ENCYCLOPEDIA OF EARLY CINEMA

Edited by Richard Abel

LONDON AND NEW YORK

universe characterized by constant pratfalls and incessant destruction.

LAURENT LE FORESTIER

migration/immigration: USA

Although ostensibly acknowledged, the emergence of early cinema and the phenomena of turn-of-the-20th-century migrations are profoundly interrelated: their threads span from social and economic history to racial politics and film aesthetics. The historical appearance of moving pictures coincided, in fact, with an increasing network of commercial transactions and movement of goods and peoples connecting industrially developed countries with each other and with underdeveloped ones. Whereas the international circulation of films influenced the development of most national cinemas, migrations had their most significant cultural impact in the USA. Here the influx of new populations deeply affected every cultural realm, including popular entertainments. From its inception, then, early cinema constantly and variously interpellated the multinational and multiracial fabric of American society. And it did so by asserting the moral and cultural superiority of American culture and lifestyle through more or less overt displays of racialized nationalism.

Traditional scholarship on early American cinema has dealt with "migrants" mainly as European immigrants. In the USA, however, migration was a historically broader and more complex affair, inclusive of domestic dimensions. Between 1890 and 1915, a staggering fourteen million southern and eastern Europeans arrived in the USA; from 1850 to **World War I**, approximately one million Asians (Japanese, Chinese, Koreans, Filipinos, and Indians), despite numerous restrictions, landed on the West Coast; through the imposition of a border, more than a million Mexicans and Mexican-Americans found themselves to be "migrants" in a new country. Furthermore, thousands of African-Americans (the figure reached approximately a half million after 1916) had begun moving northbound to urban environments away from the rural South.

At the turn of the 20th century, the USA was thus a nation of migrants facing racial and cultural diversity at home and abroad. Domestically engaged in nativist debates over eugenic taxonomies, post-slavery interracial relationships, and compatibility between foreign nationalities and American citizenship, the country was also proudly conducting imperialistic wars in Asia and the Caribbean. The public emphasis of an all-American identity, indeed an Anglo-Saxon one, was both enhanced and threatened by the increased domestic visibility of foreigners and former slaves. Early cinema was closely imbricated in these charged public debates. In brief, migrants to and within the USA inflected early American cinema's ideological, aesthetic, and social fabric, by patterning films' subject matter, genres, representational patterns, styles, and **stars**' identity—both on- and off-screen. In addition, movie-going among foreigners, blacks, and their descendents contributed to defining the public nature of cinema during its decisive formative years and its establishment as the most affordable national pastime.

From early on the film industry's own ideological self-posturing praised the new medium for its "universal" appeal and intelligibility in the face of former slaves' and newcomers' striking cultural and linguistic diversity. Yet, both film industry and traditional historiography have constantly hailed cinema as a visual *esperanto* precisely for, and not in spite of, its *American* character. Consequently, American film history has claimed that from its origins American cinema welcomed, addressed and, ultimately, encouraged the integration of foreign and unassimilated constituencies. This has often hindered the radical methodological challenges presented by migrations, as it has undermined the resilient diversity of people's movements and cultural exchanges.

Specifically, film historiography has focused on three primary realms: production, reception, and representation. Firstly, film accounts have regularly underscored the non-American origins of most early film producers and distributors. Carl **Laemmle**, William **Fox**, Adolph **Zukor**, Sam Goldwyn, Louis B. Mayer, and others were mostly Jewish entrepreneurs from eastern Europe and Russia who found themselves excluded from

established lines of business. They shaped early cinema's business practices, before and after the industry moved to Hollywood; even more significantly, they contributed to the development of film narratives centered on a proud all-American identity.

Secondly, both early and recent film historiography has emphasized the extraordinary diversity of early film audiences, crowding **nickelodeons** of large urban centers, where cinema emerged and consolidated itself as prime popular entertainment. Quite detrimentally, however, the lack of proper consideration for African-American film commentaries and for forms of evidence produced in languages other than English has prevented many scholars from reading American films against the grain of audiences' multicultural loyalties and multinational origins. For instance, disregarding such sources as the black and the ethnic press, monocultural and monoglottistic studies of film reception, coupled with a persistent methodological privilege of films' semiotic significance, have supported the notion that American cinema amalgamated the reception of most, if not all its spectators. Recent works on Jewish, Italian, and African-American spectators and on such diverse reception venues from neighborhood halls and variety shows to foreign and multilingual stages and ghetto theaters have openly questioned this common interpretation. From a spectatorial viewpoint, American cinema elicited what, with reference to African-American reception, Anna Everett has called "processes of transcoding." Among immigrants and former slaves, these modern and communal dynamics of acculturation supported new forms of cultural and racial identity, through mongrelizing operations of re-positioning, complicity, and self-expression.

