

# Book Review

## Before Video: A History of the Non-Theatrical Film

By Anthony Slide, Greenwood Press, Westport, Conn., 1992. Hard cover, 192 pp.

Nontheatrical films have for 50 years been a significant element of the exploding global information and presentation communications media. Its impact has been much greater than inferred by another name used for it many years ago: substandard. So points out Anthony Slide in his latest writing, "Before Video: A History of the Non-Theatrical Film."

Anyone interested in the 16mm film medium will find the book to be a fascinating account. Slide did an impressive amount of research to come up with so much about people, companies, and organizations.

Nontheatrical film as of 1992, when this book was released, has had a venerable 69-year history. And its life is not yet over. In fact, something Slide did not bring out in his closing chapter, "The Waning Years," is that 16mm negative film for production is doing better than ever. For example, during the past two years Eastman Kodak has sold more 16mm negative film than in the history of the company. As a presentation system, however, 16mm print film has been almost totally replaced by videotape.

I can appreciate the dilemma that Slide must have faced when he organized his thoughts for the layout. The first five chapters are subject oriented: "Origins," "Chicago - The Non-Theatrical Capital of the World," "The Eastman Kodak Connection," "Specialization," and "Film in Education and Religion." The book's last three chapters follow a chronological sequence — "The 1930s and 1940s," "Decades of Progress and Prosperity," and, finally, "The Waning Years."

The chapter on Chicago's dominance in the industry was one of the more interesting and informative for me. Competition between Chicago and Detroit is traced. In many ways New York could be a third candidate for recognition as the nontheatrical film capital.

Chapter four, "Specialization," spells out the structure of the 16mm film world. While it covers all aspects of the industry, it concentrates on business and industry, medicine, and government use of the nontheatrical film.

"Film in Education and Religion" is the only chapter that carefully details its topic, the famous — or infamous depending upon your viewpoint — early historic film series,

*Chronicles of America*. Slide begins, "One series of film is superior to any other production in the non-theatrical subgenres of business, educational, or religious subjects....It was the most ambitious non-theatrical production ever attempted, combining 'Hollywood' techniques with the highest of educational standards." *Chronicles of America*, based on the 50-volume series from Yale University Press, was envisioned to be a 100-reel project. It never did reach that goal; 49 reels of 15 topics were completed between 1923 and 1925.

If any fault is to be found with the book, it is that the first five chapters jump around from the early 1900s to the current time, depending on the subject. This proved confusing at times and caused me to go back from time to time to keep my thoughts straight. For such an ambitious topic, the 172 pages mean that the hundreds of subjects are treated in a terse fashion. As I read, I found myself mentally filling in what I might have considered as essential information to make a vignette more interesting. I wonder why the book was only 172 pages.

A major omission is the Calvin Workshop, an annual event run by what many people felt was the number one 16mm production company of the day, the Calvin Co. of Kansas City, Mo. It should go down in history as one of the finest short courses of all time in any discipline. Some of their instructional films were classics. The workshop must have run for at least 15 years, drawing literally hundreds of people active in all aspects of production each year. Since the nontheatrical production industry never had a national convention, in some ways this workshop served that role. It certainly brought together people of note. Forest

Calvin, Lloyd Thompson, Larry Sherwood, Bill Hedden, and Neal Keehn all deserve their place in history for a variety of significant contributions to the industry, which are too numerous to elaborate here.

Almost overlooked was the vital role film played in World War II training. When the German surrender was being signed by Germany's chief of staff, Field Marshal Von Keitel, he reputedly said, "We had everything calculated perfectly except the speed with which the Allies were able to train their people for war. Our major miscalculation was in underestimating their quick and complete mastery of film education."

Sixteen million men and women each saw dozens of training films in all services. In addition civilians in the war effort were trained by film. It was after the war that thousands returning to peacetime positions put the 16mm film to effective use. I mark that period as the turning point that made film an industry.

If I had written the book, I would have devoted a chapter to the documentary film. Likewise, the single largest market for 16mm by a wide margin was the business and industrial use. That market used as much film as all the others put together. References to corporate use of 16mm are scattered throughout the book.

*Before Video: A History of the Non-Theatrical Film* ranks right up with Gloria Waldron's *The Information Film*, which was written in 1949 when 16mm film was approaching its zenith. *Before Video* was intriguing reading; I learned much from it. The book should be used in every cinema and television school in America and the world.

—Thomas W. Hope

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