

Watching Henry Skate: The Films of the Ford Motor Company

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Archival fragments are central to Michael Chanan and George Steinmetz's essayistic documentary *Detroit: Ruin of a City*. In one, for example, Henry Ford skates across ice, away from the movie camera and back; in the background, beyond some trees, is what appears to be a factory or perhaps even the city of Detroit itself, risen high in part as a consequence of Ford and the auto industry. In these images, repeated three times by Chanan and Steinmetz, the juxtaposition of Ford himself, the childlike innocence of ice skating, and the looming distant factory or cityscape seems to speak to some of the contradictions that surround the figure of Ford. Associated on the one hand with the establishment of new modes of industrial production – labelled “Fordism” by the Marxist political theorist Antonio Gramsci – Ford also demonstrated a nostalgic pastoralism, an urge to memorialise the past that was perhaps most clearly visible in the building of Greenfield Village in Dearborn, on the outskirts of the city of Detroit, a space celebrating the American village before it was transformed by, in part, the automobile. In this sense Ford was ambiguously positioned on the cusp of American modernity, looking back to a time of agrarian stability whilst simultaneously ushering in a time of mass production, consumption, and intensified urbanization.

Watching Henry skate in *Detroit: Ruin of a City* is possible because of his commitment to moving pictures, that form of culture predicated both on the machines of industrialised modernity and on the urge to memorialise the past. Ford's interest in moving pictures was, Chanan and Steinmetz observe, initially piqued by conversations with Ford's friend (and former employer), Thomas Edison, whose laboratories had participated in the invention of cinema technology in the late nineteenth century. In 1914 Ford established a Motion Picture Department, the first of its kind at a major commercial company, and began producing short films about various subjects – news features, productions about cities, and items of general interest – that were widely distributed free of charge to cinema theatres and to various other venues. Later, from 1916-1925, the Department produced a series of historical, geographical, travel and educational films and it was estimated that by 1920 these

Ford films were shown in a minimum of 4000 theatres and were seen by approximately one-seventh of the weekly motion picture audience in the United States. The films were also shown widely in non-theatrical settings, including YMCA's, churches, prisons, schools, and in many rural locations. Later films, incorporating sound technology, were more clearly advertising based; after 1932 Ford contracted out to outside agencies and only re-established the Motion Picture Department in 1952.

One prominent strand of film production from the Ford Motion Picture Department focused on the benefits of industrial progress. In *Detroit: Ruin of a City*, for example, Chanan and Steinmetz use extracts from Ford films showing the enormous Rouge factory, widely regarded at the time as a symbol of industrial modernity, and demonstrating a moving assembly line at the factory as an example of the efficiency of standardization and Fordist work practices. The celebration of industrial modernity was also apparent in films like the series *A Century of Progress* in 1920 and the films *A Visit to the Ford Motor Company* (1917) and *Industrial Working Conditions* (1921), which together surveyed improvements in manufacturing and industrial working conditions, or *Iron and Steel* (1920), showing the industrial production of iron and steel in Detroit. Other films showed different aspects of technological progress and development, such as a series of films on modern communication systems including *Telephone and Telegraph Communications* (1919) and the film *Benjamin Franklin and Modern Communications Systems* (1918). At times in the Ford films the modernity of production and communication is seen to be symbiotic with the city, notably with, as one film title had it, *Dynamic Detroit* (1921: city films were important to the Department, and films were produced on Washington, Baltimore, New York City, Pittsburgh, and so on). Yet in other films industrial progress benefits rural communities. *An All Year Friend* (1924), for example, contrasts two farmers, one tending his farm on his own – his boys have left for the city – with outdated and decrepit equipment whilst the other works with his sons using a Fordson tractor and up-to-date machinery. The successful farmer shows the beleaguered farmer his machinery and the myriad jobs it does around the farm, observing “[t]he Fordson cuts down the working days and shortens the days work, thereby allowing time for recreation and self-improvement.” Tradition and modernity co-exist. Together, the Ford films mediated public response to industrial

transformations, promulgating the ideology of modernization or Fordism that was predicated on economies of scale and the standardization and acceleration of work practices. We may perhaps call this Fordism via film.

Antonio Gramsci observed that Fordism was both about the standardization and acceleration of work practices and about a concomitant regulation of the behaviour of workers. Hence the project of establishing Fordism via film accordingly included films seeking to guide the activities and beliefs of workers. Included here were a series of films about safe work practices like *Safety First* (1920) and *Hurry Slowly* (1921) that sought to decrease work injuries and the concomitant loss of workers time (reducing this by 27% according to *Ford News* (April 1, 1921, 5)). And a series of films about history, civics and citizenship, including films about American historical events like the series *Landmarks of the American Revolution* (1920), about sanitation and health like *Detroit Water Supply* (1919), and about the necessity of educating the immigrant working class in films like *Ford English School* (1918), *The Henry Ford Trade School* (1924-7), *A Day at the Merrill-Palmer School* (1928), and thus the development of what the film *Lights and Shadows in a City of a Million* (1920), about social work in Detroit, described as “sound bodies and minds” in the “citizens of tomorrow.” Together these films explicitly sought to promulgate norms of behaviour, explicitly allied to a project of “Americanization” of immigrant workers and to the establishment of moral and social conditions that was connected both to increased efficiency and to the goal of governing a mass population of workers.

Cinema could be used, the Ford Motion Picture Department thought, for the promotion of what *Ford Times* called “[t]he Ford idea in manufacturing and social and industrial welfare” (*Ford Times*, July 1916, Vol. 9, No. 12, 534). Watching the Ford films now, in *Detroit: Ruin of a City* and archival collections, offers us a glimpse into the creation of ideals of industrial practice and progress and the concomitant management of workers as a critical moment in the establishment of corporate power and American modernity. Optimism courses through the films. In *Detroit, Michigan* (1921), for example, we are shown and told about the dynamism of Detroit, a city where the “downtown district pulsates with business activity” and where “[m]agnificent municipal buildings” are built and well maintained. This indeed is a different Detroit from that seen in Chanan and Steinmetz’s film. What the Ford films

of the first part of the twentieth century cannot show us, of course, is what animates the work of Chanan and Steinmetz: the dissolution of the Fordist dream of industrial modernity and the post-Fordist disintegration of urban centres like Detroit.

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