

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

"Making Movies Modern: Film in American Culture before World War II"

by

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This dissertation is an investigation of the motion picture as an object that eluded the familiar high/low boundaries that defined American culture. I trace the development of the moving pictures' cultural reception as it moved from a "cheap amusement" featured in nickel theaters to an aesthetic and scholarly object exhibited in museums and universities. The moving picture not only redefined the historical link between popular culture and the pre-industrial "folk" arts, but also challenged the position of the high arts. The movies were also increasingly described as an essentially American art, due in part to the newness and vitality of the medium, reflecting the youthfulness of the nation. Its status as the American art form, its supporters argued, was also due to its undeniable popularity across class and regional lines, inspiring many to refer to the movies as the democratic art.

After 1910, articles praising the cinema and its artistic potential began to circulate in the United States. Despite significant differences, there seemed to be a growing consensus upon regarding the film as an art. Vachel Lindsay's *The Art of the Moving Picture*, published in 1916, compared the formal qualities of the cinema to those of sculpture, painting, and architecture. Lindsay believed that the moving picture could provide a common culture based on democratic values or, what he called, "old fashioned-Americanism." Movies would thus serve as a bulwark against anarchy. In the same year, Hugo Münsterberg created a self-contained theory of film as a modern art independent of the other arts. