982),

schooling could build and reinforce democratic and republican values while the country transitioned to independence. One of the first projects of the new nation was to solidify a pedagogical direction and educational plans for shaping American citizens. Arts education had the complex role of representing political values and cultural ideals while attempting to define the artist's place in society.

While the PAFA built the foundations of art instruction in the US, of more direct relevance to those in New York was the development of the Arts Students League of New York formed in 1875 at 215 West 57th Street. Though it was a school for full-time study with prestigious training, it did not grant degrees. Moreover, the program was not based on grades. In the late nineteenth century, the League focused on more traditional arts instruction, but shifted toward premier avant-garde and modernist training by the early twentieth century. Artists John Sloan, Thomas Hart Benton, and Yasuo Kuniyoshi taught at the school between the 1920s and 1940s. Their training—focused on realism—helped to include working-class and marginalized Americans in art representation, though it did not do much for including these folks in the creation process itself. Politically, the Art Students League was liberal with some radical artists-students such as socialist cartoonist Art Young, a main artist for *The Masses*. While the school did not provide film instruction, filmmakers did emerge out of the institution, such as surrealist-dadaist Man Ray.⁷⁶⁴ The school had no formal ties to left-wing workers' collectives nor film. However, that several developing filmmakers and radical artists involved themselves indicates the Art Students League was important for the growth of arts schooling in New York City. That the school broke some norms with its stylistic training and depicting everyday Americans

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⁷⁶⁴ James L. McElhinney, *Art Students League of New York on Painting: Lessons and Meditations on Mediums, Styles, and Methods* (New York: Watson-Guptill, 2015), 13-37.

historicizes how film education evolved within a cultural and political environment that fostered art training, realism, and modernism. Even without formal film courses as models, film collectives constructed their own film education with models of arts education in New York and traditions of radical intellectual, artistic, and political movements in the 1920s-1930s.

Shifting social relations reconfigured ideas about best practices in teaching and learning. Emerging in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, progressivist education emphasized the learner's experience, the integration of real-world context, and a focus on critical thinking over rote memorization. Progressive ideas of art and education emphasized uplift or refinement for lower and middle classes rather than radical social-political change of cultural systems. Progressivist educational theories, championed by educators such as John Dewey, emphasized learning by doing, through problem-solving and collaboratively constructing knowledge. Dewey analyzed in 1938 how traditional education made learning history an "end," which disconnected past, present, and future. Active engagement with education, in a progressivist form, in addition to connecting one's experiences with schooling could bridge these gaps. Education that connected the past with the "living present" brought forth better understandings of one's lived experiences in relation to the world around them. In addition, education could serve as a positive social influence, as learning about the past could help with "dealing effectively with the future."⁷⁶⁵ Dewey's philosophy underscored the importance of connecting education to the lived experiences of students for them to integrate academic knowledge with practical skills.

One vein of progressivist reform was the role of culture to refine Americans into better political and cultural citizens. Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz's *Culture and the City* investigates

⁷⁶⁵ John Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 23.

Chicago's elite philanthropists' designing of libraries, schools, museums, and other public cultural spaces during the 1880s-1910s. Chicago philanthropists believed "cultural institutions would educate and inspire the artist and shape the taste of his public so that the people would support the true works of art that he produced."⁷⁶⁶ Using language such as "purify" and "uplift" the public suggests a passive group that was directed by reformers and elites. Horowitz even points to the University of Chicago's debates over "extending" the university by "redefining the public to include all of Chicago's citizens."⁷⁶⁷ Film increasingly appealed to progressives as an educational tool, particularly when used to teach lower and middle classes genteel morals. Film also had the capacity to immerse learners in experiential scenarios that encourage students to engage in empathy for those on and off screen. Film could visualize historical, political, and cultural messages, fostering a sense of connection and understanding that went beyond traditional textbooks and the walls of classrooms. Film collectives in New York developed schooling in a US culture increasingly interested in reforming urban education. But while scholars like Horowitz focus on elites creating political narratives and cultural spaces, film collectives worked to decenter elites in urban cultural projects and create political ideals that redistributed power.

In the arts, radical modernist styles evolved with arts valuing everyday life, urbanism, and working people. These artistic movements paralleled economic panics and increasing labor unrest. Cultural organizations combined radical labor concerns with modernist forms in the 1910s. These included *The Masses* and "The Eight" artists of the Ashcan School in NYC, Chicago, and other metropolises in the US. John Sloan's mother came from affluence, and he attended the Pennsylvania Academy of Arts under Thomas Anshutz, as did Robert Henri. Henri

⁷⁶⁶ Horowitz, *Culture and the City*, 192.

⁷⁶⁷ Ibid., 159.

and Art Young also studied at the Académie Julian in Paris in the 1880s. Others like Max Eastman and Robert Minor came from middle-class families with access to degrees at Williams College and Columbia University or classes at the École des Beaux-Arts, respectively.⁷⁶⁸ Painting, literature, and drawing, therefore, frequently required attending elite art schools and many leading artists came from middle-class white, Christian backgrounds.

Artists like William Gropper and Jacob Lawrence, however, helped change the landscape of American arts schooling in the 1910s-1920s. Gropper's parents were Jewish immigrants from Romania and Ukraine. Both worked in New York's garment industries, while Gropper and his five siblings grew up in poverty. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire in 1911 formatively shaped his stances on labor because of his parents' work in this industry, but also because he lost an aunt in the fire. Jacob Lawrence's parents migrated from the South to escape violent Jim Crow laws, but after his parents split, Lawrence entered foster care. He then moved to New York with his siblings to live with his mother in Harlem, where he worked in printing and at a laundromat after leaving high school at sixteen. Harlem's neglected neighborhoods and his daily experience seeing white Americans' cruel treatment of African Americans molded his political and artistic beliefs at an early age. Both Gropper and Lawrence engaged with art as children, keeping occupied while their parents worked long hours. Gropper made elaborate chalk drawings on his neighborhood sidewalks on the Lower East Side before attending classes at the Ferrer School (or Modern School) and Lawrence created crayon drawings in Harlem's Utopia Children's House. The Ferrer School was an anarchist-socialist school dedicated to teaching children of working-class parents, while the Utopia Children's House was created to help with after-school childcare for working-class women. Though artists like George Bellows and Robert

⁷⁶⁸ Rebecca Zurier, *Art for the Masses (1911 - 1917): A Radical Magazine and its Graphics* (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 1986), 15-66; 163-168.

Henri occasionally taught at the Ferrer School, neither organization had full-time trained arts teachers nor salaries to compensate professionalized employees.⁷⁶⁹ Gropper and Lawrence's daily lived experiences as marginalized Americans shaped their engagements with art, politics, and education; they did not receive formal training from artists' schools or as apprentices until much later in their careers. Their most formative art education came from channels outside of professional schools and occurred instead within independent institutions designed for working-class people.

This track of education was remarkably important because education in New York City was limited for working-class and poor folks, especially Jews, immigrants, and African Americans. Columbia, New York University, and other schools such as Rutgers, Princeton, Harvard, and Yale admitted mainly wealthy, white, Christian men. Jewish quotas and selective admissions processes reached heights during the 1920s-30s, effectively barring many Jews from pursuing higher education at elite institutions.⁷⁷⁰ Tuition also costed too much for most folks to afford. At Columbia, for example, tuition was around \$200 in 1921, equivalent to over \$3,000 today. It grew to about \$400 in 1938 for tuition and \$925 in overall costs of attendance—\$9,000 and \$19,000 in today's money, respectively. New York University's tuition similarly costed \$200-\$300 in 1922 and \$850 in 1938. This would have been in a range of 15-30% of working families' yearly income depending on specific job and demographics. Meanwhile, CCNY and

⁷⁶⁹ Cécile Whiting, "William Gropper (1897-1977)," in *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, ed. Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990): 283; Joseph Anthony Gahn, "The America of William Gropper, Radical Cartoonist" PhD Dissertation, Syracuse University, 1966; Patricia Hills, *Painting Harlem Modern: The Art of Jacob Lawrence*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019; Ellen Harkins Wheat, "Jacob Lawrence and the Legacy of Harlem," *Archives of American Art Journal* vol. 30, no. 1/4 (1990): 119–26; Brigit Katz, "How Jacob Lawrence Painted a Radical History of the American Struggle," *Smithsonian Magazine* (Jan. 28, 2020), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/how-jacob-lawrence-painted-radical-history-struggle-180974072/>.

⁷⁷⁰ Jerome Karabel, *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton* (New York: Mariner Books, 2006).

Brooklyn College had free tuition with total costs of attendance between \$1-\$15 a year.⁷⁷¹

Leo Hurwitz noted his difficulties attending college. Originally, he planned to go to the City College, but “his sister Eleanor’s fiancé, a Harvard student, suggested that he sit for the exam for the Harvard Club Scholarship.” Hurwitz won the scholarship that covered tuition and then took a boat to Cambridge. Unlike most at Harvard, however, Hurwitz worked in the dining halls to cover room, board, and living expenses. He was also denied the Sheldon Fellowship to study abroad in Germany because there were “too many Jews” already on the fellowship, and Harvard imposed informal restrictions on Jews admitted to the university and selective programs. Hurwitz sat in on a few art courses, but had no access to film courses. Right after college, despite a Harvard education, Hurwitz struggled to find work during the Depression.⁷⁷² And when he decided to pursue film as a career, his job prospects dwindled further. Others Hurwitz connected with faced similar challenges, though their college years are not as well-documented. Nevertheless, Hurwitz’s story reveals one version of reality for working-class, poor Jews who did enter elite, Christian-led universities: they found little social mobility, as most worked while through college with few opportunities after. Antisemitism also impacted their opportunities. And for those with radical ideas wanting to study art, college offered few options to advance skills and knowledge that would help them build a workers’ film movement.

⁷⁷¹ These are average percentages and could be higher in many cases, or be inflated due to having many children and family members to care for. “Prices and Wages by Decade: 1920-1929,” *University of Missouri Libraries Government Documents* (2018), <https://libraryguides.missouri.edu/pricesandwages/1920-1929>; “Prices and Wages by Decade: 1930-1939,” *University of Missouri Libraries Government Documents* (2018), <https://libraryguides.missouri.edu/pricesandwages/1930-1939>; US Department of the Interior Bureau of Education, Biennial Survey of Education in the United States 1920-22, Bulletin 1924, vol. 2, no. 14, 376, US Department of the Interior Bureau of Education, Biennial Survey of Education in the United States 1920-22, Bulletin 1924, vol. 2, no. 14, 376, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=umn.31951d01976418l&seq=367>; US Department of the Interior Bureau of Education, Biennial Survey of Education in the United States 1920-22, Bulletin 1924, vol. 2, no. 14, 437, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=umn.31951d01976418l&seq=437>; Walter Greenleaf, Working Your Way Through College And Other Means Of Providing For College Expenses, 1937-1939, US Office of Education and Federal Security Agency, Vocational Division Bulletin 1942, no. 210, 167, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=ien.35556004339214&seq=167>.

⁷⁷² Hurwitz, “The Last Interview,” Reel 5, 1990.

When Hurwitz reflected on his few arts courses he took at Harvard, he made a revelation about a spark for his creative draw toward film: watching his mother sew as a kid. Seeing the process of cutting fabric, stitching pieces together, and creating an original design intrigued Hurwitz. Later in his life, he saw his own work as a “seamstress” by comparing the sewing process to that of filmmaking, primarily cutting, editing, and sharing a creative product for a purpose.⁷⁷³ Like Gropper and Lawrence, Hurwitz had some schooling later in his life, but recalled experiences from his youth outside of school as formative for shaping his radical art career and understanding of his work as a filmmaker.

Workers’ Education and Leftist Art Schools

Film instruction and schools emerged alongside workers’ schools and leftist art schools during the 1920s-1930s. The New York Workers’ School opened in 1923 at 28 East Fourteenth Street under the directorship of Bertram Wolfe and other communist leaders. It was a training school with the Communist Party. By 1929, a split in the Communist Party led Wolfe and Jay Lovestone to create their own New Workers School, originally titled the Marx-Lenin School, to continue courses they believed truer to Marxist-Leninism. Those who attended both schools were actual workers from “shoe, jewelry, light electrical and food preparation industries, retail and building and needles trades were most heavily represented.”⁷⁷⁴ By the 1930s thousands of workers enrolled in classes, rising from hundreds in the 1920s. The school expanded sites to Harlem, Brooklyn, and New Jersey by the 1930s and the school was funded from its own tuition

⁷⁷³ Leo Hurwitz, interview by Ellen Hawley, 1985, cited in Sarah E. Cohen, “LEO HURWITZ: A Pioneer in The Beginnings of America’s Documentary Film, Part 3A: Radical Filmmaker in The Making,” *Characters on the Couch* (Oct. 16, 2017), <https://characteronthecouch.com/leo-hurwitz-radical-documentary-filmmaker/>.

⁷⁷⁴ Marvin E. Gettleman, “No Varsity Teams”: New York’s Jefferson School of Social Science, 1943–1956,” *Science & Society* vol. 66, no. 3 (2002): 336-359; Marvin E. Gettleman, “The Lost World of United States Labor Education Curricula at East and West Coast Communist Schools, 1944–1957,” *American Labor and the Cold War: Grassroots Politics and Postwar Political Culture*, ed. Robert Cherny, William Issel and Kiernan Walsh Taylor (Rutgers: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 205-215. Gettleman’s main sources are his interviews with David Goldway in 1988, Annette T. Rubenstein in 1989, Sender Garlin in 1988, and Doxey Wilkerson in 1990.

and in-school sales of textbooks. Diego Rivera created over 20 frescos for the school narrating an American history from the proletarian point of view of class struggle.⁷⁷⁵ The New York Workers' Schools celebrated working-class history and workers' intellectual potential.

As Gettleman, a leading historian of Communist education and workers' schools, has catalogued, courses in 1923 began at \$3.50 for twelve sessions that ran once a week, and in 1927 the cost increased to \$4.00. Workers organizations, trade unions, and foreign language associations received discounts of \$25 for four courses each term for an individual student. The school evaluated teachers' credentials "not only on the basis of their ability and experience but also on the basis of their close contact with the struggles of the workers and familiarity with their lives and needs."⁷⁷⁶ The school made efforts to provide opportunities for working-class students and teachers who could directly relate their lived experiences to high-level learning. Teachers earned about \$12 for weekly 2-hour classes ten to fifteen times a week.⁷⁷⁷ As "self-educated part-time volunteers," teachers made little money but played a vital role in pioneering workers' education in New York. In his article on the New York Workers' School, Gettleman highlights teachers' strategies to encourage students to apply knowledge to advancing strikes, protests, and other political activities including the Scottsboro Boys, Sacco-Vanzetti, Gastonia strikes, and other key events.⁷⁷⁸ These ideas filtered into film collectives' schools to encourage both students

⁷⁷⁵ "Rivera at the New Workers School," *American Magazine of Art* vol. 27, no. 2 (Feb. 1934): 97-98.

⁷⁷⁶ "Workers' School in New York City Opens Second Term," *Daily Worker* vol. 1, no. 331 (February 5, 1924): 3; "Workers' School Students Have Magazine; Interesting Article in First Issue," *Daily Worker*, vol. 4, no. 35 (February 23, 1927): 4.

⁷⁷⁷ Marvin E. Gettleman, "The New York Workers School, 1923-1944: Communist Education in American Society," in *New Studies in the Politics and Culture of U.S. Communism*, ed. Michael E. Brown, Randy Martin, Frank Rosengarten, George Snedeker (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1993): 270-272; Exhibits for Public Hearing (June 4-5, 1941) #1-85: Includes Workers School Announcement of Courses, Board of Education Resolution Expelling Isidore Begun and Mrs. Williena J. Burroughs, Teachers Union Minutes, 1933-1940, TAM.533, Box 13-RC506, Folder 4, Microform Reel: R-7860, Reel Frame: 34-0547, Investigation Files of the Rapp-Coudert Committee (New York State Legislature), Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University, New York, NY.

⁷⁷⁸ He intended for his articles on the New York Workers School, Jefferson School, California Labor School, and various conference papers and other writings to become a book entitled *Training for the Class Struggle: American*

and teachers to rely on their lived experiences as creative fodder for making and analyzing art.

These schools in partnership with radical groups also organized travel programs for Americans to study abroad in the Soviet Union for supplemental training. Several educational travel programs existed and were advertised in journals regularly. These were marketed as courses allowing Americans to travel abroad. “Edutavel” with Edutavel, Inc. and other travel programs sponsored trips to the Soviet Union, Europe, and Mexico. Advertisements ran routinely through *The New Masses* with figures like Langston Hughes and John Spivak as not only teachers, but fellow travelers. As educational courses, they were also opportunities for those without much training to learn from Soviet artists in person at Soviet schools beyond reading in papers or watching on film.⁷⁷⁹

Jewish radicals in New York also have a long tradition of workers’ education.⁷⁸⁰ In 1924, United Jewish Workers’ Cultural Society formed in Chicago primarily to advocate for Yiddish language and culture education. One main message was to develop teaching and schooling themselves as part of the Communist branches of Jewish labor.⁷⁸¹ The International Ladies Garments Workers Union developed national and city-based educational programs between 1916 and into the 1920s. As Michels notes,

In New York City, the union offered an array of courses in English, Russian, Yiddish, and eventually other languages. The ILGWU’s Unity Centers provided courses for lower-

Communism and Education, 1923-1957 that never published. Marvin E. Gettleman, (1990), “Workers School,” in *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, ed. Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas (New York: Garland Publishing Co., 1990), 853–854; Marvin E. Gettleman, “The New York Workers School, 261–280; Tony Michels, “The New York Workers School, 1923-1944: Communist Education in American Society”, in *Communism and the Problem of Ethnicity in the 1920s*, ed. Eli Lederhendler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 40.

⁷⁷⁹ “Edutavel,” *New Masses* vol. 23, no. 10 (June 1, 1937): 28; Mike Wakeford, “The Aesthetic Republic: Art, Education, and Social Imagination in the United States, 1900-1960,” PhD diss., (University of Chicago, 2014), 34-62.

