

Health Education Films of the Silent Era: A Historical Analysis

Alan Sofalvi, PhD¹

Author¹ is affiliated with SUNY Cortland. **Contact author:** Alan Sofalvi, Health Department SUNY, Cortland, NY, 13045 Phone: 607-753-4226; Fax: 607-753-4226 Email: asofalvi@twcny.rr.com

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Abstract

Films have been used to present health messages throughout the history of the medium. The purpose of this article is to describe pictures from the silent film era that were designed to educate people about health issues. Films still available in at least one format were reviewed. Published reviews were also used to obtain information about these films. Films described here dealt with tuberculosis, hookworms, breastfeeding, traffic safety, dental care, and children's health. Suggestions for how these films might be used in a professional preparation setting are provided.

Keywords: *Visual Aids, Films, Educational History, Critical Viewing, Media Literacy*

Introduction

Since the production of films began on a widespread basis, they have been divided into genres.¹ One such genre is educational.² Motion pictures have long been used as a health education technique; they are mentioned in the *American Journal of Public Health* in 1912.³ The purpose of this article is to describe educational films of the silent era, detailing health information and recommendations found in the films. The focus will be on those films available on YouTube or other websites; films available on DVD will also be described.

How silent films were used to spread health messages

Before audio was introduced into films, use of films for educational purposes was known as visual instruction or visual education.⁴⁻⁶ Most health-related films of the era were designed not just to inform but also to convince people to modify conduct.⁷ By 1914 films had already been accepted as an educational method, and perhaps taken for granted; at a joint meeting of the American Public Health Association and the National Mouth Hygiene Association, the Director-General of the National Mouth Hygiene Association said “the motion picture, as a device for popular education, has been perfected and exploited so thoroughly that it only needs to be mentioned.”^{8(p405)} Bauer and Hull⁹ stated in 1937 that silent pictures were shown more often than films with sound for health education purposes, even though sound films were widespread by the late 1920s or early 1930s.¹⁰

Turner¹¹ grouped health education films of the silent era into four categories, primarily based upon their suitability for classroom use. First was the “long drama”.^{11(p270)} These pictures were shown to the general public in theatres and weren’t suitable for classroom use because of their length.¹¹ Second was the “propaganda film”^{11(p270)}, made by a group to be shown to promote interest in supporting the group. Turner¹¹ also placed films that promoted certain types of food or beverage as being healthy into this category. The third category consisted of films “prepared for a general audience, rather than to fit the school curriculum”.^{11(p270)} Information in these films met the scientific standards of the time; the question about these films was their suitability for the classroom.¹¹ The final kind of film was designed for classroom use: these films were made to aid in

instruction, not take the place of the teacher.¹¹ These pictures didn’t have to be entertaining, in Turner’s view: a student was “on the job to learn. That is his business, to get information, and it is not necessary to make an appeal to his interests to maintain his attention”.^{11(p270)}

Selected health education films of the silent film era

Films described for this article were made in cooperation with health agencies or health professionals of the time. These films are available on DVD and/or on YouTube or similar sites. They are described in chronological order.

Hope, A Red Cross Christmas Seal Story was made in 1912. The picture was sponsored by the National Association for the Study and Prevention of Tuberculosis, the forerunner of the American Lung Association, and was produced by Thomas Edison’s film production company as part of a series of films that “were probably the first film series produced for health education”.^{12(p22)} The picture deals with the prevention and treatment of tuberculosis and tells the story of a woman who contracts the disease and seeks treatment.¹² The films in this series were connected to the sale of what were then known as Red Cross Seals, now known as Christmas Seals).¹²⁻¹⁴ For several years in the early 20th century, Red Cross Seals were sold in a collaboration between the National Association for the Study and Prevention of Tuberculosis and the Red Cross.^{13, 14} This film is available on the *Treasures III: Social Issues in American Film DVD*¹² and as of July 25, 2011 was available at dailymotion.com.¹⁵

