Northeast Historic Film invites you to be a part of a symposium dedicated to the topic of work and amateur film. The symposium is open to anyone interested in the relationship between the moving image and representations of work. Students, teachers, researchers, museum, library and archives professionals, programmers, amateur film and video creators, and labor and union specialists may find the symposium of particular interest.

Thursday, July 20, 2006

7:00 PM  

Cast and Crew as Family, Family as Cast and Crew: Henry Koster’s Home Movies

presented by Melissa Dollman, Moving Image Archive Studies, UCLA

In the Moving Image Archive Studies program at UCLA, I took a course called Cultures of Production, a class in which we studied the film and television production world by borrowing methodologies from Sociology, Anthropology, Geography, Cultural Studies as well as film theory. Concurrently I interned at the Academy Film Archive, working with film director Henry Koster’s home movie collection. I combined methodologies from the Production class to analyze specifically the behind the scenes footage captured by Koster and his family while on the set of feature films he directed. I explore ways in which the footage contains a wealth of primary resources for research: material and oral historiography, ethnography, and cultural/industrial history.

Three Smart Girls,  
Koster home movie  
Image courtesy Melissa Dollman
An Interview with Simone Weil
presented by the filmmaker Julia Haslett,
Line Street Productions, New York, NY

Until recently, I mostly made observational films on contemporary subjects, although over the last one and a half years I have begun making an expressionistic documentary on the French philosopher and labor activist Simone Weil (1909-1943), much of whose focus was on better understanding the nature and transformative power of manual and skilled work. Research for the film has taken me to some remarkable film archives, including the French Communist Party archives and the archives of the Albert Kahn Museum.

Friday, July 21, 2006

9:30–10:30 AM  The Corporate Video: Its Purpose and Meaning
presented by Sian Evans, filmmaker, Maine and New York City

Corporate videos are a small and specialized part of "working life." They are integral to most American corporate cultures and are a genre all their own and have remained quite rigid in style, length and intention across the 15 years I've been associated with the field, despite changing cultural references and styles, unlike more popular mediums such as documentary or narrative feature. I will give a context to each form I illustrate—describing the use and impact of each. In particular I would like to show a piece made for a Pfizer "Aricept" meeting—an Alzheimers' symptom drug treatment, which was built around Super 8 transfers of my own family home movies.

10:45–11:45 AM  "Towards a Post-Documentary Sensibility," or, the Surprising Implications of Audio-Video Digital Indexing Tools for Representing and Sharing Working Lives
presented by Michael H. Frisch, Professor of History & American Studies/Senior Research Scholar at the University at Buffalo, SUNY

Audio and video documentation is conventionally encountered relatively “raw,” in archived collections of film, video, or tape, and relatively “cooked,” in constructed, selective, and linear documentary forms. In this presentation, based in part on documentation of work, workers, and working-class communities in the grain and steel industries of Buffalo, New York, I will demonstrate how new digital tools open an important non-linear, multi-pathed ground between these poles.

In these modes, audio/video documentation can be usefully, intelligently, and instrumentally mapped and searched, and thus collections become something more than “raw.” And the same tools make it much easier to “cook” -- to explore a collection, select, compare, and order meaningful materials, and export them instantly for a range of presentational or analytic purposes. In this way, documentary exploration and representation can become far more democratically sharable.

These new tools dramatically narrow the distance between the archive, the scholar, and the documentary filmmaker at one end, and public access, educational use, and community engagement at the other. As such, I will argue, they imply a kind of post-documentary sensibility that opens powerfully transformative dimensions of analysis, utility, engagement, and presentation.
1:15–2:15 PM

"With These Hands" The ILGWU, Film, and Labor History in the Cold War
presented by Nathan Godfried, Department of History, University of Maine

The International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), at its high point in the 1930s and 1940s, represented hundreds of thousands of women and men in the clothing industry and practiced a form of unionism that recognized the economic, social, and cultural needs of its membership and the larger society. To celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the union’s founding, scheduled for the spring of 1950, ILGWU President David Dubinsky pushed for the production of a movie that would recount the history of the union and explain for members and the general public the vital services and goals of the trade union movement. The resulting 50-minute film, With These Hands, was a historical docudrama that told the story of the ILGWU through the eyes of a garment worker who applies for benefits under the union’s retirement fund. The film provides a means of exploring what union leaders perceived as the nature of work in the garment industry, the significance of their union’s history, and the role of the union in American society. It also reflects the Cold War environment in which it was made and released.