⁷⁸⁰ J. Alexander, *The Right Opposition: The Lovestoneites and the International Communist Opposition of the 1930s* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1981); Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union, 1921-1934* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

⁷⁸¹ “Tsu di yidishe arbeter un unzer folkstimlekher-inteligentsia,” *Fareynikte Yidishe Arbeter Kultur-Gezelshaft Dos naye vort* (Nov. 1924): 1, trans. Tony Michels in *Jewish Radicals: A Documentary Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 191.

level students, while its Worker's University catered to the most serious learners. Its curriculum included courses in literature, drama, poetry, trade-union policies, psychology, and political and social history. More than seventy-six hundred men and women attended classes at the Worker's University in the year 1922–1923.⁷⁸²

These courses catered to students who may have had less access to great education or who As the ILGWU stated itself, “The function of Workers’ Education is to assist in the all-important task of making our world a better place for all. The truth is clear that it is the mission of the workers themselves to abolish the inequalities and injustices which they suffer, and that they can accomplish this only through organization. But it is equally clear that economic strength is much more effective if directed by intelligent, well informed, clear thinking men and women.”⁷⁸³ Courses covered the importance of history in working-class education as well as the important of knowing working-class history—the oppression but also successes to “get some joy and happiness out of their miserable existence.”⁷⁸⁴ Workers’ schools in New York thus offered courses in the arts while tying together labor, culture, and intellectual development. Those involved in film collectives and their families grew up in these same cultures and politics that shaped their approaches to film education.

One major site of education for Jews and working-class folks also became the City College of New York. The City College of New York was a free public college in New York that appealed to many working-class, immigrant, and refugee or children of refugee students—many of whom were Jewish from various NYC boroughs. For nearly 100 years, CCNY had served non-elite populations on a merit basis to provide access to higher education when many institutions did not. Often called the “harbor of the proletariat,” CCNY students (and some

⁷⁸² Michels, *Jewish Radicals*, 194.

⁷⁸³ A. J. Muste’s course titled “The Place of Workers in History” listed in a course pamphlet by the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, 1927, ILGWU Educational Department, Box 10, Folder 1, Kheel Center, Cornell University, New York, NY.

⁷⁸⁴ Ibid.

faculty) had communist and socialist organizations on or near campus. Their political activism also included printing and distributing leaflets or pamphlets with antifascist, communist, and other leftist messages to the community.⁷⁸⁵ Though not an official “workers’ school,” wealthy philanthropists did design the school for immigrants’ children and poor Americans. The school’s origins included an art collection and courses that gradually grew into an Art Department by the late nineteenth century. Labor and modern art activities grew simultaneously at the college at the start of the twentieth century. CCNY became a locus of radical intellectual and political activities in the 1920s-1930s that spurred increasing interests in arts studies amongst diverse working-class students.

Across the US, modern arts schooling grew during the 1920s and 1930s. Bauhaus and European exiles who came to the United States during the fascist takeover in Europe between the world wars brought pedagogical theories and practices to the US. For adult arts education globally, many scholars pinpoint the Bauhaus in Weimar and Dessau, Germany as “the moment” when arts education revolutionarily changed. Workshop-based education became central to teaching painting, design, architecture, sculpture, and even photography and filming of other arts. The Bauhaus, especially once it became located in Chicago in the late 1930s, radically shifted arts instruction toward Bauhaus models and Bauhaus pedagogies of collective making and workshops are central to the history of modern arts education in the US. But the Bauhaus remained less focused on integrating working-class students and participatory methods that leveled master-student hierarchies.⁷⁸⁶ Film collectives’ ongoing work in the 1920s-1930s United States sought to revolutionize modern arts education not just in pedagogy alone.

⁷⁸⁵ *Cinema and Sanctuary*, Dir. David Davidson, 2019. Though there is robust literature on CCNY, it does not mention the Film and Sprockets Society, nor the college’s importance in developing film education and politics.

⁷⁸⁶ Margret Kentgens-Craig, *The Bauhaus and America: First Contacts, 1919-1936* (Cambridge: MIT University Press, 1999), 3-36.

One arts school that did focus more on democratic participation was the experimental arts educational of Black Mountain College, which some Bauhaus members taught and studied at as well. Founded in 1933, developers strived to put experiential and participatory theories of education into practice. Based in North Carolina, it challenged the center of the art world in NYC by shifting to the South and operated with teachers and students as the school's administration and owners. Its creators, John Rice and Theodore Dreier, viewed Black Mountain as a space to connect arts with life, while allowing students to embrace both study and play to create art in community with one another. Teachers empowered learners to take risks and fail, believing such experimentation could engender monumental new ideas and practices. Attempting to implement John Dewey's experiential learning ideas, Black Mountain led with the principle of giving students "the freedom to learn in one's own way and according to one's own timetable."⁷⁸⁷ This school blended life, work, leisure, and art that resonated with many working Americans. Black Mountain, however, did not include much information or known courses specifically on film.⁷⁸⁸ Black Mountains radical experimental education did inspire filmmakers to emerge from the school, including Stan VanDerBeek.⁷⁸⁹ Even without film as a central part of its vision, Black Mountain both drew on and provided models for American arts groups to build their own spaces resistant to structures of the traditional academy.

Other experimental arts schools took more overt political approaches to education. In New York specifically, the Art Students League provided a space for leftist artists to learn techniques. Positioned as "anti-establishment," the ASL featured teachers such as Stuart Davis

⁷⁸⁷ Martin B. Duberman, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (New York: Anchor Press, 1973), 5; Amanda Fortini, "Why Are We Still Talking About Black Mountain College?" *New York Times* (July 7, 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/07/t-magazine/black-mountain-college.html>.

⁷⁸⁸ Menand, *The Free World*, 125. Menand discussed connections between the Black Mountain College and post-WWII New York cultural figures.

⁷⁸⁹ Martin B. Duberman, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (New York: Anchor Press, 1973), 283; Mike Wakeford, "The Aesthetic Republic," 46.

and Thomas Benton to train artists in mural painting. Both were affiliated with the Art Union and American Artists School in the 1930s that frequently partnered with communist organizations. Skills-based classes and lectures ran in afternoons and evenings with some occasionally on Saturdays. Tuition prices usually ranged between \$4 and \$6 per month, with a few exclusive courses up to \$17 per month.⁷⁹⁰ Advertisements promote the school as a place to study art “at a school that is *different*.”⁷⁹¹ What they celebrated as different was the combination of leftist politics with experimental arts training that could simultaneously aid labor and modern arts in New York. Film collectives’ courses applied similar concepts to film education.

As arts instructional programming grew in the interwar period, many leftist organizations created courses for dance, theater, painting, writing, and to a lesser degree, photography and film. The most direct model for the Harry Alan Potamkin Film School and radical cinema education is the John Reed Club School of Art. Harry Potamkin was involved in the John Reed Clubs near their beginnings in late 1929, with activity noted especially in 1930.⁷⁹² Potamkin published in the July 1930 *New Masses* an article on the John Reed Club as the secretary, noting that the organization was preparing to begin a film group “mobilized for the study of the technique of picture-making and the education of workers in the cinema as an ideological and artistic medium.”⁷⁹³ This group is presumably the Film and Photo League. Harry Potamkin’s early support of the John Reed Club School of Art coincided with his plans for a film school and teaching film courses at local New York universities.

The JRC School of Art began in November 1932 with courses on painting, drawing, and

⁷⁹⁰ Booth, *Comrades in Art*, 63.

⁷⁹¹ “Art Students League” advertisement, *The New Masses* vol. 23, no. 9 (May 25, 1937): 31.

⁷⁹² John Reed Club newspaper clippings list Potamkin twice, n.d., Files Series, ca. 1920s-1980s Part IV, John Reed Clubs of the United States, 1930-1936, Box 304, Folder 9, J. B. Matthews Papers, 1862-1986 and undated, Duke University Library Archives and Manuscripts, Durham, NC.

⁷⁹³ “Worker’s Art: The John Reed Club,” *New Masses* (July 1930): 20.

other visual arts. It ran until 1936 when the JRC clubs themselves dissolved in the wake of the Popular Front.⁷⁹⁴ A pamphlet for the 1935-1936 academic year described the “social viewpoint” of arts and how the instructional methods of the John Reed Club School of Art revolved around this principle. The pamphlet reads, “The courses offered, the democratic methods of instruction, the subjects treated in art classes and lectures, are designed to develop each student to the point where his art is a vital part of his life, and he as an artist is an integral part of the life around him.”⁷⁹⁵ Instructors ranged from upcoming artists to those more established in the field, including Walter Quirt, Anton Refregier, Hugo Gellert, William Gropper, Louis Lozowick, and William Siegel. Norman Lewis, an African American abstract expressionist artist, studied at the JRC School of Art.⁷⁹⁶ Lewis grew up in Harlem with Bermudan-immigrant parents—his father a fisherman and dockworker, and his mother a baker and domestic worker. He derived most of his art training from his own self-edification and acquiring art books to practice drawing and painting before attending the JRC School of Art in 1933 until 1935.⁷⁹⁷ The school welcomed Jewish, African American, immigrant, and working-class artists with little to no formal training. Leyda describes “the double phenomenon of self-education and educating younger people in one’s own profession” that was integral to leftist arts schooling and training in the early twentieth century.⁷⁹⁸ Many artists started their creative careers at the school, while others began their teaching careers.

⁷⁹⁴ Philip Evergood, “Building a New Art School,” *ArtFront* (April 1937), Vertical Files Series, ca. 1920s-1980s Part I, *ArtFront*, 1937, Box 57, Folder 19, J. B. Matthews Papers, 1862-1986 and undated, Duke University Library Archives and Manuscripts, Durham, NC.

⁷⁹⁵ John Reed Club “For Art with a Social Viewpoint,” 1935-1936, Vertical Files Series, ca. 1920s-1980s Part IV, John Reed Clubs of the United States, 1930-1936, Box 304, Folder 9, J. B. Matthews Papers, 1862-1986 and undated, Duke University Library Archives and Manuscripts, Durham, NC.

⁷⁹⁶ Booth, *Comrades of Art*, 35.

⁷⁹⁷ Billy Hodges, *Norman Lewis: A Painter's Odyssey 1935-1979* (New York: Bill Hodges Gallery, 2009), 14-25.

⁷⁹⁸ Leyda, “Advanced Training for Film Workers: Russia,” 279-286, 285; Paula S. Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920's* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

The JRC held classes Monday, Wednesday, and Friday evenings with tuition differing depending on attendance: \$3.00 per month for three nights a week, \$2.00 a month for two nights a week, and \$0.50 for single sessions. JRC members had access to courses, as did non-JRC members. The school's "primary function was to run classes on art and culture for workers and the unemployed." As such, the JRC designed courses "to train students to take a practical and active part in the development of art which will advance the interests of the working class."⁷⁹⁹ On Mondays and Wednesdays, classes focused on "drawing from life," while Friday's focused on "composition, illustrations, cartoons, posters, etc."⁸⁰⁰ Students could attend free night lectures when the JRC brought in speakers that public audiences could also attend. Artists around the city gave classes and others provided public lectures, such as Louis Lozowick's "A Marxian History of Art" in 1934.⁸⁰¹ JRC's School of Art provided a model for working-class arts education motivated by communist revolutionary politics that radical film groups often engaged with.

Schools such as the Harry Alan Potamkin Film School and the various lectures or classes collectives held were designed for working-class people and any students of film—not just those with access to universities or academic training. Polan traces how film studies programs and curriculums developed across the US in the early twentieth century to challenge earlier historiography that placed US film studies as beginning in the 1960s. He argues that intellectuals became interested in film as an art, primarily in teaching it in classrooms. This was to develop an appreciation of cinema among the American public and position film studies within the academy. In linking film studies with business elite and university administration like Patterson and

⁷⁹⁹ Foreword of the John Reed Club School of Art pamphlet, 1935-1936, Vertical Files Series, ca. 1920s-1980s Part IV, John Reed Clubs of the United States, 1930-1936, Box 304, Folder 9, J. B. Matthews Papers, 1862-1986 and undated, Duke University Library Archives and Manuscripts, Durham, NC.

⁸⁰⁰ Booth, *Comrades in Art*, 61.

⁸⁰¹ Louis Lozowick lecture "A Marxian History of Art" advertisement, *Partisan Review* vol. 1, no. 1 (1934): 64.

Freeburg, Polan highlights the various brokers involved in building educational programs as well as debates around film. These individuals had self-awareness to preserve films and study film history as it unfolded, similar to the development of the MoMA Film Library.⁸⁰² As media scholars Duncan Petrie and Rod Stoneman have emphasized, American film schools were often tied to Hollywood industry rather than to state funding or oversight as they were in Europe and the Soviet Union. Petrie and Stoneman concentrate on how this “independence” from “national policy” allowed for more “open and diverse” admittance and programs in the US.⁸⁰³ It is also important to center that “open and diverse” programs were often still restricted to white, often male, elites or those already with ties to the industry. And Jews were frequently excluded. Folks in the FPL, FSS at CCNY, and others were working-class and poor folks without ties to film industry. They, too, understood persistent antisemitism in American schooling and businesses, all of which drove them to form independent schools and lectures providing film training.

This study places film schools in a history of workers’ schools and radical arts instead of institutions like Columbia, Harvard, Syracuse, New York University, University of Southern California. Though these developed programs are important, the predecessor schools mentioned here tailored training to working-class populations and creatively designed school programs before any established film studies programs materialized in the US. Film studies therefore reemerges as a matter of working-class grassroots history with Friends of Soviet Russia, Film and Photo League, Film and Sprockets Society, and broadly, the Workers International Relief at the forefront.

⁸⁰² Sabine Haenni, *The Immigrant Scene*; Alison Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference: Cinema, Anthropology, and Turn-of-the-Century Visual Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 299. Gould and the Film Arts Guild also were very attentive to the history of film as it occurred in real time, and called for the screenings of “old, classic” works of cinema to see how far cinema has come within a few years.

⁸⁰³ Duncan Petrie and Rod Stoneman, *Educating Film-Makers: Past, Present and Future* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 51-52.; Hurwitz, “The Last Interview,” Reel 6, 1990. Members frequently reflected on their independence as organizations, rejecting that Comintern or institutional oversight dictated their projects.

Working-Class Film Studies and Potamkin's Proposal

As film studies developed in the US, film collectives pioneered “working-class film studies,” or school created by and for working-class artists. These schools prioritized workers’ intellectual growth and their status as learners, as opposed to stereotypes as “drunk, coarse, or ridiculous” Americans or “impassive in the face of these daily insults.”⁸⁰⁴ Film collectives did not argue that formal schooling in workers’ schools was necessary for making good leftist cinema. However, they did find it necessary to create the option for leftist and working-class Americans to access formal schooling and a variety of training options. One purpose was to establish workers’ collective ownership of means of production as well as activities of production, distribution, and reception.⁸⁰⁵ Such schooling prioritized night courses, multiple times to attend, flexible and reduced costs of attendance, community-shared resources, and content focused on social-political themes.

American film collectives drew inspiration not only from a tradition of leftist arts education and workers’ schools in the US but also Soviet schooling. Soviet film schooling served as models for American leftists, especially as oppositional schools to the traditional arts education and capitalist film industry. The first major film school in the world opened in 1919 in the Soviet Union.⁸⁰⁶ Film director Vladimir Gardin and filmmaker Lev Kuleshov founded the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography in 1919. It was known as the Moscow Film School and later the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography from 1934-1991. The Institute taught production training and theory in addition to film history and styles. In 1929, the Soviet Central

⁸⁰⁴ Jacques Rancière, *Proletarian Nights: The Workers’ Dream in Nineteenth-Century France* (New York: Verso Books, 2012), 261; 274-5.

⁸⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 295.

⁸⁰⁶ There were small schools in Berlin as early as 1915, and later Geneva and Budapest hosted film schools in the 1930s. “The Photograph and Film Institute of Berlin,” *International Review of Educational Cinematography* (Jan.-Dec. 1930): 1397.

Committee issued a decree “On the Strengthening of Cinema Cadres” to emphasize the training of “working-class and peasant background” individuals with a 75 percent quota.⁸⁰⁷ Working-class and peasant students entered the program in droves of 76 percent or higher until 1934. But this policy collapsed due to difficulties of working with folks entering university with minimal education as the first in their families to attend school and high dropout rates. Jamie Miller writes that “most students struggled to understand the academically challenging lectures given by figures, such as Eizenshtein, whose cross-disciplinary approach required a broad basic knowledge of theatre, art, and literature.”⁸⁰⁸ What this experience reveals historically is that even though the school attempted to bring as many working people as possible into classes, the overall structure operated too closely to a traditional elite academy. Without full consideration of workers’ needs to attend school, the mission to foster working-class schooling buckled and inadvertently grew to support more prominent travelling filmmakers and those who had previous academic experience.

The US, however, lagged behind Soviet, European, and Asian academies. The Film School at Munich, Germany opened in 1921, mostly training actors and directors, as did the Nihon University in Japan around 1921.⁸⁰⁹ Lumiere and Gaumont opened the *Ecole Technique de Cinématographie et de Photographie* in France in 1926. By 1927, there were at least three state-run schools in the Soviet Union.⁸¹⁰ The *Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia* opened in Italy in 1935 as a fascist institution under Mussolini after beginning as a National Film School in 1932.

⁸⁰⁷ Jamie Miller, “Educating the Filmmakers: The State Institute of Cinematography in the 1930s,” *Slavonic and East European Review* vol. 85, no. 3 (2007): 466; “School for Russian Writers,” *Variety* (June 19, 1929): 2. Sovkino, the main distribution branch, also began a “film writers” school led by directors and writers themselves at the Moscow School.

⁸⁰⁸ Jamie Miller, “Educating the Filmmakers,” 467.

⁸⁰⁹ “Comment and Review,” *Close Up* (Jan. 1929): 80.

⁸¹⁰ “Russia’s Three Schools Busy,” *The Film Daily* (August 28, 1927): 5.

The US had yet to have sustained conversations about film studies plans until the late 1920s with no formal institutions until the early 1940s besides the Harry Alan Potamkin Film School in 1933. Dana Polan traces early debates about film education, noting the significance of Columbia University as a site for early proposals from Will Hays, Egbert, and Milliken in 1926-1927 that consistently disintegrated into the 1930s.⁸¹¹ Educational sociologist Frederic Thrasher studied relationships between cinema and human behaviors, particularly the effects of cinema on children. Not only did he help establish a media studies program, but was involved in the 1934 course “The Motion Picture: Its Artistic, Educational, and Social Aspects” at New York University in the School of Education.⁸¹² But again, these were all in academic institutions that had cost, learning, and social barriers. Early institutional plans focused on commercial productions rather than the works of independent groups.