Thirdly, cinema studies recently has begun to examine how early film narratives represented national and racial *others*—from immigrants to former slaves to native Americans—in stories of economic misery, criminal inclinations, moral dilemmas, and problematic adaptation to American civic and ethical values. In the midst of domestic Anglo-Saxonist crusades against migrations and in support of overseas expansionist campaigns, US culture at large addressed the potential loyalty of these "dissonant" groups. For decades, American theater, **vaudeville**, literature, and music had engaged in such racist practices as racial impersonations, whether in comedies or crime stories, stage black minstrelsy, and even slave narratives (often composed by former masters and white authors). Moving pictures continued these controversial practices, and this persistence determined the *racialness*, or intrinsic racial quality, of the American filmic image. Because turn-of-the-20th-century discourses and theorizations of race were connected inextricably to the phenomena of international and domestic resettlements, the critical trope of "migrations" may bridge the long established divide opposing discussions of film representations of white vs. non-white populations.

In the heat of the post-1880s waves of immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, in fact, scientific and political arguments converged in a common preoccupation about the biological effects of this exodus for the American republic. Cosmopolitan in scope, but jingoistic in purpose, these research enterprises compared world races throughout history with the presumed Anglo-American distinctiveness. The resulting eugenic program produced a multitude of racial taxonomies and hierarchies rather than a simple white/non-white juxtaposition, as it correlated racial stocks with inherent national and cultural qualities and scales of human development and worth. European, but also Asian, Mexican, and African-American populations were thus divided in terms of outer physical traits, from craniology to hair type and skin color, but also in terms of national and community predispositions, such as criminal attitudes, literacy, and civic stance toward Anglo-Saxon Americanism.

After the mid-1910s, the growing migration of blacks from the South and the arrival of populations of African descent from the Caribbean supported the emergence of the New Negro Movement, with its race riots, labor strife, and visible protests, which engendered, in historian Matthew Pratt Guterl's words, "a national mass culture obsessed with the 'Negro' as the foremost social threat." Up until that point, however, the composite power of the aforementioned racial distinctions was not at all subservient to color-based paranoid fears and legalized civic discriminations. Writing at the height of

this cultural phase, in his influential *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916), Madison Grant argued: "the term 'Caucasian race' has ceased to have any meaning," except when it is used to contrast Europeans with "Negroes," "Indians," or "Mongols."

In the years before 1915, then, the cultural discourse of race in the USA encompassed more than color distinctions. Predictably, in this period American films presented a vast array of racialized depictions, exhibited through strict hierarchical arrangements. Caucasian or not, however, they all stemmed from a white, Anglo-Saxon entitlement. Such supremacist cinematic racialness was an aesthetic dimension that, operating as a racial unconscious, inflected even the countless films where no foreigners or African-Americans, Asians, and Native Americans ever appeared. Still, in pre-1915 US cinema the distinction between whiteness and non-whiteness was a powerfully discriminatory trope, on- and off-screen, as it defined, in legal, social, and representational terms, civil entitlements that certain individuals enjoyed, while others did not.

Within the contours of American racial discourse, the imbricated tropes of "migrations" and "cinematic racialness" may help to explain a wider series of aesthetic practices adopted by American films to tell stories about new and old Americans. In general, early American cinema portrayed African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and Native Americans as subjects *extraneous* to the realm of American polity, ostensibly "unfit," from a racial standpoint, to adapt to and assimilate with American mainstream society. By contrast, the ambivalent status enjoyed by racialized white European immigrants was determined by the fact that adaptation and assimilation were not denied in principle, but simply questioned and problematized with variable results. In other words, for European ethnics in general, unlike non-white subjects, allegations of racial inadequacy, were difficult, but not impossible to overcome.