2:15–3:15 PM

Behind the Scenes with Women Factory Workers
presented by Patricia Raub and Robert Goff, American Studies, Providence College

Factory administrators, government officials and scientific management researchers have utilized film to promote methods of working more efficiently, train workers in using these techniques, and measure worker efficiency on the job. These films have often focused on women workers, who are usually shown segregated from male co-workers and under the supervision of male foremen. Our presentation includes the Westinghouse Works series (1904), Behind the Scenes in the Machine Age (1931), Supervising Women Workers (1944), and The Trouble with Women (1959). We will draw upon labor and gender studies scholarship to examine each of these films within their broader social and historical context, and we will situate the films within the genres of industrial and government films, tracing their respective production and exhibition contexts.

3:30-4:00 PM

What a Little Movie Can Do: The Events Surrounding the Making of “A Day at the Factory”
presented by Bob Brodsky, filmmaker and 8mm filmmaker, Rowley, MA

“One day in 1973, someone from the Fitchburg Rotary Club telephoned the superintendent of the shoe factory where I was personnel director to ask if he would send someone to speak at the annual Rotary Jobs Preparedness Day for the faculty of our local high school.” This presentation will cover the events previous to, surrounding, and following the making of A Day at the Factory, a Super 8 film I shot for a specific occasion in the City of Fitchburg. I worked at Anwelt Corporation for five years.
4:00-4:30 PM  “The Abbakadabba Coopno:” A Real Life Drama of Christian Farm Work presented by Robbins Barstow, filmmaker and retired educator, Wethersfield, CT

This original, 17-minute, 1941 film story dramatizes the working life for an inter-racial bunch of kids on a summer farm camp in New Jersey, just prior to the U.S. entry into World War II. It examines the Biblical-inspired work ethic and Christian ways of dealing with recalcitrance. A “coop-no,” you see, is a contrary kid who won’t cooperate. The camp was operated by a group of Christian pacifists, who sought to instill the values of work, cooperation, and sharing, using non-violent love to overcome intransigence. The “Kid-Stars” performing in this Biblical-based drama were from the slums of Newark, New Jersey, being offered a few weeks of country experiences at the “Abbakadabba Farm.”

6:30 PM  Screening: Model (Frederick Wiseman, US 1980, 129 minutes)

Frederick Wiseman observes the world of modeling, closely documenting the working lives of models, their New York agency, and the attention to detail demanded by photographers and directors to create the perfect image.

“He highlights the mad perfectionism of TV commercial-makers--rehearsals, retakes, huge crews, anxieties, tantrums, and exhaustion--all for a few seconds of film selling hosiery.”

– David Denby, New York Magazine

Saturday, July 22, 2006

9:00-10:00 AM  Early Adopters: The Transport Workers Union’s Use of Television as a Tool for Publicity in the early 1950s – 1960s

presented by Erika Gottfried, Curator of Nonprint Collections, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives Labor Archives, New York University

Michael J. Quill, flamboyant president of the Transport Workers Union (TWU), was a savvy manipulator of publicity. Most likely it was at his behest that, in the early days of television, the New York City-based union began to produce its own broadcast television materials—aimed at the general public as well as its own members—and to arrange frequent appearances by Quill and other TWU officers and members on both locally-produced and nationally-broadcast television programs. I have screened, arranged, and described the nearly 45 hours of 16mm black and white film donated to the Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives by the TWU. These materials contain a large number of TWU-produced filmed press conferences and television programs and some TWU-related television programs produced by other entities. It is these materials that I will explore in a presentation accompanied with numerous illustrative clips. I will also draw upon the extensive paper records of the union (also held by the Archives) that document the union’s production of and involvement in television broadcasts in the 1950s and 1960s.
10:00-10:30 AM  The Negotiation of White Working Class Identity and Film-Going (1895-1914)  
presented by Cara Caddoo, Integrated Media Arts, City University of New York