In 1922, the New School shifted focus to fine arts education, prioritizing the value of studying urban life and expanding opportunities to study arts.⁸¹³ As authors Rutkoff and Scott have highlighted, the New School’s Twelfth Street was located along subway and bus lines. It was “within easy reach of every resident in the New York metropolitan area, even those without automobiles,” which increased ease for students to go to the New School for evening events and classes.⁸¹⁴ Moreover, the New School quickly became a dynamic space merging modernist intellectual and artistic practices with general publics.⁸¹⁵ As early as September 1926, The New School began a “movie course” on the history and art of cinema. Terry Ramsaye, a notable film scholar, taught film courses at the New School in 1926-1927 on Thursdays 8:20pm to 9:50pm

⁸¹¹ Polan, *Scenes of Instruction*, 33-89.

⁸¹² Polan, *Scenes of Instruction*, 486.

⁸¹³ Peter Rutkoff and William Scott, *New School: A History of the New School for Social Research* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 65; 82.

⁸¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 47; 43.

⁸¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 47-49.

with twelve weekly lectures. Topics of study included film's relationship to other arts, cinema's origins, inventions, narrative and commercial structures, markets and international relations, stars and economics, spectacles and melodramas, public taste and box office sales, screen and print relationships, propaganda and war, film and education, amateur film, censorship and ethics, and future cinema (color, talkies, technique). Film courses were irregular based on no further entries of such in NS course catalogs, but film was sometimes part of Music courses. Ramsaye also proposed a 1931 course "The Moving Picture" that never occurred.⁸¹⁶ While film courses waxed and waned, the New School maintained a viewpoint of art as integral to society. A 1934 *New School Art Bulletin*, for example, noted the "collective movement of art toward historical relevance" that situated art as taking an increasingly prominent role in producing social change.⁸¹⁷

Harry Alan Potamkin taught a twelve-week course at the New School in 1932 called "Lands, Films, and Critics." The course ran from 8:20pm to 9:50pm on Mondays and cost \$10 total to take the course. A 1932 *National Board of Review Magazine* article "A Course in the Motion Picture Art" lists October 3rd as the start for the New School course. The article describes it as "an unusual series of lectures that will make up what is probably the first course of its kind in this country."⁸¹⁸ Included in the course were the lectures in order: "I's of the Movie: Inventor, Investor, Impresario, Imperialist"; "First Statements and First Principles" about early cinema; "The Compound Cinema"; "Social Energies and the National Film"; "Prestige of the American Film"; "Pivotal Films: A Critical Analysis"; "a presentation of a major silent film"; "Hollywood or Lenin Hills?" about Soviet film; "Censorship"; "The Humorous Film"; "The Animated Film";

⁸¹⁶ Polan, *Scenes of Instruction*, 98; 110.

⁸¹⁷ Rutkoff and Scott, *New School*, 228.

⁸¹⁸ "A Course in the Motion Picture Art," *National Board of Review Magazine* (Nov. 1932): 15.

and a concluding lecture with the “presentation of a major talking film.” Potamkin’s classes featured guest lecturers and film stills or images to show students. Potamkin also taught “Critical History of the Film” in 1932 at the New School, though less information of exact courses exists. Although the New School included many Marxist intellectuals and Jews—from the US and European exiles—and supported FPL exhibitions, students at this time still were mainly middle-to-upper-class and most faculty and administration remained primarily liberal progressives seeking to “reform” or “uplift” workers. Jews, workers, and immigrants could often *watch* films at theater or university exhibitions and attend lectures, but they were rarely invited in to *make* films or knowledge. Potamkin’s lectures did, however, establish foundations for teaching Soviet film in the US and film studies from Marxist perspectives.

Unlike the New School, the City College held lectures and courses in the early 1930s that hosted working-class, immigrant, and leftist students. CCNY’s first classes were infrequent and focused mainly on industry. In January 1933, *The Film Daily* reported that Irving Jacoby, who later co-founded the 1941 Documentary Institute at CCNY, developed a film course. *Educational Screen* described this course two months later, stating,

A course on the Art of the Motion Picture will be given at the spring term of the College of the City of New York by Irving A. Jacoby, A. B., formerly of Warners and now associated with B. K. Blake. Sessions will be on Wednesday evenings from a term of 16 weeks at a fee of \$10. The course is intended for members of the industry who seek the proper perspectives of films, as well as for moviegoers and students of the screen. Each of the 16 lectures will be devoted to a thorough analysis of one phase of the motion picture. Important films of the past will be shown and field work will be done in the contemporary motion picture.⁸¹⁹

The City College “The Art of the Motion Picture” ran throughout 1933 and included “important pictures no longer exhibited” with courses that followed “phases” of the film, past, present, and future. Jacoby and CCNY marketed this course toward any “intelligent movie-goer, the student

⁸¹⁹ “College Plans Course in Study of Motion Picture” *Educational Screen* vol. 12 no. 3 (March 1933): 78.

of the comparative art, and members of the motion picture industry who seek proper perspective of films.”⁸²⁰ While this course was a forerunner in collegiate film courses, it was also oriented toward preparing students for careers in the film industry. Film collectives, however, prepared students with skills that could transfer to industrial jobs, but did not shape their curricula around this goal.

Such programs also rarely included Soviet cinema or social documentaries that the FPL hailed as central to the study of cinema. Leftist filmmakers’ pedagogical strategies were at the vanguard of incorporating film studies into US education. Friends of Soviet Russia, for example, led the charge in physically bringing the first Soviet film *Polikushka* into the US in 1923 and developing histories and theories surrounding Soviet films. Soviet films *Battleship Potemkin*, *Ten Days That Shook the World*, *Mother*, *October*, *The Man with the Movie Camera* prominently featured in Film and Photo League and Film and Sprockets Society courses and discussions throughout the 1930s.

Realizing the need for more training oriented toward workers and communist politics, FPL filmmakers began makeshift courses amongst themselves to recruit new members and better inform each other about latest filmmaking techniques and theory. The Workers’ Film and Photo League adopted an anti-professionalization attitude like Soviet filmmakers in that they believed culture should be produced by and for the masses. American film collectives procured these pedagogical approaches from lectures abroad as well. During a lecture that Samuel Brody attended in Paris, Sergei Eisenstein stated, “We are working to draw broad masses into the production of our films... We have discarded the professional actor for the ‘man in the street’.”⁸²¹ This mentality of discarding elites and professionals as authorities allowed American film

⁸²⁰ “Irving A. Jacoby to Give City College Film Course,” *The Film Daily* (Jan. 19, 1933): 2.

⁸²¹ Sergei Eisenstein qtd. in Samuel Brody, “Eisenstein in Paris,” (1930) in *Celluloid Power*, 188-189.

collectives to center the authority of working masses to produce and circulate film education.

The League began holding lectures at their headquarters in the early 1930s, from both self-taught teachers and more mainstream film experts. They invited figures like Merrit Crawford of the little cinema movement to “discuss the economic history of the early American film industry and its present-day alignment” and others to lecture on new film developments.⁸²² The group also created lectures themselves. In 1931, Lester Balog, a founding member of the FPL, held photography classes to gather images to use for the press after identifying the exclusion of working-class perspectives and information on ordinary people’s suffering during the Depression within new production. Hurwitz recalled, “We organized classes to teach ourselves elements of camerawork, lighting, image-thinking, editing. We were our own teachers, there being among us individuals with different amounts of experiences in various areas. The class sessions were improvised and experimental.”⁸²³ This self-teaching involved writing short scripts to prepare for upcoming demonstrations to be filmed, reading avant-garde publications such as the British *Close-Up*, and frequently watching film across avant-garde and popular genres.⁸²⁴ All of these materials made their way into FPL classes with teachers like Hurwitz deciding how to structure their courses and topics. As they taught themselves to learn practices and ideas of filmmaking, they simultaneously learned how to teach and communicate them to the public.

Without consistent courses available at CCNY, students made their own classes through the Film and Sprockets Society starting in 1934. Their screenings and discussions focused on

⁸²² “Church Crusade Against the Hollywood Film,” *Motion Picture Daily* (Jan 24, 1935): 2; “To Discuss Film Drive,” *Motion Picture Daily* (Aug. 7, 1934): 4; “Discussion of Crusade at Film & Photo League,” *The Film Daily* (Aug. 7, 1934): 2.

⁸²³ Hurwitz, “One Man’s Voyage,” 10.

⁸²⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

European, Soviet, and American avant-garde films as well as montage and other radical techniques. Founder Bernard Gordon recalled about its origins,

This was a time before every other college and university in the United State boasted a cinema department. We did the next best thing. We started the Film and Sprockets Society and organized a film course that was attended for five sessions at the school theater by over a thousand students and outsiders... It really amounted to one of the very first film-studies courses at any school.⁸²⁵

Gordon is likely referencing the first “Film Appreciation” series in 1934. Coordinated with the Art Department on campus, FSS ran several series at Lexington Theater. Though advertisements pin this as a “series,” Gordon’s use of “film course” highlights how Gordon of the FSS and those in other collectives understood their film series as courses. Film series importantly served as arguments about stylistic, technical, historical, and theoretical developments of film. Press articles increasingly codified film series as courses throughout the 1930s. *The National Board of Review Magazine* in 1938 ran an article “The Motion Picture is Studied” about FSS, detailing how the group created “film classes” students and the public could use to train themselves.⁸²⁶ In a 1939 *New York Times* report, they reported that the Film and Sprockets Society claimed to be “furnishing, outside of the curriculum, a serious approach to motion-picture technique and criticism in an effort to enable students to distinguish good pictures from bad.”⁸²⁷ The article lists Sergei Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Rene Clair, Pabst, Lubitsch, De Mille, Vidor, Brennen, *Ten Days that Shook the World*, *Mother*, travelogue cartoons, Chaplin and Lloyd slapsticks, Boyd’s abstract films, and Ivens as features of the series. Such series established histories of film and created canons of film, even if not in a formal discipline at the time.

One main intellectual contribution of both FPL and FSS was how they developed courses

⁸²⁵ Gordon, *The Gordon File*, 27.

⁸²⁶ “The Motion Picture is Studied,” *National Board of Review Magazine* (Nov. 1938): 19.

⁸²⁷ “Movie History at City College; Film and Sprockets Society Show Tells Rise of the Industry,” *New York Times* (April 30, 1939): 54.

about documentary cinema. As early as 1931-1932, the FPL created flyers for film series, including “The History of the Russian Film” at the NYC Labor Temple that included *Polikushka* (1922), *Morozko* (1924), *Girl with the Bandbox* (1927), *Lash of the Czar*, *Village of Sin*, *Czar Ivan the Terrible* or *The Wings of a Serf* (1929), *Arsenal* (1929), *Two Days* (1927), *Turksib* (1929), and *Soil*.⁸²⁸ The flyer promoted discussions and leaflet program notes that would accompany each screening, hinting at the educational motives for viewers to come away from the show with as much information as possible with guided studying. FPL later held shows at the New School, such as “The History of the Soviet Film” in 1934 that included discussions of documentary. Between 1933 and 1935, FPL held film series about abstract experimental, documentary, Soviet, and national-ethnic cinema studies.⁸²⁹ These series established narratives about American and global cinema that students could view for cheaper than most school courses. The Film and Sprockets Society continued this approach to using film series as course, particularly for documentary. In 1938, *The Columbia Daily Spectator* included an advertisement for the Film and Sprockets Society’s fall series on documentary cinema. FSS designed the series to tell the evolution of documentary cinema from its “roots” to “developing documentary” to “contemporary” films. The series highlighted British Films such as *Night Mail* and *The Wave*, but also American Robert Flaherty and Soviet cinema. It listed *Potemkin* as a “root” film that

⁸²⁸ “The History of the Russian Film” flyer sponsored by the Film and Photo League and Workers International Relief, TAM. 083: 82501, Box 22, Folder 7, Jay and Si-Lan Chen Leyda Papers, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University Special Collections, New York, NY. It is not clear year the *Lash of the Czar* and *Village of Sin* films were made.

⁸²⁹ Tickets were purchased at the Columbia Bookstore; Columbia’s student newspaper ran several articles and advertisements for FSS events throughout the 1930s. “Merritt Crawford,” *Motion Picture Herald* (Sept. 7, 1935): 37; “Film Alliance Lists Policies and Board of 21 Advisors,” *Motion Picture Herald* (Sept. 14, 1935): 24; “Doublier to Lecture for Film Alliance,” *Motion Picture Herald* (Oct. 19, 1935): 30; “Byrd Cameraman to Speak” *The Film Daily* (Nov. 29, 1935): 4. Evelyn Gerstein lectured on Soviet and British film production. Gerstein studied production and institute techniques in the Soviet Union and England. *Motion Picture Herald* (Nov. 9, 1935): 18. With the lecture, they showed William Halstead and Julian Bryan’s film about filmmaking in the Soviet Union. “Showing Soviet Film at Lecture” *The Film Daily* (Nov. 8, 1935): 2; “Symposium on Censorship” *The Film Daily* (Dec. 17, 1935): 2. This was held at Youth House on 159 West 49th Street to talk about censored films with William Barrett of the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures, Columbia Pictures, and the Legion of Decency.

established documentary technique.⁸³⁰ The structure of the FSS series, however, charted a history of the documentary film that was international and likely provided room for vibrant discussion of different approaches, theories, and techniques for creating documentaries. All programs and lectures from these groups ran at night, often with two times to attend. Though these were not always standard courses or lectures, they created open, public-facing schooling. Including lectures and discussions, these courses allowed for participation from audiences alongside opportunities to accumulate new knowledge from those practicing in the field.

But one of the most overlooked developments in working-class film studies and the overall building of cinema studies in the US was Harry Alan Potamkin's film proposal. Potamkin first introduced his own "Proposal for a School of the Motion Picture" in 1932 in the same year he taught at the New School. He had hoped to establish a four-year Bachelor's Degree program for film studies that would become a permanent part of the university to fill the void of documentary studies in the US, but also to ensure that leftist filmmaking would persist in the US.⁸³¹ At the same time he developed this proposal, Potamkin wrote articles in various film and leftist journals on the didactic use of cinema, and contributed to the FPL's weekly digests about politics and films in attempt to educate the public on "good" films.⁸³² These various projects indicate a dedication to educating the masses about themselves but also to creating an institutional zone for intellectual discourse on film.

Prior to Potamkin's a "Proposal for a School of the Motion Picture" in 1932-1933, the premier European-international avant-garde film journal *Close Up* published an illuminating

⁸³⁰ "The Documentary Film Presented by the Film and Sprockets Society," *Columbia Daily Spectator* Vol. LXII, No. 27, (Nov. 3, 1938): 3.

⁸³¹ Potamkin, "A Proposal for a School of the Motion Picture," *Hound and Horn*, 1933 in *The Compound Cinema*, 587-592.

⁸³² Potamkin, "Motion Picture Criticism," *The New Freeman* (March 4, 1931) in *The Compound Cinema*, 47-51.

“Comment and Review” in March 1931 about both American and European film education.

Editors stated, “We cannot recommend any reliable film school nor can we advise readers as to the best way of obtaining employment in a studio. There is the State School of cinematography in Moscow but it is very difficult for foreigners to enter it. Readers who wish to work in films are advised to perfect themselves as far as possible in some technical branch before trying to obtain a position.”⁸³³ This appeared in a stream of other notes responding to various inquiries editors received from readers, which indicates a noticeable amount of people asked *Close Up* editors for film training recommendations. Not only did the editors indicate a lack of good film schools globally, but also that the best alternative route to learning about film was self-teaching.

Potamkin’s 1932 proposal emerged when film education across North America and Europe gained traction as a field of research and teaching. Italian Anton Giulio Bragaglia drafted a film school program in 1930 based on “1) theoretical culture 2) experimental application of scholarly ideas, and 3) practical artistic work.”⁸³⁴ Such school proposals catered to the upper and middle classes in formats similar to traditional arts schooling with rigid technical training based on mastery, exemplifying the fact that “college was not made for working [people].”⁸³⁵ They also focused on state film projects or preparing students to enter industrial jobs. Proposals like Bragaglia’s ensured that higher education remained inaccessible to most working and poor people, and this meant that in New York, higher education primarily excluded those who were Jewish, African American, immigrants, or children of immigrants.⁸³⁶ Potamkin and his comrades

⁸³³ “Comment and Review,” *Close-Up* (March 1931): 73.

⁸³⁴ Masha Salazkina and Natalie Ryabchikova, “Sergei Eisenstein and the Soviet Models for the Study of Cinema, 1920s-1940s,” in *Notes for a General History of Cinema*, ed. Naum Kleiman and Antonio Somaini (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Publishing, 2016), 409-410. Potamkin listed Moscow, Leningrad, England, and Berlin as “existing schools, similar to this proposal.” The England and Berlin schools are likely smaller ephemeral schools like those referenced above, though the history of film schools and education in Europe is still a topic requiring research and clarification.

⁸³⁵ Don McKenzie, “Proletarian Student,” 5.

⁸³⁶ See Marcia Graham Synnott, *The Half-Opened Door: Discrimination and Admissions at Harvard, Yale, and*

responded to a need for cultural institutions for workers, led by workers.

Drawing on Soviet models of film institutes, Potamkin grounded his pedagogy in coordinating film education to advance students' knowledge of innovative filmwork and prepare them to use film as pro-labor propaganda. The Moscow Film School remained inspirational to FPL members because of its participatory structure and direct recruiting of Soviet workers, but the group sought to rethink the overall structure of higher education and worker participation.⁸³⁷ As stated above, in 1932, Potamkin also had a US model for workers arts education with the opening of the John Reed Club School of Art in New York City. Similar to the Soviet model, the JRC School trained workers to create, show, and study art from Marxist working-class perspectives, which influenced Potamkin's teaching theory and film school plans.⁸³⁸ His pedagogical activities aligned with the broader communist missions to create study opportunities for workers and promote this study as politically necessary for advancing labor and social causes.