The Public and Private Care of Infants was made in 1912 as a joint effort of Thomas Edison’s production company and the Russell Sage Foundation’s Department of Child Helping and is available on a DVD, *Edison. The Invention of the Movies*.^{16, 17} The film portrays conditions in an institutional setting, portraying the institution in a negative light and calling for infants to be taken care of at home, or at least in settings where they could be given more individual attention than would be possible in the institutions portrayed in the film.¹⁷

The Cost of Carelessness, an early traffic safety film, was made in 1913 for the Brooklyn Rapid Transit Company and the Brooklyn Institution for Safety.^{12, 18} The film was shown in Brooklyn schools by “the

Brooklyn Committee of Public Safety ... to lower the mortality of children in the crowded streets.”¹⁹(paragraph

¹⁾ The film depicts several safety-related scenarios related to trolleys and automobiles.^{13, 19} This film is available on the *Treasures III: Social Issues in American Film DVD*¹² and as of July 29, 2011, a clip of the film could be found at the National Film Preservation Foundation website.¹⁸

The Temple of Moloch, made in 1914, was the result of another cooperative effort between Thomas Edison's production company and the National Association for the Study and Prevention of Tuberculosis.²⁰ The film is a story about workers at a factory where pottery is made and a physician who detects an unusual number of cases at the factory.²⁰ The Temple of Moloch is a Biblical reference to a temple built to honor a god to whom children were sacrificed.²¹ In the film the pottery factory is compared to the Temple of Moloch where “children are fed to the disease as they were fed to the ancient god”.²² The film focuses on one family as well: the father (a former employee at the pottery factory) contracts tuberculosis and later in the story an infant in the family dies after contracting the disease. Before the baby was infected the physician gave the family guidelines to follow regarding prevention of the disease and suggested removing the infant from the home, but the family did not follow through on these guidelines or the suggestion.²² In an intertitle in the film a reference is made by the father about “the rot”²², possibly a reference to potter's rot or silicosis, which he blames on his work at the pottery plant.²² A clip from the film is available on YouTube.²²

The Lone Game (made in 1915) was another film made by Thomas Edison's production company in conjunction with the National Association for the Study and Prevention of Tuberculosis.^{12, 17, 23} It's a story about three people that contract tuberculosis, one of whom dies.^{17, 23} The character that dies originally had his tuberculosis diagnosed as malaria.¹⁷ At the end of the film what were still known as Red Cross Seals are promoted.¹⁷ This film is available on a DVD, *Edison. The Invention of the Movies*.¹⁷

In 1912 the United States Children's Bureau was established.^{24, 25} In 1919 the Bureau made *Our Children*, a film that depicts how civic groups could cooperate with the Bureau to evaluate the health status of children and improve their health.^{26, 27} Depicted are a variety of ways to evaluate the health of children, including height and weight measurement and testing hearing.^{26, 27} The film was

made in Gadsden, Alabama and is available (in two segments) on YouTube.^{26, 27}

Light and Shadows in a City of a Million was made in 1920 by the Ford Motor Company to raise money for the Detroit Community Fund, a group that coordinated the distribution of funds to Detroit social service agencies in the early 20th century.

These included hospitals, child welfare agencies and agencies aiding people with disabilities.¹² The film portrays some of the social services available in the Detroit area at the time. At the end of the film is an intertitle with a request for contributions. The total the fund-raising effort was intended to raise was \$2.5 million.¹² The film is available on the *Treasures III: Social Issues in American Film DVD*.¹²

The Rockefeller Foundation made *Unhooking the Hookworm* in 1920, a film that portrays the transmission, symptoms, treatment and prevention of hookworm infection.²⁸ The film was originally shown in the southern United States but it ultimately was translated into different languages and shown around the world.²⁹ The film is available at the Rockefeller Archive site²⁹, on YouTube³⁰ and on a DVD.³¹

Tommy Tucker's Tooth was released in 1922 with Walt Disney as the director.^{32, 33} The film was made for a dentist and deals with proper tooth brushing technique: it follows two boys, one who practices good dental hygiene and one who does not.³³ The film is available on YouTube³⁴ and on DVD.³⁵ It is the first educational film made by Walt Disney.³³