An examination of the (re)formation of white working class identity in the United States and its relationship to early silent film (1895-1914). The presentation will focus upon the ways the massive late 19th/early 20th century wave of Eastern/Southern European immigrants and "native" white Americans negotiated their identity through the act of film going. This includes the importance of class/labor consciousness in influencing how blackness and yellowness were imagined, and how gender anxieties in urban spaces contributed to the re-imagining of the American white working class both on and off-screen.

10:45-11:45 AM  “The Cry of the Children” and the 1912 American Woolen Strike, Lawrence, Massachusetts  
presented by Ardis Cameron, American Studies, University of Southern Maine

This presentation will cover the social impact of the film that was released in 1912 during the American Woolen Company strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts. The Cry of the Children is a completely restored two-reel Thanhouser film that runs just over 28 minutes. Cameron’s work focuses on labor history and Lawrence, Massachusetts, during the time this film was made.

1:00-2:00 PM  Amateur Cinema and the Re-Making of a ‘Local’ Heritage: Changing Images of the Fishing Industry in Scotland  
presented by Ryan John Shand, Department of Theatre, Film and Television, University of Glasgow, Scotland

My current research project, Amateur Cinema in Scotland, is an empirical study drawing on material from the Scottish Screen Archive in Glasgow. This research proposes that due to its very different production and exhibition networks, amateur cinema constructs a supplementary image of the nation: one that is much closer to 'local' histories and community memories. Cine-club films from the 1930s (amateur documentaries entered into The Scottish Amateur Film Festival) shed light on aspects of national life that went undocumented by metropolitan newsreel and sponsored documentary filmmakers located in the Central Belt of Scotland. The use of amateur film as a way of understanding the specific past of peripheral areas is explored in relation to the town of Wick, Caithness, located in the far north of Scotland. The analysis is developed in relation to three short films: Around Wick Harbour (1936), Fishing Week (1955), Around Wick Harbour (1974/75). Through this small case study, the potential value in broadening narrow definitions of national cinemas is proposed, as is the importance of archival images traditionally marginal to the concerns of film scholars.
In February 1959 a small coal mine near Berwick Upon Tweed, in north-east England near the border with Scotland, closed with the loss of 202 jobs. The event attracted little attention at the time. A long and bitter campaign by Blackhill miners and their supporters in the district to prevent the closure was the subject of a 48-minute 16mm documentary, made by a sociology academic and former National Coal Board researcher, Jack Parsons. For someone who had no formal training or professional experience in film production, the film displays a near astonishing degree of technical proficiency. Many of the key events in the campaign, including a mass meeting in Berwick’s town hall, were reconstructed with an amateur cast. My presentation will describe the film’s production, rediscovery and restoration, and will include excerpts from the film itself and a videotaped interview with Mr. Parsons which was made for its re-release on DVD last year. I will argue that the film’s significance lies in the light it sheds on a little-known aspect of British industrial history, and that its non-professional provenance has its cultural roots in the Documentary Movement and oppositional film cultures of the 1930s and ‘40s.

My focus will be on the home movies of Andrew Avery shot in Decatur County and Bainbridge, Georgia, during the 1930s-1950s. Avery graduated from the University of Georgia in 1929 and was a principal and school superintendent in Decatur County. He spearheaded successful legislative drives to provide free textbooks and rural library services to the children of Georgia. With this strong commitment to education Mr. Avery began filming educational agricultural footage and scenes of everyday life in Southwest Georgia with his 16mm camera. His amateur films capture the farming life of people in his region, the teaching they received, and the leisure activities of these same people.

Unemployed miners in Berwick-Upon-Tweed. The Blackhill Campaign, © Jack Parsons, 1964. Restoration © Northern Region Film & Television Archive, 2004 Image courtesy Leo Enticknap

Andrew Avery home movies. Image courtesy Ruta Abolins