Princeton, 1900–1970 (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979); Marcia Synnott, "Anti-Semitism and American Universities: Did Quotas Follow the Jews?" in *Anti-Semitism in American History*, ed. Gerber, 233–76; William Trolinger, "Hearing the Silence: The University of Dayton, the Ku Klux Klan, and Catholic Universities and Colleges in the 1920s," *American Catholic Studies* vol. 124 (2013): 1–21; Harold Wechsler, *The Qualified Student: A History of Selective College Admission in America* (New York: Wiley, 1977); Benjamin Wurgaft, *Jews at Williams: Inclusion, Exclusion, and Class at a New England Liberal Arts College* (Williamstown: Williams College Press, 2013); Robert Shaffer, "Jews, Reds, and Violets: Antisemitism and Anti-Radicalism at New York University, 1916–1941," *Journal of Ethnic Studies* vol. 15, no. 2 (1987): 47–83; Jason Kalman, "Dark Places around the University: The Johns Hopkins University Admissions Quota and the Jewish Community, 1945–1951," *Hebrew Union College Annual* vol. 8, no. 81 (2010): 233–79; Jerome Karabel, *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton* (New York: Mariner Books, 2006); Edward Halperin, "The Jewish Problem in U.S. Medical Education: 1920–1955," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* vol. 56, no. 2 (2011): 140–67.; Michael Greenberg and Seymour Zenchelsky, "Private Bias and Public Responsibility: Anti-Semitism at Rutgers in the 1920s and the 1930s," *History of Higher Education Quarterly* vol. 33, no. 3 (1993): 295–319.; Kirsten Fermaglich, "The Social Problems Club Riot of 1935: A Window into Antiradicalism and Antisemitism at Michigan State College," *Michigan Historical Review* vol. 30, no. 1 (2004): 94–115; S. Perry Brickman, *Extracted: Unmasking Rampant Antisemitism in America's Higher Education* (New York: Morgan James Publishing, 2019).

⁸³⁷ Polan, *Scenes of Instruction*, 259.

⁸³⁸ Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt, "'New Masses' and John Reed Club Artists, 1926–1936: Evolution of Ideology, Subject Matter, and Style," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* vol. 12 (1989): 56–75.; John Reed Club School of Art Pamphlet, 1936, Vertical Files Series, ca. 1920s–1980s Part IV, John Reed Clubs of the United States, 1930–1936, Box 304, Folder 9, J. B. Matthews Papers, 1862–1986 and undated, Duke University Library Archives and Manuscripts, Durham, NC.

With a study program for both workers and general students, Potamkin proposed a four-year curriculum divided into mandatory introductory courses, followed by “specialized” and “seminar” courses. It included classes for enrolled students and the public to attend. Topics included history and sociology of cinema, theory, and directing and acting methods. Soviet filmmaking featured most dominantly, although Potamkin also included some Hollywood and European studio films. “Prescribed courses” were The Forms of the Cinema, The Cinema related to the Arts and Industry, The history of the motion picture, Sociology of the cinema, Comparative literatures, Languages (German, French, Russian), Principles of the performance, History of Aesthetics, and Design. History ran throughout a student’s four years. “Specialized courses” were designed to run for two or three years, leading to graduation. These included Theory of Direction, Cinematography, Acting, Scenario, and Animation.⁸³⁹

Potamkin’s “Proposal” also included plans for a film library and listed potential faculty or invited lecturers, including Sergei Eisenstein and Iris Barry. Potamkin recommended faculty who were not trained teachers, but film industry professionals and self-taught people involved in working-class film. Alexander Bakshy, Potamkin himself, Walt Disney, Eisenstein, Rene Clair, Robert Flaherty, Carl Freund, Iris Barry, and Terry Ramsaye are examples of those included. The school plan included a film library divided into “foreign” and “domestic” categories. Potamkin proposed organizing films into genres such as “Documentary” and “Experimental” as well as “Shorts” and “Subject matter,” among several others. Scenarios, Designs, Stills, and Books, Magazines, and Pamphlets were also areas of the library that would effectively create an archive.⁸⁴⁰ Jay Leyda called Potamkin’s proposal the “soundest American program for a film

⁸³⁹ Potamkin, “A Proposal for a School of the Motion Picture,” 587-592.

⁸⁴⁰ Polan, *Scenes of Instruction*, 239.

institute.”⁸⁴¹

This was largely because Potamkin and his FPL comrades argued film was worthy of high-level study, but that film also served greater social-political purposes. The FPL focused on creating documentaries and newsreels that could teach fellow Americans about the conditions workers faced during the Depression to encourage mass action for revolutionary change. This was unlike most film courses earlier in the US that focused on Hollywood fictional or classical cinema and at a moment when commercial newsreels dominated any access Americans had to news, which was largely entertainment-driven “news” detached from the realities of ordinary people, especially those suffering during the Depression. Potamkin envisioned a working-class film movement that encompassed documentary, fiction, news, and experimental forms all from a Marxist perspective that depicted workers respectfully and their lives honestly. While Potamkin proposed a broad film education available for Americans across classes and careers, that this proposal included a curriculum that considered workers as practitioners and intellectuals is key to understanding how film studies grew alongside the labor movement.

“Students Will Be Participants”: Film Education at the Harry Alan Potamkin School

The Harry Alan Potamkin Film School was a formalizing effort of film collectives to establish film training in the US. As an experimental educational, political, and cinematic endeavor, it was the first program designed to award a four-year college degree in motion picture studies in New York, second in the US. A history of the HAPFS provides an important window into the development of film studies in the US as part of communist labor, working-class, and Jewish-immigrant history while foregrounding the intellectual contributions by Jews,

⁸⁴¹ Polan, *Scenes of Instruction*, 237; Jay Leyda “Advanced Film Training: Russia,” 286. Leyda noted that educators should consult Potamkin’s proposal for building film training in the US. Leyda also cites the City College Institute of Film Techniques and Sawyer Falk’s film class at Syracuse as the most comparable educational programs to that of the Harry Alan Potamkin Film School.

immigrants, and working people.⁸⁴² What is most distinctive, however, is that it was a school to train working-class and leftist students with a focus on experimental cinema.

HAPFS was a short-lived film school intended to teach working-class people film studies and filmmaking techniques. Even with its collapse (largely financial instability), HAPFS's curriculum has lasting impacts on film studies education today—from the canonization of Eisenstein films in intro film courses to division of classes into history and theory. Organized by the FPL from 1933 until 1934, it is an example of how film studies developed alongside the US labor movement. Training workers to pick up cameras and gain knowledge about film, they believed, would create more active participants in protesting injustice in the United States. FPL led projects to mass mobilize for workers' rights and saw film as essential to the labor movement. Harry Alan Potamkin was a co-founder and dedicated member of the FPL as early as 1929-1930. His pedagogical drive was instrumental in the group's projects to develop film education from workers' perspectives and to generate leftist film that strived for a Marxist restructuring of society. The Harry Alan Potamkin Film School provides insight to growing labor schools and film studies courses in the 1920s-1930s by uniquely foregrounding education created by and for diverse workers to build film studies "from below."

HAPFS leaders—Tom Brandon, Leo Hurwitz, Sam Brody, amongst others—were close friends of Potamkin's. Potamkin likely consulted them in developing improvised, informal classes from its beginnings in 1929-1930 and they likely conversed with Potamkin about his proposal and constructing an independent film school. While many of Potamkin's proposal ideas

⁸⁴² Pamphlet for "Opening of the Harry Alan Potamkin Film School," MssCol 2100, Correspondences, Box 102, Folder J: Controversial Films, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, New York, NY; "Photo League Announces Registration for Class," *Motion Picture Herald* (Jan. 6, 1934): 72. This article read, "The Film and Photo League of New York this week announced the opening of registration for a class in elementary photography. This class, like the Harry Alan Potamkin Film School, is said to be a practical workshop planned to train those who have no experience in this direction. Nominal fees are to be charged. Classes begin January 5 at 116 Lexington Avenue, New York."

became present in the school, HAPFS goals were more explicitly tied to labor organizing. HAPFS's direct objectives were to open education to working-class people and help students apply that education to revolutionizing American society—two objectives that were often not foundational to the missions or visions of higher education institutions. Leaders of HAPFS prioritized caring for America's poor, houseless, and struggling people of all classes, races, genders, ethnicities, and immigration backgrounds. This was not a progressive “uplift” mission to refine the working class, but a radical transformative mission to provide systemic aid and change stereotypical perceptions of workers. Instead of seeking to generate university scholars or industry professionals, HAPFS's mission involved acquiring labor organizing skills and film knowledge to fundamentally change social hierarchies.

After Potamkin's abrupt death in July 1933, FPL members opened the Harry Alan Potamkin Film School in November 1933. It opened at the then FPL headquarters at 116 Lexington Avenue in New York City. The November 4th, 1933 *Film Daily* issue included a front page titled “Workshop Movie School Started” that provided the background of the school and Potamkin as well as information about its operation and leadership. As a “workshop school,” the driving pedagogy of HAPFS was that “workers who attend the school will not sit and listen to lectures, but will be a participant.”⁸⁴³ This, too, included more focus on Soviet cinema and revolutionary film theory and techniques. As the next section delves into the content of courses, this section discusses the pedagogy of the school in terms of its structure that centered workers' learning access.

An FPL announcement pamphlet prior to the opening had a registration page where multiple students could sign up at once. Within just a few weeks of announcing its opening, the

⁸⁴³ “Workshop Movie School Started,” *The Film Daily* vol. LXIV no. 30 (Nov. 4, 1933): 1.

school's enrollment reached one hundred. Enrolling one hundred students was an accomplishment. For one, it was the enrollment cap for the school given the resources and teachers available. It is especially notable that it reached one hundred students during a period when no film schools existed on the East Coast and film programs provided limited offerings, usually only open to enrolled university students at Columbia University, for example. Courses began on November 13th, 1933: two nights a week, two hours each from 8:30-10:30pm, for five months. The school had fifty regular students and one full-year cohort between 1933-1934.⁸⁴⁴

Tom Brandon of the FPL directed the school. Brandon came from a working-class family in Philadelphia, like Potamkin. But Brandon did not finish college like Potamkin in the 1920s because of his inability to afford higher education. He then worked as a "milk truck driver, amateur boxer, and professional prizefighter," and began working with the FPL in New York around 1931.⁸⁴⁵

As most FPL members who taught at HAPFS came from working families, they designed the school to fit workers' lifestyles. Leo Hurwitz, for example, had to work about seventeen hours in the dining halls to cover living costs even after having the Pulitzer Scholarship to attend Harvard University.⁸⁴⁶ Having this experience as a student influenced him as a teacher. Classes ran at night to prioritize working-class and poor students' participation—no prior film experience required.⁸⁴⁷ Designing the school around an 8-10pm timeframe gave students the opportunity to attend after work, unlike most universities and colleges where courses ran throughout the

⁸⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁵ "New Frontiers in American Documentary Film: Other Members," *American Studies at the University of Virginia* (2009), <https://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA01/Huffman/Frontier/others.html>.

⁸⁴⁶ Hurwitz, "On Time, Art, Love, and Trees," 1980.

⁸⁴⁷ "100 Enroll in Film School," *The Film Daily* (Nov. 23, 1933): 3. The article reads, "One hundred students, the capacity of accommodations, have already enrolled in the Harry Alan Potamkin Film School, sponsored by the Film and Photo League and now in its second week, it is announced by Tom Brandon, director. Tuition fees are based on the ability of students to pay. Exhibitors in the metropolitan area are being asked by Brandon to extend reduced rates to the students. Other individuals interested in helping are invited to send books, magazines and equipment."

workday. Evening workers' schools originated in 1660s Dutch colonies in the Americas, specifically what eventually became New York.⁸⁴⁸ At the start, night schools were for boys who worked during the day, and gradually expanded throughout the nineteenth century to teach a wide range of courses and to serve immigrant populations in urban areas. The reality of workers studying at night challenged divisions between manual laborers and intellectuals.⁸⁴⁹ Jacques Rancière also described the demanding lives of artists workers like a “locksmith-poet,” who spent days manual laboring and spent “nights polishing his prose and verse...”⁸⁵⁰ Without evening courses, most working people would not have been able to practice or study arts.

Additionally, HAPFS had pay-as-you-can tuition system, which showcases the deliberate schooling for workers compared to elite and middle-class institutions with set tuition and fee prices. HAPFS ran on donations of books, equipment, and other supplies to reduce costs for students and teachers. Brandon encouraged local NYC theaters and screening hosts to bring in students to their films with “reduced rates” to provide affordable opportunities for students to engage with film outside of the classroom.⁸⁵¹

The workshop-based model allowed students to gain intellectual and practical skills, encouraging both studying film and creating it. Moreover, film schooling that prioritized leftist working-class learning and social issues offered an arts education rooted in democratic classroom participation—still with structure, but focused on collaborative projects rather than master-pupil knowledge transmission. One announcement noted a main project to “cooperatively produce a documentary film” at the school.⁸⁵² *The Film Daily* article announced: “It will be a

⁸⁴⁸ Linda Carter, “A Hard Day’s Night: A Hard Day’s Night: Evening Schools and Child Labor in the United States, 1870-1910,” *The Journal of Economic History* vol. 70, no. 2 (2010): 459.

⁸⁴⁹ Rancière, *Proletarian Nights*, viii.

⁸⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 304.

⁸⁵¹ “100 Enroll in Film School,” *The Film Daily*, 3.

⁸⁵² Tom Brandon, “Workers Study the Film,” *New Theatre* (Jan. 1934): 14-15.

workshop school based on actual production and projection of American and foreign films, says Brandon, with tuition based on the student's means. Classes... will include History of the Movie, Film Criticism, Technique, Production and Criticism."⁸⁵³ HAPFS created a community-based film studies curriculum—one rooted in the immediate needs of US and global workers to address social conditions and to respond to changing aesthetic and political landscapes. This school focused on public, affordable education that used community resources for financing and teaching and learning materials.

With classes taught by "comrades," this model also emphasized the importance of working-class people as teachers, not just audiences.⁸⁵⁴ Likewise, the opportunity for working-class students to learn from working-class teachers became a key dynamic of the school that was unique compared to US universities. The teachers were FPL members with some invited lecturers. Instructors included David Platt, Ralph Steiner, Leo Seltzer, Leo Hurwitz, and Lewis Jacobs for various classes on history, theory, and production. Sam Brody and Irving Lerner taught class on criticism⁸⁵⁵ They also gave lectures on film as a political tool by using Soviet films and juxtaposing them with Hollywood pictures.⁸⁵⁶ That teachers encouraged students to actively engage and create as part of their learning was a style of teaching that was just becoming more known in the early twentieth century trailing the Progressive Era. John Dewey's theories about both education and art as embedded in daily life, emphasizing that active participatory learning generates knowledge, would push these concepts into the mainstream by the 1930s.

Though the school was created in memorial of Potamkin and did draw on his earlier

⁸⁵³ "Workshop Movie School Started," *The Film Daily* vol. LXIV no. 30 (Nov. 4, 1933): 1.

⁸⁵⁴ Campbell, *Cinema Strikes Back*, 56.

⁸⁵⁵ Sam Brody was listed as "faculty at the Harry Alan Potamkin Film School" in "Nazi Film Agent Flees Coop; Demonstration Fizzles Out," *The Jewish Daily Bulletin* (Feb. 15, 1934): 2.

⁸⁵⁶ Polan, *Scenes of Instruction*, 152; "Workshop Movie School Started," *The Film Daily*, 1.

proposal, it was not, however, a direct translation of his proposal into a school. The actual school veered slightly to link the school directly to communist labor. Dana Polan and Russell Campbell have emphasized the differences between Potamkin's proposal and the FPL Film School. They both note how Potamkin intended for a university four-year program to professionally train students, whereas the HAPFS created by the FPL after Potamkin's death trained "workers and intellectuals who have pledged to become active participants in the work of the Film and Photo League upon completion of their studies (a five-month course)" ⁸⁵⁷ While Potamkin's proposal was primarily to create a film degree and department at an existing university, the HAPFS could avoid constraints of traditional academia but also target more explicitly to working-class students. HAPFS drew from pedagogies of other leftist art organizations, such as the John Reed Club and its Art School, to create a radical film education intended to democratize filmmaking opportunities and the study of film. "[Enabling] workers to use their knowledge of photography" and film, the school celebrated the learning potential of workers.⁸⁵⁸

Tailored to working-class students, HAPFS focused on training workers in artistic production, history, and theory. The workshop emphasis but also the content had similar structures to that of the John Reed Club art schools—art in society, social functions of art, Marxist aesthetics, and technical training. Arts schooling became increasingly important to the labor movement in the 1920s and 1930s for workers to hone intellectual and artistic skills that allowed them to analyze and create from their lived perspectives. Education at the school encouraged learners and teachers to not only understand their social-political lives but also to actively participate in labor organizing through the medium of film. The 1933 course pamphlet for the school stated, "Students will be participants. The function of the leaders of each class will

⁸⁵⁷ Polan, *Scenes of Instruction*, 261; Campbell, *Cinema Strikes Back*, 57.

⁸⁵⁸ Campbell, *Cinema Strikes Back*, 56.

be to present the problem and to participate with the students in its solution.”⁸⁵⁹

Key courses at HAPFS included Technique, Production, History of the Movie, History of the Soviet Film, and Film Criticism.⁸⁶⁰ Such courses responded to the rapidly shifting aesthetic and political concerns in the interwar period by teaching workers the basics of film studies in relation to how they could apply them to labor organizing. Workers could become practitioners and scholars of cinema and class politics with both lecture and discussion modules alongside hands-on learning with equipment.

Technique is listed as the first course as “a workshop class” with Irving Lerner, Leo Seltzer, Ralph Steiner, and Barton Yager as instructors. Projection, Lighting, Camera, Laboratory. Sam Brody and Lewis Jacobs led the Production class. The description notes that “A short documentary film will be produced by the class” as students learned about montage theory, structure, and editing. One known workshop film Sam Brody directed was *Waste and Want* in 1934, though the content is not archived. The school’s experiential pedagogy becomes more apparent on the following page describing the structure of courses, stating that “Students will handle films, cameras, splicers, projectors, and other equipment.”⁸⁶¹ From the first day in class, students were expected to engage in absorbing and applying material learned on site.