The most blatant example of cinematic racialness engaged in "processing" migration and its characters was silent comedy. Indebted to the irreverent physical routines of circus and vaudeville theater, **comedies** and **comic series** cast immigrants, and outsiders generally, by showcasing their incapacity to master the challenges of modern technology and urban life, from **transportation** to commercial artifacts, and thus to adapt to an American lifestyle inflected by the Protestant work ethic and Anglo-Saxon puritanism. Another instance was represented by the **western**. Mimicking and further visualizing dime novels, Remingtonesque **paintings**, and popular stage plays, the genre equated the conquest of the frontier and its social and natural landscapes—including the romanticized, but doomed "savage" Indians—with a quintessentially American national geneaology. Western films displayed a racially discriminating ideal of American identity and citizenship and thus represented an ideological move toward the *Americanization* of American cinema. This patriotic move also had commercial value as it aggressively pitted a national production against competing film traditions—most notably that of France.

A further example is offered by the many racial and interracial dramas of crime and love, where "migrants" were protagonists of stories of emotional disfunction, resilient (self)marginalization, and difficult, if not impossible assimilation. Their racial status, and specifically their color and eugenic attributions—from violent inclinations to self-control or lack thereof—determined how they featured side by side with Anglo-Saxon characters and what kind of Caucasian empathy could result. Countless sensational **melodramas** cast racialized

Figure 80 The Pests of our Pacific and Atlantic Coasts: Uncle Sam: "There shall be no discrimination. I will shut you both out." *Judge*, 23 (17 December 1892).

European immigrants in nativist narratives displaying their questionable assimilative qualifications for citizenship or, in Matthew Frye Jacobson's words, their "probatory whiteness," a status that was constantly denied to African-Americans, Latinos, Asian-Americans, and Native Americans. Recent work on female stars' white ethnicities has shown how Euro-American actors could differently activate assimilation myths and enable forms of characterization, spectatorial identification, and moral closure denied to other racialized groups.

When read through the broad lens of migrations, the **modernity** of early American cinema appears to be defined by the encounters, exchanges, and conflicts of people of allegedly different racial background, on- and off-screen. Namely, this modernity is constituted by the heavily commercialized imbrications between national and racial difference on the one side and the so-called mainstream culture on the other. "Migrant communities" were visibly coded and differentiated in narrative, representational, and socio-spectatorial terms by the very American power game of racial identities and national loyalties as well as racial loyalties and national identities.

See also: audiences: surveys and debates; black cinema, USA; colonialism: Europe; ethnographic films; imperialism: USA; Pathé Cinematograph; racial segregation: USA; white slave films

Further reading

Abel, Richard (1999) *The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900–1910*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Bertellini, Giorgio (2001) *Southern Crossings: Italians, Cinema, and Modernity: Italy, 1861–New York, 1920*, Ph.D. dissertation, New York University.

Brownlow, Kevin (1990) *Behind the Mask of Innocence*, London: Jonathan Cape.

Everett, Anna (2001) *Returning the Gaze. A Genealogy of Black Film Criticism, 1909–1949*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Gevinson, Alan (ed.) (1997) *Within Our Gates: Ethnicity in American Feature Films, 1911–1960*, Berkeley: American Film Institute Catalog/University of California Press.

Guterl, Matthew Pratt (2001) *The Color of Race in America, 1900–1940*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Haenni, Sabine (1998) *The Immigrant Scene: The Commercialization of Ethnicity and the Production of Publics in Fiction, Theater, and the Cinema, 1890–1915 (German-American, Yiddish, Italian-American, New York City)*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago.

Negra, Diane (2001) *Off-White Hollywood: American Culture and Ethnic Female Stardom*, New York: Routledge.

Stewart, Jaqueline Najuma (1999) *Migrating to the Movies: The Emergence of Black Urban Film Culture, 1893–1920*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago.

Stokes, Melvyn and Richard Maltby (eds.) (1999) *American Movie Audiences: From the Turn of the Century to the Early Sound Film*, London: British Film Institute.

Thissen, Judith (2001) *Moyshe Goes to the Movies: Jewish Immigrants, Popular Entertainment, and Ethnic Identity in New York City (1880–1914)*, Ph.D. dissertation, Utrecht University.

GIORGIO BERTELLINI

Milano Films

Milano Films emerged on December 1909 from the financially troubled SAFFI-Comerio (formerly **Comerio Films**). A national market crisis and SAFFI-Comerio's own ambitious projects, particularly a spectacular adaptation of Italy's quintessential literary classic, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, had proved fatal. By contrast, Milano became a most exemplary Italian company, defined by great financial possibilities and grand plans of cultural uplift.

Backed by capital of the local aristocracy and not just the emerging Milanese industrial bourgeoisie, Milano Films had the most modern and well-equipped film studios in Italy. Its owners and administrators shared a common didactic aspiration to establish a national cultural hegemony and foster a sense of national identity.