The Best-Fed Baby was released by the Children's Bureau of the United States Department of Labor and was made to encourage mothers to breastfeed.³⁶ The film was made in 1925, according to the Records of the Children's Bureau.³⁷ According to the *New York Times*, however, the first showing of the film was in 1928.³⁸ The film gives recommendations as to the type of diet breastfeeding women should follow and gives suggestions regarding breastfeeding techniques. It is available on YouTube.³⁹

Clara Cleans Her Teeth was made in 1926, also by Walt Disney; it was made for the same dentist that worked with Disney on *Tommy Tucker's Tooth*.³³ The film portrays a girl who does not brush her teeth; she has a nightmare about her teeth, which convinces her to see a dentist.³³ The director of Michigan's Bureau of Mouth Hygiene, part of the Michigan Department of Health, criticized the film⁴⁰, believing the film placed too much emphasis on tooth brushing

and that it implied “a few visits to the dentist will change the most neglected, badly decayed teeth to a perfect set of teeth and we know this does not happen in real life”.^{40(p1105)} He also thought there was too little emphasis on appropriate diet and primary dental care.⁴⁰ The film is available on YouTube.⁴¹

Conclusion

That films have been used to present health messages has been noted since early in the twentieth century.^{2, 3, 8} The importance of mass media to health education has been emphasized as well.⁴² The importance of awareness of history of health education has been accentuated by Nolte, who stated that “our history is crucial to our present, and to our future, and if we don’t know our history, we’re working in a fog”.^{43(p231)}

The films described here are part of that history. They would be best used in professional preparation college courses with a focus on the history of the profession or in foundations of health education courses. The films could also be used in Health and the Mass Media courses or in Health Communication courses where the uses of various media are described. In addition, the films could be used in content courses, such as showing films about tuberculosis in a course about diseases.

More explanation of a silent film may be needed than would be needed for a sound film, as students are unlikely to have seen many silent films and may never have seen one. In addition, students would have to be encouraged to watch the film carefully, as key components of the story can be missed if students fail to see intertitles. These were used in silent films as a narrative device (indicating passage of time, where something was occurring, introducing characters or concluding scenes⁴⁴) or to indicate what a character was saying.⁴⁵ Compared to talkies, more concentration and focus are needed to watch a silent film.⁴⁵ One potential advantage of a silent film over sound films is that the professor can comment on important things in the film without worrying about speaking over any dialogue.⁴⁶ Some films on DVD are accompanied by comments from scholars that expand on points raised in the film. Students may find these comments helpful in understanding the motion pictures. Commentaries are available on the *Treasures III: Social issues in American film 1900-1934*¹² DVD for *Hope, A Red Cross Christmas Seal Story, The Cost of Carelessness* and *Light and Shadows in a City of a Million*.

The course instructor should always screen films before showing them to the class.^{47,48} In professional preparation courses, students should be analyzing the pictures, not having the analysis done for them. Following are some questions for students to consider when evaluating the films⁴⁹:

1. What types of lifestyles are portrayed?
2. What positive messages are communicated? Negative messages?
3. How are people persuaded to be healthier or safer?
4. How do the messages in the film reflect the era in which it was made?

Related to the fourth question, some of the messages in these films use language in intertitles that is considered unacceptable today. For example, in reel 2 of *Our Children* on YouTube, the term “colored folk” is used.²¹ In *Light and Shadows in a City of a Million* the term “cripple” is used to refer to a person with a disability.¹² Those viewing the film should be notified of such terminology or about other potentially problematic scenes before the film is shown.^{47, 48}

Students can also be asked to identify points that are still considered accurate even though the films were made approximately 100 years ago. Points that are no longer considered factual could also be identified.

Many films of the silent era have been lost⁷, but these “early motion pictures proved critically important in communicating to the lay public the tremendous medical and public health revolution”^{7(pviii)} taking place at the beginning of the twentieth century. Radio programming from the 20th century has been identified as being useful in helping health educators understand how health issues were perceived in the past.⁵⁰ The still-available silent films designed to educate the public about health issues are important historical resources for health education specialists.

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