The course categories illuminate how FPL leaders (and Potamkin) elevated learning how to operate camera equipment, studying the cultural-political history of film and various theories about film, and being able to evaluate films and communicate effectively about the history and theory of film. History of film was important to FPL not only intellectually, but also politically.

⁸⁵⁹ Pamphlet for “Opening of the Harry Alan Potamkin Film School,” 1933, MssCol 2100, Correspondences, Box 102, Folder J: Controversial Films, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, New York, NY. (hereafter cited as Pamphlet, 1933, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures Records).

⁸⁶⁰ Ibid.; “Experimental Cinema in America,” *Experimental Cinema* no. 5 (1934): 54.

⁸⁶¹ Students and faculty elected a “School Committee” to administer the school. “Film and Photo League Filmography,” *Jumpcut*, 33; Pamphlet, 1933, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures Records.

One course was History of the Movie taught by Leo Hurwitz and David Platt—a “comprehensive survey of the technological, social and economic history of the motion picture, from peep-show to movie-palace.” Themes included censorship, labor, war, and others. Separately, students took History of the Soviet Film taught by Nathan Adler with guest lectures from Joseph Freeman and Joshua Kunitz. Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Vertov were main subjects of the course, emphasizing their theories of film. Film Criticism is the final course listed and required by HAPFS after passing the previous ones. Taught by Sam Brody and Irving Lerner, it focused on “workers’ film correspondence and the film forum” as well as broad literature on cinema.⁸⁶² Potamkin’s proposal included history, theory, technique, and production as well, and film criticism was the core of Potamkin’s career.

These courses signify deep thinking about organization and pedagogy rooted in working-class lived experiences. Scaffolded learning experiences prepared students with delineated topics such as production and history, but also prepared students to have a comprehensive understanding and practice of cinema work and art. Because HAPFS stated, “No previous camera experience or equipment required for any of the courses,” they began instruction at its very basics to build toward more complex applied learning. Fibla-Gutiérrez focuses mainly on Potamkin’s emphasis on film criticism as pedagogical. But one main point of the essay is to reframe Potamkin’s pedagogical ambitions, alongside Piqueras and Moussinac in Europe, not as “failures” but as long-term impactful sentiments and projects. He notes that if we reside Potamkin and others’ projects to “their immediate historical present,” we overlook their critical influences on film culture across both geographical and temporal boundaries.⁸⁶³ This is also true

⁸⁶² Pamphlet, 1933, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures Records.

⁸⁶³ Enrique Fibla-Gutiérrez, “Film Called into Action: Juan Piqueras, Léon Moussinac, Harry Alan Potamkin and The *Internationale* of Film Pedagogy,” *Screen* Vol. 58, no. 4 (Winter 2017), 435-436.

of the entire HAPFS.

After the HAPFS closed due to insufficient financing, FPL continued improvised and sporadic courses in 1934. In January 1934, *Motion Picture Herald* reported new FPL classes beginning on January 5th at the FPL headquarters. The article discussed “the opening of registration for a class in elementary photography. This class, like the Harry Alan Potamkin Film School, is said to be a practical workshop planned to train those who have no experience in this direction.”⁸⁶⁴ In 1934, Brody proposed that the Film and Photo League connect with the Workers School to advance educational film and film education.⁸⁶⁵ Members also discussed a possible joint school with New Dance League and New Theatre League in 1935 that never happened.⁸⁶⁶ This partly resulted from most workers’ and communist cultural organizations folding by the mid-1930s, but also from conflicts in how to lead, operate, and finance the schools. Meanwhile, the FPL sought out more sustainable ways of holding classes and screenings, including building their Educational Committee to serve as a liaison with major film institutions and schools, including the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures.⁸⁶⁷ Popular Front politics shifted many revolutionary leftist organizations, like the FPL, toward coalitions with organizations of similar and more moderate politics.

FPL also increasingly held exhibitions at the New School for Social Research, starting in 1933 until 1935, that expanded many of the topics held at the Harry Alan Potamkin Film School.

⁸⁶⁴ “Photo League Announces Registration for Class,” *Motion Picture Herald* (Jan. 6, 1934): 72.

⁸⁶⁵ Samuel Brody, “The Revolutionary Film: Problem of Form,” *New Theatre* (Feb. 1934): 21.

⁸⁶⁶ Russell Campbell, *Cinema Strikes Back*, 58.

⁸⁶⁷ In 1934 and 1935, the Educational Committee of FPL wrote several letters to the NBR, including several asking the NBR to have FPL members on the Better Films committee. This committee was at the forefront of ranking domestic and foreign films as well as determining if films needed amending before release to the public. Although Soviet and radical films were often still accepted by the NBR, the organization was hesitant to fully support the FPL and left-wing politics. Film and Photo League Educational Committee and National Secretary David Platt letter to National Board of Review Better Films Committee, Nov. 12, 1934, MssCol 2100, I: Correspondences, Box 3, Folder: Film and Photo League, National Board of Review of Motion Pictures records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, New York, NY.

Jay Leyda became a primary lecturer, giving talks in courses and night lectures. On February 22nd, 1938, Jay Leyda held a single lecture on “Russian documentary films” for \$1 at the New School at 8:20pm as part of the “Documentary Film” course. Leyda showed scenes of Eisenstein’s *Ten Days That Shook the World* (1927), Dovzhenko’s *Ivan* (1932), and Vertov’s *Three Songs About Lenin* (1934) as part of his lecture to illustrate his arguments about Soviet stylistic and political attributes.⁸⁶⁸ The 1939 New School Spring course catalog lists two film courses: Sidney Kauffman’s “Cinema: Introduction and Survey” course and a “Workshop on Filmmaking” with Jay Leyda and Irving Lerner.⁸⁶⁹ These courses ramped up at the New School as CCNY began expanding its documentary training into a full institute by the end of the 1930s.

When the FPL officially ended in 1936, an offshoot of internal members formed the Photo League in New York. The group consisted of some photographers associated with the former FPL and newcomers interested in social photography but engaged very little with film. The Photo League was much less embedded in communist and labor organizing, and several Photo League members even named former FPL people to the House of Un-American Committee (HUAC) in the 1940s and 1950s. However, one of the Photo League’s main assets, as scholars have continuously emphasized, was its school and course schedules throughout the 1930s and 1940s.⁸⁷⁰ The Photo League continued a workshop model and pedagogical approach of experimental hands-on training derived from FPL activities, primarily the improvised courses of the film collective and later the formal structure of the Harry Alan Potamkin Film School. Radical film collectives’ participatory schooling models and community education projects

⁸⁶⁸ The New School for Social Research Bulletin No. 9. Feb. 14, 1938, NS030102_bd380214, New School Bulletin Collection, The New School Archives and Special Collections Digital Collections, New York, NY, https://digital.archives.newschool.edu/index.php/Detail/objects/NS030102_bd380214

⁸⁶⁹ “Arthur Mayer Starts Industry Lectures,” *Motion Picture Daily* (May 9, 1936): 7.

⁸⁷⁰ Anne Tucker, Claire Cass, and Stephen Daiter, *This Was the Photo League Compassion and the Camera from the Depression to the Cold War* (Chicago: Stephen Daiter Gallery, 2001); Ann Tucker, “The Photo League,” *Illuminations* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 165-170.

filtered into several larger institutions in the 1940s that although less overtly leftist, still maintained a dedication to experiential learning and employing art and film as tools for social change. By creating their own curriculums, classes, and schools, they experimented with radical modernist film education with working-class and amateur folks at the center.

Conclusion

This study uncovers the efforts of film collectives to experiment with film schools and curriculums before film studies became integrated into official collegiate programs. By the late 1930s and early 1940s, film courses at New York universities expanded to include formal institutes and degree-granting programs. At the New School and City College of New York, documentary film became central to their programs with premier training in the US. Film and Sprockets activities continued through 1941 with film programs and production; however, the group largely fizzled out by late 1941. This was not due to diminished interest in film, but rather the expansion of programming and curriculums FSS spearheaded.

The Film Institute opened in 1941 at CCNY under the leadership of Hans Richter, a German exile and maker of experimental and abstract films and painting. New York University's official film Bachelor's program began the same year after years of singular classes by Robert Gessner.⁸⁷¹ But the CCNY Film Institute focused on documentary cinema. Irving Jacoby understood film as an important communicative tool as well as a persuasive one and the institute was connected with Office of War Information. He recognized the power of European propaganda films, particularly those in Germany and Britain at the time, to instruct audiences.

⁸⁷¹ David O'Neill and John Zarrilo, "Guide to the George Amberg and Robert Gessner Papers," MC.199, 2019, New York University Archives, New York, NY, https://findingaids.library.nyu.edu/archives/mc_199/. In 1935, Gessner taught in NYU's General Education department before teaching a course "Cinema as a Literary Art" at Washington Square College, the first cinema course for credit at a liberal arts college. Then in 1941 at NYU, Gessner founded the Motion Picture Department. It was the first Bachelors-degree granting four-year film program in the United States.

After being in Europe, he came back to US with intentions to establish similar practices after noticing the US's lack of documentary compared to Europe leading up to and during WWII. He wanted to establish space where documentary filmmakers could be "trained." John Grierson and Robert Flaherty, whose films FSS screened during their "Documentary Film Series," were both on the advisory board. A single person taught classes and sometimes brought in guest speakers whose names were well-known in documentary circles, including Flaherty who showed *Nanook of the North* to students. Political and social filmmakers were also invited into classes to discuss their filmmaking processes, theories, and history. Leo Hurwitz, Sidney Meyer, and Leo Seltzer are a few who were directly associated with Communist or leftist groups such as FPL in the 1930s. For example, Leo Seltzer instructed directing and Meyers on editing. Richter also invited in various European exiles who created antifascist and social problem films during the 1930s-40s. Joris Ivens, creator of *Spanish Earth*, was one such figure. The Institute also benefitted from the knowledge of US Film Service workers, such as Willard Van Dyke and Al Wasserman who helped make *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, *The River*, and *The City* through Roosevelt's New Deal funding. Each of these filmmakers' movies had been exhibited at CCNY through the FSS in the 1930s.⁸⁷²

Teachers, including Richter, at the Institute were not professionally trained; many were working filmmakers as well as political activists. The Documentary Institute followed a workshop model similar to the HAPFS. Richter even invited former FPL members to guest lecture modules or courses for the program. Leo Seltzer, Leo Hurwitz, and others taught at the Institute in the early 1940s about film production, history, and technique. Leo Hurwitz and Leo

⁸⁷² Carole M. Carp, "Focus on Forty Years of Filmmaking" describing the history of film at CCNY and the Film Institute with Richter, uncatalogued, City College of New York Special Collections, New York, NY, retrieved by Prof. Sydney Van Nort.

Seltzer oversaw students creating their own productions on and around campus as part of the class projects. Films produced in those classes often featured labels “CCNY Workshop” for the production credits. That faculty were “hands-on” and not professionalized in the same ways as those in established departments created tensions at the college. The Institute received little funding or support from others on campus. Richter often brought income into the program by making instructional films and writing about the Institute in journals and magazines. Most classes ran during nights and weekends until becoming more integrated and accessible for students during the daytime. An article about the Institute illuminates the working-class community and outreach this program developed:

Because of the lack of proper facilities at the College, classes, nearly all scheduled at night, were held in the Preview Theater at Broadway and West 49th Street...Most of the students were not from the college community and worked during the day, as did most of the teaching filmmakers. Since no regular funding was available, President Wright formed a non-profit organization to buy equipment for the program. The separation from the regular college community and routine, and the proximity to primary film activity in the city, created a special artsy atmosphere—autonomous and distinctly non-academic.⁸⁷³

The community’s involvement in CCNY allowed film training to reach beyond those in enrolled classes and integrate everyday people into higher-level learning.

The film *Cinema and Sanctuary* describes the CCNY Film Institute under Richter’s modernist expertise as a “groundbreaking program [that] exposed thousands of working class kids raised on Hollywood movies to the power of documentary film.”⁸⁷⁴ During the Institute’s operation, it is estimated that it “taught more than 2000 students” on documentary films.⁸⁷⁵

Workshop film education accelerated in the 1960s as many independent film groups sought to

⁸⁷³ Ibid.

⁸⁷⁴ “World Premiere of *Cinema and Sanctuary*,” *PR Newswire* (Jun 20, 2019), <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/world-premiere-of-cinema-and-sanctuary-a-documentary-about-the-fascinating-life-of-pioneering-experimental-filmmaker-hans-richter-and-americas-first-documentary-film-school-300871857.html>.

⁸⁷⁵ “City College Institute of Film Techniques 10th Anniversary: ‘Special Showing of Student Workshop Films at Museum of Modern Art on January 22,” *Educational Screen* (Jan. 1953): 14.

challenge hierarchical higher education at a moment when Film Studies had become more widespread programs in US universities and colleges. Britain experienced a “Workshop Movement” in which art and film workshops exploded in the 1960s into the 1970s.

By the late 1940s-1950s, the Institute and FSS former members faced increasing surveillance because of their relationships with FPL members, Communist-associated filmmakers, and experimentalism with foreign films. CCNY students also ramped up direct actions, such as on April 11th, 1949 when several students went on strike to remove an antisemitic administrators and faculty members. This protest was also to demand removal of racial segregation at CCNY.⁸⁷⁶ Protesting students, staff, and faculty faced removal from the university or possible retaliation from administration or students. The Institute came under scrutiny for its support of radical filmmakers and teachers, which caused issues with funding and overall support at the university. Students filmed engineering students and technology at CCNY with *Tomorrow's Engineers* that Leo Seltzer, a former member of the FPL, oversaw.⁸⁷⁷ Such films and education associated with communism quickly faced political challenges on campus and throughout the city. Political repression of cultural activities from the US government and institutions deeply affected independent, experimental filmmaking in the US, especially for those associated with the left.

By the 1960s, the Film Institute had largely lost its radical, experimental thrust forged by leftist, surrealist, dada, abstract filmmakers, and amateur teachers. As the political tensions of the

⁸⁷⁶ *Cinema and Sanctuary*, Dir. David Davidson, 2019. This program was quickly shut down by Congress after being labeled “New Deal propaganda,” hence many of these filmmakers went elsewhere to create documentary cinema. Here, students could take film studies course as English electives. Introduced to European art films, students developed a sense of experimental non-fiction and fiction filmmaking. One student described his experience of the school as being able to take a Literature class that featured Thomas Mann and others to then take a Film course right after to watch *Un Chien Andalou*. Surrealist and Dada influences became ever-present in Richter’s classes and institute.

⁸⁷⁷ Lawrence Weiner, “Tenth for City College,” *Movie Makers* (Feb. 1953): 46.

1940s-50s targeted left-wing and experimental artists, much of the cultural-political environment of the 1930s that supported documentary cinema, social-political cinema, and amateur artistry waned. Institutionalization and professionalization of the program partially led to its faculty and administration reacting to trends in US universities across the US, including commercializing film practices and left-wing repression. Film programs sprung up across the country at elite universities that became tied to the film industry. This challenged the Institute's anti-industry approach since it predicated itself on independent filmmaking by grassroots students and political activists who were interested in capturing daily NYC and student life through nonfiction works of art. Though the Institute's leadership maintained less emphasis on experimental, amateur cinema making and teaching, students in the program maintained their radicalism.

In 1965, students protesting the administration's hostility and threats to close the program projected Flaherty's *Nanook* onto President Gallagher's building at night. Gallagher and other traditional academics often shunted film as vocational rather than art or worthy of academic study on par with other subjects. As students, alumni of the Institute, and other filmmakers sent letters to CCNY as part of the Committee to Save the Film Institute and independent citizens, they indicated that film was "an abused art form" but necessary for "a modern college" like CCNY. They also took this issue to *Variety*, a popular film journal, to gain publicity for this issue and pressure CCNY.⁸⁷⁸ Student activities such as this indicated that FSS's spirit continued within the CCNY student body, still willing to fight for the value of cinema education and documentary, even if CCNY administration refused to embrace this.

Though the Institute is often credited with creating an institutional space for providing exposure to, discussion, and study of modern art films, this program grew out of grassroots

⁸⁷⁸ "New York Sound Track," *Variety* (Jan. 15, 1964): 15.

efforts and informal schools many of the same figures set up in years prior to the opening of the Institute. Leo Hurwitz and Leo Seltzer with FPL, for example, had been educating on documentary filmmaking and setting up ad hoc workshops throughout the 1930s in NYC, while the Film and Sprockets Society made their own documentary production and education group on CCNY's campus. The culture of leftist documentary from the FPL and FSS in the 1930s, as well as the culture of CCNY's student population, laid the foundations for established film programs to emerge.

New York institutions evolved from grassroots schooling. Most apparent of these were the City College of New York and the New School for Social Research. Potamkin lectured at the New School in the early 1930s, while the Film and Photo League's exhibitions and Jay Leyda's lectures provided course models for the New School's later courses. Though radicals and workers more rarely frequented New York University, Robert Gessner helped organize the Film Institute at NYU and continued to teach throughout his life after being a part of radical groups in the 1930s, namely writing for *New Theater* and writing about the Film and Photo League. Leo Hurwitz, too, remained dedicated to film as a pedagogical medium throughout his career, working for television in the 1940s-1960s and making films for programs such as National Educational Television in 1966. Hurwitz also became a professor of film and chairman of the Graduate Institute of Film and Television at New York University from 1969-1974. Leo Seltzer lectured at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York and continued making didactic films for government agencies in both the US and Germany.⁸⁷⁹ Several FPL members and their pedagogical ambitions became part of the structure of film studies in the US that continues to inform film students of today.

⁸⁷⁹ Leo Seltzer, "Documenting the Depression," 254.

Despite the growth of film education in the US by the late 1930s, Jay Leyda still did not believe US higher education had reached sufficient growth. Leyda wrote in *Hollywood Quarterly* in 1946 about the “Advanced Training for Film Workers.” In highlighting the successes of the Soviet Union throughout the twentieth century in developing wonderful film education, Leyda compared US training as less than ideal. He wrote,

I received a cable from the Soviet film journal, *Iskusstvo Kino*, requesting me to prepare an article for them on ‘film schools, training, and libraries in the United States.’ Soviet film education has been conducted for so long on such a broad scale, both in technical and in audience training, that the editors of *Iskusstvo Kino* naturally assume that the great American film industry must be doing at least as much in this field as the far smaller Soviet film industry. I have not yet had the courage to tell them that the American film industry has nothing of the sort.⁸⁸⁰

Leyda draws an interesting point about how the American film industry and Hollywood have reached unparalleled financial and global influential success, but have not made the same strides in developing state-of-the-art film education. However, as I argue throughout this study, looking to major national institutions as indicators of educational, artistic, and political successes can cause us to overlook the robust networks of film education that smaller, often less financially or nationally stable organizations pioneered. Leyda also wrote this at a moment when film schools continued to grow across the US, but was correct in noting the comparative lag in US-industry and government-sponsored film schooling. Leyda’s irregular teaching at the New School and involvement in the Harry Alan Potamkin Film School made him privy to the grassroots development of radical film studies, but also close to the isolation of these programs in the US.

Nevertheless, a more robust network of film courses throughout the 1920s-1930s existed than previously thought. Self-taught educators outside of universities and grassroots collectives identified gaps in training and lack of access in universities or museums. Creating educational

⁸⁸⁰ Leyda, “Advanced Training for Film Workers: Russia,” 279-286.

centers that prioritized working-class people made more opportunities for workers to both learn about film and experiment with making film. Connections between the Friends of Soviet Russia, Film and Photo League, and Film and Sprockets Society show attempts at sustained film training for students to create, study, and distribute information about film. Filmmakers employed pedagogical strategies to valorize both the film form and leftist political values. Their projects were not merely about inculcating revolutionary politics and aesthetics amongst the masses, however. Their dedication to educating the masses about themselves and creating film infrastructures in the US shaped alternatives for students of film to have contact with and learn about non-Hollywood or commercial productions. Rather than isolating these radical figures and their organizations as failed communist projects, through the lens of their pedagogical impulses, a new image of their integral value to constructing film education and institutions emerges.

CONCLUSION: RETHINKING RADICAL FILM HISTORY

When the Film and Photo League began in 1929-1930, it established goals “To organize classes in the technique, development and history of the film” and “to help establish a film library where classics can be preserved and made available to students.”⁸⁸¹ By the end of the 1930s, New York City became a premier location for both film study and film preservation. What this project interposes is clarifying the history of how communist arts organizations across the interwar period majorly contributed to this feat. Growing from the 1920s projects of the Friends of Soviet Russia and Workers’ International Relief, FPL’s combination of politics and aesthetics in the 1930s formed the bedrock of radical film education that also inspired CCNY’s Film and Sprockets Society and the eventual establishment of film schools and study centers across the US. But the education film collectives imagined and designed centered the daily lived experiences and needs of working-class Americans rather than common traditional academic standards.

Collectives’ designing, sharing, and preserving of film education in the 1920s and 1930s provided “a great school of struggle and filmmaking” for working-class artists and intellectuals involved.⁸⁸² By embedding communist politics in their film activities, film collectives directed their energies toward teaching working-class people to unlock their creative potential. They resourcefully designed film activities to reach working-class audiences, engage intellectuals in labor, and contribute to film studies as a developing discipline. On the streets of New York, young radicals made portable projectors from automobile engines and used pawned cameras to

⁸⁸¹ Film and Photo League organization points and announcements with founding principles and options for membership support, c. 1931, New York Film and Photo League, Box CC, Folder 1041-1 (A), Film and Photo League, Film Study Center, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY.

⁸⁸² Leo Hurwitz, "One Man's Voyage: Ideas and Films in the 1930s," *Cinema Journal* Vol. 15. No. 1 (Autumn, 1975): 15.

document Americans' changing urban and rural socio-economic conditions. Modernist artistic styles were part of workers' daily lives rather than isolated frames on museum walls. Such works, they believed, could structurally transform American culture and politics. Workers' film education focused on democratizing intellectual production, political action, and cultural participation. Film collectives provided accessible outlets to participate in Marxist class struggle and avant-garde experimentation.

Communal experimentation characterized workers' and leftists' educational practices in the 1920s-1930s. Learning facilitated novel ideas and practices, and film collectives experimented with pedagogies and learning opportunities. Marxist educational theorist Paulo Freire, in his 1983 "The Importance of the Act of Reading," argued that the process of learning was community-based, yet an individualized journey where one could express creativity in how and what they learn. Workers and other Americans engaged with film studies through a variety of media. Some read magazines in their homes and others attended Soviet films at local theaters. Two years later in his 1985 essay "The Act of Study," Freire wrote "To study is not to consume ideas, but to create and re-create them."⁸⁸³ Film collectives of the 1920s-1930s made study part of their direct action and ideological framework. They emphasized not only the creativity of education, but also the participatory and transformative nature of education when aligned with democratic political and aesthetic values.

The aesthetic, political, and educational legacy they leave us with is that if we are to destroy the oppressive world we live in, we also must participate in the thoughtful, innovative re-creation of a new egalitarian world. "Freedom dreams," in the words of historian Robin D.G.

⁸⁸³ Paulo Freire and Loretta Slover, "The Importance of The Act of Reading," *The Journal of Education* vol. 165, no. 1 (1983): 5–11; Paulo Freire, "The Act of Study," *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power and Liberation* trans. Donaldo P. Macendo (South Hadley: Bergin and Garvey Publishers, 1985), 4.

Kelley, involves dismantling oppressive power structures while simultaneously constructing new egalitarian options in their place. In speaking about twentieth-century Black radicals, Kelley refers to moments in revolution when it becomes “time to think like poets, to envision and make visible a new society, a peaceful, cooperative, loving world without poverty and oppression, limited only by our imaginations.”⁸⁸⁴ Revolutionary film collectives of the 1920s and 1930s largely followed this model, seeking to create new power-relations rooted in grassroots community. And they imagined an America where race, ethnicity, class, nationality, religion, or politics did not preclude one from participating fully in American democracy. The Friends of Soviet Russia, Film and Photo League, and Film and Sprockets Society reimagined the role of workers in American and global society. They, too, designed new possibilities for film’s role in labor, communism, and avant-garde art. Such revolutionary practices appeared in documenting New York taxi drivers fighting for better working conditions and designing schools catered to workers’ schedules.

Understanding these groups as part of film history and American history, rather than just as “radical film history,” provides a lens to see the origins of Film Studies in the US as one of creative experimentation largely outside of university walls. Placing the development of film education within labor and social justice activism on the streets of New York City—led by young Jews, immigrants, radicals, and working-class people—offers a historical narrative where peripheral minority groups reclaim their centrality in shaping American film culture and education. Moreover, this strengthens the connections several scholars, such as William Alexander, Russell Campbell, Barnaby Haran, Jacob Zumoff, and others, have shown between labor modernist art, and communist film movements in early twentieth century America. It was

⁸⁸⁴ Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 211.

not that working-class communist film groups were one lane of modernist and avant-garde art developments. Rather, they were core to modernist and avant-garde film's development and American film culture. And while film was on the outskirts of most labor organizations, this research emphasizes the growing role film had for American communist groups through the actions and ideas of the members who lived it and place their aspirations and activities within a history of modernism, labor, and film.

A methodological contribution of this research is illuminating the value of working-class peoples' voices in film histories and modernist, avant-garde art movements. This study has engaged them in conversations through oral histories, self-produced documents, and institutional archives. Especially for historians and readers of middle and upper-class statuses, working-class oral histories and grassroots perspectives offer opportunities for "learning across difference and in dialogue," which supports a "shift from learning *about* to learning *with*."⁸⁸⁵ It also supports recentering working-class people as educated Americans, dedicated to learning and teaching, as opposed to "consuming ideas" from upper classes.⁸⁸⁶ Shifting the historiography of film and radical history to one focused on collectives' vibrancy and social justice goals provides a model for writing communist film and art histories where many of the cultural objects created—films, lectures, books, photographs—no longer exist. For most members, possibilities of renewal carried throughout their lives and the twentieth century, despite government and industry repression.

Institutionalization of Radical Cinema

In Spring 2019, a group of Film Studies undergraduates at Michigan State University

⁸⁸⁵ Steven High, "Listening Across Difference: Oral History as Learning Landscape," *LEARNIng Landscapes* vol. 11, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 40.

⁸⁸⁶ Freire, "The Act of Study," 4.

entertained my presentation of FPL's *Hunger* (1932) and *Bonus March* (1932), followed by Frontier Films's *Native Land* (1942) narrated by Paul Robeson. Fractures in communist organizations influenced the reshaping of film collectives, such as Kruse's exit from CPUSA and therefore from WIR and FSR film projects by the end of the 1920s. Film and Photo League members split into groups Nykino and Frontier Films led by Leo Hurwitz and Paul Strand. Such groups focused on dramatized and feature films compared to Brody's urge for revolutionary films to remain focused on short documentaries and newsreels. As part of the "Film School" thematic semester of the MSU Film Collective, students analyzed these films in light of my historical overview of changing radical pedagogies and Popular Front politics.⁸⁸⁷ One student insightfully observed that FPL films seemed to teach the necessity of class struggle to structurally transform American institutions away from their unequal origins while protesting government neglect and the degradation of American working people. *Native Land's* pedagogical focus, however, emphasized fulfilling the promises of American founding principles with patriotic American unity and reform efforts. Such differences show major political, aesthetic, and pedagogical changes across ten years.

Combinations of Popular Front politics in late 1935, increasing surveillance by US government and FBI, onset of war, lack of finances, and internal strife contributed to the decline of the Workers' International Relief, Friends of Soviet Russia, Film and Photo League, Film and Sprockets Society, *Experimental Cinema* group, *New Theatre* group, John Reed Clubs, and several other radical cultural organizations by the end of the 1930s. The increasingly realization of Stalin's atrocities in Soviet territories also pushed many communist arts organizations toward

⁸⁸⁷ McKayla Sluga, "Native Land with Film and Photo League and Nykino Shorts," (presentation, Michigan State University Spring 2019 "Film School" Film Collective, East Lansing, MI, April 4, 2019), <https://filmstudies.msu.edu/past-collectives/>.

more liberal partnerships. Popular Front politics shifted much of the central focus from revolutionary change to governmental reform and alliances across left-wing and democratic politics. Political shifts and modernist developments influenced debates over documentary and modernist filmmaking in the 1930s as definitions underwent reconstruction and those on the left reevaluated styles best suited for social change: social realist styles with clear messages or abstract images to represent the incomprehensible physical and psychological violence of the World Wars.

As radical and avant-garde cinema became integrated into places like the Museum of Modern Art and university degree programs, 1920s-1930s' collectives' radical pedagogical initiatives waned. Many institutions tried to separate avant-garde aesthetics from radical politics to avoid political controversy or the appearance of supporting communism. Some of the first films acquired by Iris Barry and her partners for the Museum of Modern Art Film Library during a European trip in 1936 were Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* during a visit to Berlin, Buñuel and Dali's surrealist *Un Chien Andalou*, short works by Man Ray, and several 1920s German expressionist films.⁸⁸⁸ At their time of creation, each of these films represented radical ideas. These included *Potemkin*'s Marxist revolutionary message, Surrealism's Marxist-Freudian ideologies, and German expressionism's processing of trauma from WWI—all with shocking stylistic experimentations.⁸⁸⁹ As Wasson has researched, the library navigated political challenges in its early years. Funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, MoMA straddled appealing to Hollywood and philanthropic ideals and doing justice to narrating the accurate histories and

⁸⁸⁸ Wasson, *Museum Movies*, 117; "Arrival Of First Group Of European Films Selected By John Abbott And Iris Barry," 1935, The Museum of Modern Art Press Release Archives, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; "Establishment Of Film Library With Rockefeller Grant," June 24, 1935, The Museum of Modern Art Press Release Archives, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, <https://www.moma.org/research/archives/press-archives#about-press-releases>.

⁸⁸⁹ Anton Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema*, 1-6; 45-86.

radical meanings of such films. The Film Library strategically positioned their beginning film programs as showcasing the history and rise of film through elements such as character development and camerawork.⁸⁹⁰ This allowed MoMA to preserve and show several films that were previously banned in the US during their original releases as works of art rather than political agitation to avoid alienating government officials and cultural elites.

This was not isolated to major institutions, but also became reality for film collectives in the late 1930s. One example of this is the Film and Photo League's screening of Nikolai Ekk's 1931 Soviet talkie *The Road to Life* at the Broadway Butler House on June 6th, 1936. The show included a screening at 7pm and another at 9pm, both for twenty-five cents.⁸⁹¹ Ekk studied under Eisenstein and *Road to Life* was based on the Soviet educational theorist Anton Makarenko's book of the same name. John Dewey celebrated *Road to Life*, particularly its portrayal of Russians helping vulnerable, orphaned children and the ability to overcome life difficulties. Though there are elements of orientalizing and essentializing Russia—Dewey's quotes included on the FPL flyer state, "there are today no wild children in Russia"—Dewey's remark celebrates "a brave band of Russian teachers" who helped children on a path away from debauchery.⁸⁹² As the League continued operating into 1936, its days and members faded. This exhibition indicates a shift toward Popular Front politics with appeals to liberals and others across the political spectrum based on Dewey's reviews and that of John Haynes Holmes of the Community

⁸⁹⁰ Press Release for the Museum of Modern Art Film Library's initial showing of first program of motion pictures on January 7, 1936, January 4-5, 1936, 47-A, The Museum of Modern Art Press Release Archives, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, <https://www.moma.org/research/archives/press-archives#about-press-releases>.

⁸⁹¹ Thom Gehring, Fredalene B. Bowers and Randall Wright, "Anton Makarenko: The 'John Dewey of the U.S.S.R.,'" *Journal of Correctional Education* vol. 56, no. 4 (December 2005): 327-345.

⁸⁹² Film and Photo League flyer for *Road to Life*, 1936, Vertical Files Series, ca. 1920s-1980s Part III, Film and Photo League, 1936, Box 219, Folder 8, J. B. Matthews Papers, 1862-1986 and undated, Duke University Library Archives and Manuscripts, Durham, NC. This show was at Butler House, which was created in 1924 at Columbia University.

Church.⁸⁹³ A reframing of this history, however, is moving from a period of “selling out” or collectives’ failure to incite revolution to seeing the creativity of film collective members in keeping their careers and ideologies alive, even if they were not in their ideal, most militant formats.

By mid-to-late 1936, several filmmakers also went into WPA projects and universities. Steiner and Hurwitz worked with Pare Lorenz to make *The Plow That Broke the Plains* for the Resettlement Agency of the US Government.⁸⁹⁴ Steiner and Hurwitz had significant disagreements with Lorenz about the purpose of political narrative and beauty in film for such a project. Nevertheless, Steiner and Hurwitz’s participation in a government-sanctioned documentary indicates the evolving relationships between radical film collectives and US government agencies. Leo Seltzer and Elaine Basil, who also worked with FPL in the early 1930s, photographed and directed *From Hand to Mouth* with WPA in 1939. It showed at the New York World’s Fair, the same event where FSS showed their CCNY film about student life on campus.⁸⁹⁵ Additionally, Seltzer supervised the Motion Picture Production Unit of the WPA to direct and oversee several other government-sponsored projects.⁸⁹⁶ Former members’ learning

⁸⁹³ The Philadelphia FPL showed the film on Feb. 1, 1936 at New Theatre Studios: “More Heat...” *Independent Exhibitors Film Bulletin* (Jan. 29, 1936): 11; “Sinclair Attacks League,” *Motion Picture Herald* (Oct. 15, 1935): 16. The Zanesville, Ohio FPL tried to show it in October 1935 at the Eagles’ Temple, but “a squad of 15 police swooped down upon C. Robert Peters, representative of the Garrison Film Company of Cleveland, and ordered him to leave the city at once, together, with the Soviet film, ‘The Road to Life’.”

⁸⁹⁴ “The Plow that Broke the Plain,” *National Board of Review Magazine* (June 1936): 9-10.

⁸⁹⁵ “Seltzer and Basil Direct and Photograph for WPA,” *American Cinematographer* (Nov. 1939): 515-521. The author notes they traveled “around the city with their 50-pound load of motion picture equipment” to “slum district-tenements, and into new low-cost housing developments, into public markets and pushcart stalls, cafeterias and along the water front.” Together, they also created films for the New York City Civil Service Commission in 1940, medical films for Mt. Sinai Hospital in 1935, and “Technique on the Fresco Painting” for the WPA about the “process of planning and painting a mural in fresco”; “WPA Produces Medical Film,” *Movie Makers* vol. 14, no. 11 (Nov. 1939): 559. The article describes a 16mm “two-reel film” that “presents a new direction in health education, making available to the general public information pertinent to bacillary dysentery, and showing what medical science is doing for its prevention and what the community at large can do to eradicate its causes.” Their WPA films showed in museums, schools, cultural organizations, hospitals, colleges, orphanages, unions, and clubs. This film spurred the beginning of the WPA Motion Picture Production unit of Federal Art Project Photography Division with Seltzer at the head.

⁸⁹⁶ “Seltzer and Basil Direct and Photograph for WPA,” 517. Elaine Basil seems to have been involved with Seltzer

in radical film collectives prepared them to take on leadership roles in major government agencies and more easily transition into industries.

Former members' talents even appealed to Hollywood. Members of the Film and Sprockets Society, for example, scattered into industry. But for former FSS co-founders Bernard Gordon and Julien Zimet, Hollywood was an alienating atmosphere throughout the twentieth century due to juggling their communist affiliations with creating public media for major corporations. Zimet traveled to Mexico in the late 1940s to escape testifying at HUAC and to continue creating films. He returned to the US in 1951 but worked under pseudonyms to avoid persecution.⁸⁹⁷ Gordon helped create several Hollywood productions, but was not credited for decades due to his communist affiliation. He produced films in exile in Madrid, Spain during the 1960s and worked in the Canadian film industry in the 1970s. While no longer a full Party member, Gordon maintained his radical beliefs and conviction that leftist film activities in the 1920s-1930s served crucial political, cultural, and educational purposes. In 1999, eight years before his death, Gordon protested Elia Kazan's Academy Award, as Kazan—who had worked with Hurwitz, Strand, and other in FPL and Nykino—had named many filmmakers to HUAC to get them blacklisted.⁸⁹⁸ FBI reports, for example, labeled FSS member and CCNY student Abraham Polonsky “a very dangerous citizen” and cataloged his involvements in left-wing cultural and political activities as well as those entangled with African American civil rights

and the FPL earlier in the 1930s. Though *American Cinematographer* does not name the group but calls it “an independent film production group,” its reference to Seltzer's work on New York Longshoremen and Basil's work “as still photographer in the making of a film on the New York waterfront” indicate they worked on FPL's films together during the early 1930s. The FPL created a documentary about dock workers and longshoremen in December 1934, according to “Film and Photo League Filmography,” *Jump Cut*, 33.

⁸⁹⁷ Rebecca M. Schreiber, *Cold War Exiles in Mexico: U. S. Dissidents and the Culture of Critical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

⁸⁹⁸ Nelson, “Bernard Gordon, 88; Blacklisted Screenwriter Led '99 Kazan Protest.” Most notably, Kazan worked on Nykino's *Pie in the Sky* (1934) with Hurwitz, Steiner, and others.

efforts.⁸⁹⁹ This period shaped many former film collective members' life-long relationships to Hollywood. After WWII, leftist artists experienced increased government and local surveillance during the late 1940s and 1950s. Blacklisted, arrested, and tried, many individuals' careers ended with the destruction of their works and political presence. Government officials destroyed documents, films, and spaces dedicated to the production of Marxist culture.

Some former members publicly renounced their Communist affiliations in the 1940s-1950s while privately continuing to produce radical works.⁹⁰⁰ And yet, others fully turned on their communist comrades to testify against them or provide information to HUAC and FBI officials. Bertram Wolfe, who had been a founder of the American Communist Party, slowly moved from opposing Stalin to becoming an anticommunist in the 1950s to work with the US State Department to track and identify radicals. Wolfe also worked in faculty positions. Ben Davidson led the Communist New York Workers' School in the 1920s, but then led the anticommunist Liberal Party in New York throughout the 1940s-1960s.⁹⁰¹ William Kruse, after being ousted from the CPUSA in 1929, turned to industry and education in the 1930s. He worked in Education and Research with the National Park Service and then Bell & Howell, in which he distanced himself from political conversations.⁹⁰² Kruse seemed to expunge his later career of connections to CPUSA and Friends of Soviet Russia. Part of this was internal conflicts and ideological disputes over versions of communism and actions that led to Kruse's expulsion from the Party in 1929. In Kruse's case, and several others, capitulating was likely a means of career

⁸⁹⁹ Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner, *Abraham Lincoln Polonsky and the Hollywood Left*, 11-13; Seshadri, "Which Side are You on, Boys?" 50.

⁹⁰⁰ Campbell, *Cinema Strikes Back*, 202; Alexander, *Film on the Left*, 184.

⁹⁰¹ Bertram David Wolfe, *Breaking with Communism: The Intellectual Odyssey of Bertram D. Wolfe*, ed. Robert Hessen (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1990).

⁹⁰² "Party Life: Notice of Central Committee Decisions on Zimmerman, Bail and Kruse," *Comprodaily Publishing Co. Inc. and Daily Worker* (Sept 30, 1929): 4; Letters from CA Hathaway Communist Party District 8 Chicago to Kruse about expulsion, August 19, 1929, Box 1, William F. Kruse papers [manuscript], ca. 1915-1940s, Chicago History Museum Archives, Chicago, IL.

preservation to continue practicing a film career or it was a genuine defection due to disagreements in political ideologies and organizational directions. Renouncing communism also became more ethical to those who associated communism with the Soviet state, as Stalinist and Soviet atrocities that became more apparent towards the end of the war.

Beyond the turmoil FBI and CIA-led activities caused for individuals' careers and daily lives, they also obfuscated or even erased history and culture. Son of Leo Hurwitz and 1960s Columbia radical Tom Hurwitz has worked to recover and preserve not only his father's involvement but the history of leftist social documentary in the early twentieth century. In a 2017 interview, Tom Hurwitz stated:

I think you have to look at blacklisting as part of an assault on left-wing culture in America. It goes from academia, including high schools and colleges, through the arts to the labor movement. A kind of an iron curtain, ironically, was dropped over American history before the war...

Think about Diego Rivera's mural for Rockefeller Center, for example, erased from the wall and forgotten—or even Edward Hopper ... it took decades for him, for members of the Prairie School and for other artists of the 1930s to get on a gallery wall again... Part of that is the history of documentary film... The fact that documentary film came out of the struggle for social justice and was always connected to that struggle is hugely important in this time of reality television. The “red scare” of the 1950s has cut us off from that history.⁹⁰³

Tom Hurwitz's questioning of historical record a generation after his father is a testament to the power of cultural-political climates to reshape historical narratives for decades. It also signifies the dedication of radicals and their families to providing alternative interpretations of standard histories.

While the early and ongoing Cold War through the Blacklist, HUAC investigations, McCarthyism, and general climate of anti-communism in the US ravaged the histories of 1920s-

⁹⁰³ David Walsh, “A Conversation with Award-Winning Cinematographer Tom Hurwitz,” *World Socialist Web Site* (June 29, 2017), <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2017/06/29/hurw-j29.html>.

1930s leftist creatives, the 1960s-1970s allowed for new possible interpretations of these histories. A new wave of experimental, avant-garde cinema renewed interest in earlier modernist film activities. Similarly, growing leftist politics through economic, political, and cultural shifts in the US inspired folks to revisit the 1920s-1930s' cultural-political landscape with a more sympathetic lens. Former members became more outspoken about their earlier communist activities and motives for their participation in education, art, and action. Despite the Blacklist and crushing of independent filmmaking in WWII and during McCarthyism, Leo Hurwitz declared,

It set important vectors for my life: to enjoy the struggle for worth, to be oneself (at the same time as one is responsive to other people's needs), to shoulder off the pressures to conform, to find one's own sense of truth. It gave me a deep-lying conviction that social and individual predicaments are amenable to solution—that the changes and contradictions we live through can go beyond despair and alienation. And it confirmed my feeling that I belonged in the conspiracy of art (against socially dictated modes of perception, feeling, thinking), which is part of the larger and continuing conspiracy to be human.⁹⁰⁴

Through the Depression, World Wars, genocides, McCarthyism, and continuing injustices, Hurwitz recalled the ways film opens ways of understanding humanity. Hurwitz emphasizes the importance of communal action, education, and empathetic reflection to creating useful art and social change.⁹⁰⁵ One's experience is valid for creating art and sharing information with others. Moreover, Hurwitz projected the idea that being part of a "conspiracy" to better society and grow intellectually was nothing to be ashamed of.

Rather than the demise of these collectives, research here points to interesting ways the activities and members of these collectives continued to inspire film projects throughout the twentieth century. Scholars such as Robin D.G. Kelley have identified quotidian forms of

⁹⁰⁴ Hurwitz, "One Man's Voyage," 15.

⁹⁰⁵ Van Dyke, Thomas Brandon Collection, 1973.

resistance amongst working-class people. Kelley has argued that if historians mainly look to analyze oppressive structures, they risk missing individual and collective actions that challenged power structures daily. What this approach does for this dissertation is to foreground the productive experimentation that collectives practiced, and to situate their major political, cultural, and intellectual ideas in the context of their daily lives, which is where most members derived meaning from communism, modernism, and their identities. The goal here is to illustrate resistance to the power of violence with attempts to subvert and, ultimately, eliminate such violence.⁹⁰⁶ For film collectives' members, resistance also manifested as political and avant-garde film labor that was transformative and enjoyable.

Film collectives, too, inspired the growth of film societies, educational programs, labor organizing, and avant-garde culture. FPL education, alongside partnerships with the New School and other radical film collectives in the US, effectively laid the foundation for the City College of New York Documentary Film Institute to open by 1941, the New York University Film School in 1941, and various film programs by the 1960s-1970s. As scholar Fibla-Gutiérrez notes, Potamkin and his comrades' pedagogies influenced "developments in later formations and networks of participatory film culture and education."⁹⁰⁷ That participatory and communal arts have become integral to US higher education and contemporary grassroots movements can be attributed, in large part, to leftist working-class Jews in the 1920s-1930s. Collectives' activities also model unique cases where schooling placed working-class students at the center of

⁹⁰⁶ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, And the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press And Simon And Schuster, 1996); Robin D. G. Kelley, "We Are Not What We Seem": Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition In The Jim Crow South," *The Journal Of American History* Vol. 80, No. 1 (Jun 1993): 75. In reference to scholars of enslaved peoples' ordinary forms of resistance and James Scott's work on subaltern populations, Kelley engages the term "infrapolitics," which he argues needs to be involved in discussions about oppressed people and their politics. Kelley focuses on unorganized working-class people, primarily Black workers resistance to white violence and exclusions placed in workplaces and unions.

⁹⁰⁷ Fibla-Gutiérrez, "Film Called into Action," 435.

curriculum design and educational practice.

New York City continues to thrive as a transformative, creative hub. The success of many radical and avant-garde movements here has depended upon their abilities to adapt and transform to the city and society's changes throughout the twentieth century. Much like the Film Arts Guild little cinemas and the spaces groups screened workers' films in the 1920s-1930s, arthouses and revival theaters in the 1950s-1980s were important to film education. As Barbara Wilinsky notes, over three hundred film societies were active in the US in 1955 and grew to 4,000 by the 1960s. Art houses grew from eighty in 1950 to 450 in 1963.⁹⁰⁸ Vincent LoBrutto authored biographies of Stanley Kubrick, Ridley Scott, and Martin Scorsese as well as books on film production, film history, and interviews with leaders of cinema. While a film instructor at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan, he recalled his main learning sites were film series at the MoMA, Whitney, Anthology Film Archives, and New York Cultural Center but also theaters such as "the Regency, the Thalia, and Elgin theaters." LoBrutto adds that "Dan Talbot's New Yorker Theater was a university in New Wave and revolutionary films of the 1960s and 1970s" and at the same time, "so many film publications nurtured my insatiable thirst for film knowledge." He points to the importance of multimodal film schooling, citing *Film Forum* as a main journal for his learning and noting that "before Borders and Barnes and Noble, Cinemabilia, the Gotham Book Mart, the 8th Street, Strand, and St. Mark's Bookshops were havens for readers and collectors of film literature."⁹⁰⁹

Influences of earlier collectives' documentary and newsreel filmmaking education are evident when looking at the 1960s upsurge in radical filmmaking and student protest. Students at

⁹⁰⁸ Barbara Wilinsky, *Sure Seaters: The Emergence of Art House Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 132.

⁹⁰⁹ Vincent LoBrutto, "Acknowledgements," *Becoming Film Literate: The Art and Craft of Motion Pictures* (New York: Praeger, 2005), xvi; xvii.

CCNY, for example, protested the changing policies and direction of the college President's ideas to move away from documentary instruction in the 1960s. Students wanted to remain focused on documentary that was central to the FSS and Film Institute's radical origins in the 1930s-1940s. The throughline of education and definition of documentary carried through to these students. Newsreel Features in NYC began distributing Newsreel in 1968, which historian Fielding marks as a "radical film series." Fielding relates this group to the FPL in the 1930s to show FPL as a model for later groups to create workers' newsreels with avant-garde techniques and leftist politics.⁹¹⁰ Peter Gessner, son of *New Theater* author Robert Gessner, produced *Detroit Finally Got the News* about Detroit auto workers in the 1970s with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. *Detroit Finally Got the News* recalls aspects of FPL's *Detroit Newsreel Special: Ford Massacre* (1932) showcasing violence against workers when they oppose unequal conditions. Peter also created anti-war Vietnam documentaries and documentaries critiquing American invasions in Latin America. Many radical filmmakers of the 1960s taught themselves by watching films and studying practices of earlier radical production like members of Friends of Soviet Russia, Film and Photo League, and Film and Sprockets Society.

Moreover, former film collective members continued backing labor film projects. Brandon supported Barbara Kopple's *The Light at the End of the Tunnel*, also called *Harlan County U.S.A.* (1976), documenting United Mine Workers and their families in the 1973 Kentucky "Brookside Strike." Brandon worked at Garrison Films in the late 1930s distributing labor and communist films before running his own distribution company Brandon Film, Inc.

⁹¹⁰ Bill Nichols, *Newsreel: Documentary Filmmaking on the American Left* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), 193; Bill Nichols "Newsreel: Film and Revolution," *Cineaste* vol. 5, no 4 (1973): 7-13. Nichols compares the Newsreel group to the Film and Photo League, as does Raymond Fielding in his comprehensive study of American newsreels. Fielding, *The American Newsreel*, 190-195.

from 1940 to 1968. Hurwitz, Gordon, Seltzer, and others maintained their support for radical film collectives and working-class labor activities throughout their lives, even if their activities did not appear as militant or expansive as they were in the 1920s-1930s.

Recovering Grassroots Film Studies

While working on his book about 1930s social documentary, former FPL member Tom Brandon asked fellow FPL comrade and long-time friend Irving Lerner:

Did the League provide opportunity to get a movie camera and editing in that difficult time? Were there any other easy access facilities? Inexpensive schools? Other places to develop criticism? Did the showings and program notes provide opportunities; was this or was it not an early organized effort that had lines running into the future film society, film exhibition, and film distribution?⁹¹¹

Brandon goes on to ask Lerner if the FPL provided avenues for intellectuals to get involved with labor organizing. Though Brandon's book *A Missing Chapter in the History of US Documentary Films* remains unpublished, his interview questions in the 1970s aptly illustrate how American leftists still involved in film viewed radical art collectives within film history.⁹¹² Brandon's questions are obviously leading, intended to provide answers he himself could give. However, his choice to inquire specifically about "easy access facilities" and equipment, "inexpensive schools," and opportunities for professional and political development encapsulates an argument of this study: film studies' growth from labor organizing provided unique, accessible film educational opportunities for working classes in the US. As a participant in these organizations who documented this era to then work on a historical project in the 1970s, Brandon also represents the efforts of collectives' members to archive their own activities and craft public historical resources. Efforts to recover or preserve these histories and archives typically

⁹¹¹ Correspondence regarding book project by Brandon on the documentary film movement of the 1930s, 1974-1976, May 27, 1974, MC 5218939, Collection 112, Box IL-12, Folder 13, Irving Lerner papers, 1935-1978, UCLA Arts Library-Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles, CA.

⁹¹² Ibid.

generated from former members, their families, or other leftist organizations outside of university walls. This once again exemplifies how film educational work often began as independent activities amongst working-class people themselves, as opposed to the often-thought flow from universities into the general public. Rather than naming universities as the locus of knowledge production, this project invites us to question who produces ideas and practices, how these enter universities, and how working people developed networks of intellectual exchange without universities at all in some cases.

During his lecture and exhibition tours in the 1970s, Tom Brandon again spoke of “The Missing Chapter in American Cinema” in 1974 in Chicago while showing newly restored FPL films. Sam Brody similarly discussed that he’d been interviewed by “young film historians” in the 1970s, and only three major works on the radical FPL activities existed. These included Anne Tucker’s work on the Photo League, William Alexander’s book, Tom Brandon’s never published book, and presumably alluded to a fourth study: Russell Campbell’s book in progress.⁹¹³ The late 1970s-early 1980s—from published books to *Jump Cut* magazine’s special edition—included an influx of scholarship on left-wing and avant-garde cinema of the 1920s-30s. While more information now exists, especially with William Alexander and Russell Campbell’s 1970s-1980s works, I would argue that this remains a “missing chapter” in American History, particularly as radical film groups’ activities relate to the development of Film Studies.

Other left-wing artists, activists, and writers have written on collectives and their activities since the 1970s, but this research remains largely exiled to obscure webpages on the Internet maintained by contemporary radical film groups or former members’ families. Histories of American “grassroots cultural activity” in the 1920s-1930s remains fragmented and isolated in

⁹¹³ Brody, interviewed by Tom Brandon, Thomas Brandon Collection.

the broad fields of US Cultural History, Film Studies, and American Studies.⁹¹⁴ Barnaby Haran and James Rosenow are two authors who have recently spent significant effort researching this era. My work is an attempt to not just emphasize the educational projects of these collectives, but to create more space for their histories in twenty-first-century scholarship beyond brief biographies or mentions of their projects. It is also to rekindle discussions about the value of studying film in the historical profession—drawing on Burgoyne and Rosenstone’s frameworks to apply to working-class film activities.

Our current knowledge and access to archival materials are mainly due to FPL members themselves and family members who have restored films, preserved manuscripts, provided interviews, and narrated this history from their vantage points. Leo Seltzer, Leo Hurwitz, Tom Brandon, Sam Brody, and others did their own teaching, research, exhibitions, preservations, and restorations across the US to develop histories of leftist filmmaking and films.⁹¹⁵ Bernard Gordon similarly catalogued histories of the Film and Sprockets Society in his own memoirs and the City College has done research on its own organization. Leo Hurwitz and Sam Brody have individual websites dedicated to them, both developed and maintained by their children. Hurwitz curated his own archival collection that was donated to the Eastman Museum in the 1990s after his death in 1991, and Tom Brandon assembled and donated his own major collection at the Museum of Modern Art in the 1970s before his death in 1982. Leo Seltzer led finding and restoring FPL films in the 1970s-80s, while David Platt, Herbert Klein, and Lewis Jacobs composed their own edited volumes of archival texts—one being *The Compound Cinema*, a

⁹¹⁴ Steven J. Ross, “American Workers, American Movies: Historiography and Methodology,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 59 (2001): 81–105.

⁹¹⁵ Rich, “The Missing Chapter in American Cinema,” Thomas Brandon Collection; Museum of Modern Art series about Frontier Films titled “A Missing Chapter in the History of U.S. Documentary Films,” Box C025, Folder 1: [Correspondence]; 1974-1978, Leo Hurwitz Collection, Moving Image Department, George Eastman Museum, Rochester, NY. Ruby Rich also spearheaded several groundbreaking queer and feminist cinema series throughout the 1970s.

collection of writings by Harry Alan Potamkin.⁹¹⁶ Those involved in creating *Experimental Cinema*, *New Theatre*, and *Film Front* have largely written their own histories or made edited volumes to make their work publicly known. Brandon continued programming film shows and creating films into the 1970s until his death in 1982. A *New Yorker* article notes that Brandon's programs "should be recorded as complete films for campuses, art houses, and posterity."⁹¹⁷ Many of Brandon's programs provided museums and scholars with footage and information otherwise hidden. In most of their statements, former members reference "missing chapters of American cinema history" understudied by scholars or absent from public memory.⁹¹⁸

Information about FSR and William Kruse is perhaps the most fragmented and hidden of all. Without his own 1968 donation of the Kruse archives at the Chicago History Museum and a couple unreleased interviews before his death in 1979, little public material exists about Kruse's life and involvement in FSR. *Marxist.org* digitized copies of *Soviet Russia Pictorial* and a few microfilmed issues are some of the only consistent public mentions of FSR to track their film activities.⁹¹⁹ Kruse and his circle scrubbed much of his communist 1920s activities from his involvement in film and politics or relegated this to his youth before his Bell & Howell years. There are no central WIR archives with organized materials on US FSR activities, which has further fragmented information globally. Information on additional WIR films in the 1920s remains sparse, with only the 1926 *Passaic Textile Strike* and the 1929 film about Gastonia, NC

⁹¹⁶ *The Compound Cinema: The Film Writings of Harry Alan Potamkin*, ed. Lewis Jacobs (New York: Teachers College Press, 1977).

⁹¹⁷ Penelope Gilliant, "The Current Cinema," *New Yorker* (May 20, 1974): 69.

⁹¹⁸ Rich, "The Missing Chapter in American Cinema," Thomas Brandon Collection; Museum of Modern Art series about Frontier Films titled "A Missing Chapter in the History of U.S. Documentary Films," Box C025, Folder 1: [Correspondence]; 1974-1978, Leo Hurwitz Collection, Moving Image Department, George Eastman Museum, Rochester, NY.

⁹¹⁹ William F. Kruse papers [manuscript], ca. 1915-1940s, Box 1, Chicago History Museum Archives, Chicago, IL; William Kruse to Thomas Brandon (unpublished letter), 6 July 1978, Personality Files, Folder I189: William F. Kruse, Thomas Brandon Collection, Film Study Center, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY.

as reference points. The film *Passaic* itself was missing until 2008 when graduate students uncovered five reels of the film and its limited information in a newly obtained CPUSA collection at the New York University Tamiment Library. The Library of Congress then restored and preserved the “deteriorating nitrate”, but the sixth reel remains missing.⁹²⁰

Before the 2019 release of David Davidson’s *Cinema and Sanctuary* documentary film and CUNY’s promotional events, the Film and Sprockets Society was almost lost to the public. Founder Bernard Gordan mentions FSS in his two memoirs. These are amazing, but extremely brief reflections on FSS’s activities in the 1930s, including Gordan and Zimet’s connections to the FPL. The history of Hans Richter and the Documentary Institute have overshadowed earlier FSS activities or positioned FSS as an inchoate precursor. However, the fact that CCNY’s student newspaper *The Campus* featured dozens of full articles or mentions about FSS attests to their significant role in New York City and US film history. By putting together these pieces from former members’ accounts, newspaper reports, fragmented archival and secondary research, CCNY’s FSS reemerges as a leading film educational project of the 1930s in connection with earlier WIR groups. That Richter’s Institute developed at the premier working-class college in America regains central attention to examine how and why working-class radicals established avant-garde film studies here.⁹²¹

Another reason film collectives’ histories remain obfuscated is that many films are lost. As Ruby Rich recounted, those “printed on nitrate stock, disintegrated,” whereas others perished in a 1935 warehouse storage fire. Others, we now know, were taken to the Soviet Union, such as *Scottsboro Boys* (1932) that Leo Hurwitz worked on, and was recently found with an excerpt

⁹²⁰ “Rediscovered *Passaic Textile Strike* Footage,” *The Orphan Film Symposium* (Feb. 12, 2008), <https://orphanfilmsymposium.blogspot.com/2008/02/rediscovered-passaic-textile-strike.html>

⁹²¹ Nelson, “Bernard Gordon, 88; Blacklisted Screenwriter Led ’99 Kazan Protest.”

featured in the PBS documentary.⁹²² Bernard Gordon of the Film and Sprockets Society briefly describes FSS's films in his memoirs, the only location besides a few newspaper reports that FSS film information exists. No known film strips currently remain, and if any remaining footage exists, it has not yet been located. No actual films from FSR remain, except for two newly uncovered film strips for *Russia and Germany* and Kruse's editing and translating of the Soviet *Beauty and the Bolshevik*. I found these uncatalogued at the Chicago History Museum in Kruse's collection, buried in an unmarked and untouched folder with the film strips stapled to a paper. These are the only known images remaining from any FSR film projects.

Based on previous filmographies and several reports, it is likely that somewhere between 60 and 75 films (finished and unfinished) are lost just from the New York branch. Likely over thirty films are lost from Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and other FPL locations.⁹²³ The few FPL films that remain exist because of former members' efforts to find, restore, preserve, and show them or their efforts to recount their contents. Irving Lerner and Tom Brandon have several correspondences in 1973-1974 about locating photographs, film stills, and pieces or full films from the 1930s-1940s to restore. Lerner wrote on one occasion: "I have been traveling around and have run into more leads for some of the missing films and also have found quite a bit of documentation."⁹²⁴ Seltzer, Brandon, and other's acts of restoring and preserving these films is part of their radical commitments and a continuation of their filmmaking into the 1980s. Films such as the *National Hunger March*, they believed, could still teach workers and any Americans about the Depression. They could also now teach the history of the Film and

⁹²² *Scottsboro: An American Tragedy*, Dir. Barak Goodman, PBS Studios: An American Experience, 2001.

⁹²³ "Film and Photo League Filmography," *Jump Cut*, 33.

⁹²⁴ Thomas Brandon letter to Irving Lerner asking questions about Lerner's experiences in the Film and Photo League for Brandon's book project on 1930s leftist film, May 27, 1974, MC 5218939, Collection 112, Box IL-12, Folder 13, Irving Lerner papers, 1935-1978, UCLA Arts Library-Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles, CA.

Photo League and radical art projects.

Intertitles that Seltzer and Tom Brandon inserted into recovered and restored FPL films in the late 1970s-1980s remind us, even at the end of their careers, that members recalled fondly their work in the 1930s. This, again, highlights the work they perceived themselves doing—working with those at breadlines, facing evictions and unemployment, and protesting for equality. Many members faced these same worries, like Seltzer who slept on one of the tables in the darkroom of the Film and Photo League headquarters. But film workers across these collectives during the 1920s-30s willingly made little income to provide relief to other workers and to bring workers' news to Americans. And as Seltzer recounted in 1980, the footage they captured was often the only source of information and representative news workers and farmers had access to in union halls, rural schoolhouse, and outdoor exhibitions.⁹²⁵ In the late twentieth century, former members still alive hoped that these films would provide an accurate historical portrait of earlier decades. Furthermore, Brandon especially hoped these films would educate contemporary Americans and mobilize workers to make additional progress for workers' rights during periods of deindustrialization, growing conservatism backlash and right-wing militarization, and left-wing radicalism for diverse liberation and civil rights.

At Loz Feliz Theater in Los Angeles in May 1977, Sam Brody spoke on a panel dedicated to the Hollywood Blacklist about the “now forgotten phase of grassroots cultural activity in this country.” He concluded by encouraging scholars and the public to research and write the histories of radical left film, namely the Film and Photo League. Brody's 1977 panel spoke broadly about how politicians, liberals, and film industries distorted or erased these histories during the 1940s-1950s Blacklist period. The ramifications of that era, he spoke, have

⁹²⁵ Leo Seltzer, “Documenting the Depression,” 256.

contributed to why such histories remain distorted or overlooked. Brody also noted his struggle to survive after WWII by taking dubbing and small jobs that rarely aligned with his politics, but were financially necessary after being exiled from working openly in film.⁹²⁶ Brody died in 1987 still sharing his experiences and advocating for more comprehensive research on leftist film activities throughout the whole twentieth century.

Into their final days, former members provided input for exhibition programs. On February 1, 1990, MoMA held “A Tribute to the Film and Photo League” series in NYC. Shows occurred on Thursdays at 3pm and 6pm—a notable time difference from workers’ film series in the 1920s-1930s in evenings and on weekends. The show included: *Workers Newsreel Unemployment Special* (1931) made by Robert Del Duca and Leo Seltzer; *Detroit Workers News Special: Ford Massacre Detroit* (1932); *Hunger: The National Hunger March to Washington* (1932) made by Sam Brody, Robert Del Duca, Leo Hurwitz, C.O. Nelson, Leo Seltzer; *The National Hunger March* (1931) made by Brody, Del Duca, Kita Kamura, William Kruck, Seltzer, Alfred Valenti, and Lester Balog; *Bonus March* (1932) made by Seltzer and Balog; and *Halsted Street* (1934) made by Conrad Friberg (C.O. Nelson) and the Chicago FPL. After the 6pm show, MoMA held discussions with David Platt, Hurwitz, and Seltzer.⁹²⁷ Platt died in 1992, Hurwitz in 1991, and Seltzer in 2000. Even as they were suffering from terminal illnesses well into their eighties and nineties, they continued creating films, photographs, and sharing histories of early communist film histories in the US to keep this “grassroots cultural activity” in the 1920s-1930s alive. Through various major cultural, political, and economic shifts in their lifetimes, former FPL and FSS members exhibited constant dedication to teaching and education.

⁹²⁶ Brody, interviewed by Tom Brandon, Thomas Brandon Collection.

⁹²⁷ Tribute to the Film and Photo League, 1990, George Eastman Museum; Alfred Clarke, “Thomas Brandon, Movie Distributor,” *New York Times* (Feb. 20, 1982), 21; “Sam Brody, Maker of Films on Labor and Social Justice,” *New York Times* (Sept. 22, 1987), 20.

Futures of Communism and Film Collectives

It is a hope of mine that this work reopens the world of the 1920s-1930s to see how modernism, the avant-garde, and documentary were part of ordinary life and very much woven into the labor movements of the time. Communism, or leftism broadly, was also part of daily life and a legitimate ideology for many American modernists, workers, and intellectuals who sought a way out of extreme inequality and political violence or negligence. The film collectives here invested in workers as intellectuals, laborers, and artists. Rather than trying to “break in” to the elite art worlds or capitalist Hollywood industry, they recognized these models were not suited for workers to participate or thrive. Instead, they devised a conglomerate of educational spaces with multilayered engagement strategies to tailor filmmaking, film writing and reading, learning film studies, and attending shows to the needs of the working class. This entailed not only tailoring the content but also the structure of media production, distribution, and consumption.

It is important for working people to see their creative history, and to be documented as part of modern art and film history. Film collectives blur the lines between cultural producers and audiences, between exhibitors and distributors, between teachers and students. They were all at once: the main artists, the intermediary circulators, the audiences, the instructors, the pupils. The individuals here showcase how workers could hold multiple identities and roles. Workers were and are creative, deep-thinking, intuitive, passionate, and often communal people.

Contemporary progressives will hopefully see the value of working-class film collectives. At a moment when many working people lean to the right—partially due to the elitism of liberal and leftist voters; misinterpretations of working and poor peoples’ daily lives, values, and histories; and academics’ condescension toward working and poor people telling their own stories—scholars should thoughtfully center workers’ stories and their creative activities, not as

peripheral but as core to American history. Moreover, critically restructuring academia and politics to more equitably represent and include working-class peoples is necessary. In a system where workers—especially non-white, LGBTQ+, and disabled workers—are actively dismissed and their histories quieted, ethical scholarship cannot exist without rectifying those inequities.

I conclude with two intersecting points. One: Oppression and threats to participatory democracy are alive and well in America in the 2020s. One hundred years after this study's time period, fascist and anti-democratic movements threaten every inch of progress made throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. White-working class folks, primarily Christian, were targets of fascist and Nazi propaganda in the US during the 1920s and 1930s.⁹²⁸ This is not dissimilar from contemporary white-working class Christians mobilized in support of right-wing movements with upsurges of Nazism, Christian Nationalism, and autocracy in recent decades.⁹²⁹ I note this not to draw loose historical parallels or create mirror images between past and present. I note this because the threat of fascism historically and contemporarily is real, which has also made the destruction and distortion of left-wing activities very real. I do not seek to glorify communism nor the figures in my study; however, I unabashedly find affinity with them for challenging fascist propaganda and attempting to better conditions for the most marginalized in American society. As autocratic regimes sweep our globe with widening gaps between rich and poor, and as distortions of reality plague our daily lives, FSR, FPL, and FSS—regardless of their political ideologies—model courage to think critically with compassion about the world around us and act against local and global injustices. And to show what those in power seek to keep hidden.

Two: Marginalized filmmakers continue to document both traumas and power in the

⁹²⁸ Neil R. McMillen, "Pro-Nazi Sentiment in The United States March 1933-March, 1934," *Southern Quarterly* vol. 2, no. 1 (Oct. 1, 1963): 48.

⁹²⁹ Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

lineage of earlier collectives. A student brilliantly asked me once about how my work in 1930s-1930s film relates to the media networks of mainstream news and self-recorded mobile videos circulating on the internet. Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin, and Marcuse could help this analysis with theories of the culture industry, reproducible images, and aesthetic dimensions. Though my analysis is surely inspired by them, I see practical value in Indigenous Ho-Chunk Nation filmmaker Sky Hopinka's work or Queer Blue Light Collective of the 1970s. By capturing Standing Rock protests and everyday cultural-political lives of queer people, filmmakers have continued to find ways to document marginalized political lives—both the terrors and joys.⁹³⁰ In NYC, Red Bloom's Art Workers' Inquiry has updated many 1920s-1930s' art collectives' ideas and actions to fight police brutality, incarceration, pandemic negligence, and workers' exploitation. As a communist collective, they support art workers and challenge elitist culture in contemporary American society.⁹³¹ Founded in 2011, Brooklyn's Interference Archive participates in Red Bloom's projects and is a volunteer community-based study center with archives about the "relationship between cultural production and social movements." They do so by providing archiving, educational programming, exhibition, publication, and preservation resources. Interference leads programs to support Palestinian liberation, expand political education and collective art opportunities, and exhibitions on Black organizers' art about abolishing police occupation in the US.⁹³² These ongoing efforts remix many projects of FSR, FPL, and FSS to open Americans' education to global anti-oppressive movements and work for justice in local NYC communities.

⁹³⁰ Justus Nieland and McKayla Sluga, "Home Movies: Experiments in Dwelling," *Broad Underground Film Series* (Broad Art Museum, 2022), program notes.

⁹³¹ "Red Bloom: The Art Workers' Inquiry," *Amplify Arts* (2020), <https://www.amplifyarts.org/alternate-currents/2021/red-bloom>.

⁹³² "About Us," *Interference Archive* (2011), <https://interferencearchive.org/who-we-are/about/>. Interference Archive is an example of the ongoing legacy of self-made, independent archives. It is volunteer-run and donation-financed.

To the contemporary reader, perhaps this study seems archaically overly sympathetic to communism or leftism in general. While the twentieth-century atrocities and failed projects in the name of communism show us how quickly power and political interests can usurp genuine values of equality and progress, many scholars and communities continue to adapt the promises of revolutionary, egalitarian politics to our contemporary world. As homelessness, poverty, hate crimes, militarization, corruption, class chasms, and other inequalities grow wildly in the US, Americans continue to seek alternative models to murderous capitalism and the depraved propaganda of the twenty-first century. The communism that FSR, FPL, and FSS members were interested in was a brand more steeped in values of community and visionary justice. In line with Willard Van Dyke and Leo Hurwitz's recollections of their driving motivations to partake in communism and film collectives, Lewis Siegelbaum, historian of the Soviet Union, provides an apt definition of the communism at stake here:

My love for communism is from afar. It comes from being an American—an often exasperated, appalled, and alienated American... The communism I am stuck on is people, working people, coming together to fight for social justice and against the barbarism of capitalism. It is radically egalitarian, anti-racist, and anti-sexist. It promotes a husbanding of natural resources that are finite and without which life cannot exist.⁹³³

This form of communism, to be clear, is more aligned with Angela Davis than it is Stalinism or even Leninism.⁹³⁴ While communism demands that we look to the future, it also requires critically assessing our past and present. Many members of FSR, FPL, and FSS maintained their political convictions throughout their lives, even if Blacklisting or other forms of suppression caused them to reroute, hide, or denounce their politics. They were aware of rigid Party rules, but also educated Americans about the adaptability of Marxism and film. The communism they aligned themselves with was very much a project of “working people, coming together to fight

⁹³³ Siegelbaum, *Stuck on Communism*, 5.

⁹³⁴ Angela Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2023 [1974]).

for social justice and against the barbarism of capitalism,” which made it malleable, driven by egalitarian values, and responsive to urgent cultural-political needs of working people.

Film collectives and their members keenly recognized gaps in knowledge and resources. Pinpointing the “silences” in history and the present, their approach to identifying unavailable or missing information was to create it themselves. Community-based educational methods allowed film collectives to approach film as a valuable tool for workers’ lives and futures. Hurwitz’s final interview leaves us with a critical perspective on one’s social-political beliefs. When asked about why he aligned with communism and leftist efforts to generate art and labor agitation, Hurwitz steadfastly explained that politics “was a human question” connected to one’s morality and compassion. He argued,

One could not be objective about it. If you entered it at all that it is, ask the question: Do individuals who are evicted, deserve to be evicted? When they have no money, and they have lost their jobs, not for their own doing. If you have to answer that question and you’re a human being, then you have to answer it in terms of the fact that if you have a camera in your hands, then your camera is to be used to make clear that truth....One side of the question is blind, deaf, and cruel and the other side of the question requires compassion and connection and activity...⁹³⁵

Communism, to him and his fellow film workers, was a dedication to seeing inequalities, learning about them, and taking collective steps to create a more just local community and global society. Film and art capture and share information that many of us overlook or capitalist systems deny our access to. If we can consistently and collectively create with “compassion, connection, and activity,” perhaps it is possible to out-produce what cruelty creates and to build anew on pace with what cruelty destroys. The history of 1920s-1930s communist film collectives shows the ingenuity and intelligence that can arise during crises or in response to local, national, and global threats. Film’s use as a tool to processes complex American identities connected with

⁹³⁵ Hurwitz, “The Last Interview,” Reel 6, 1990.

global and local activities to center education in their film and political projects. Film education became—and remains—a powerful avenue to restoring working-class, poor, Jewish, immigrant, African American, and other minorities' rights to work, live, and learn securely.

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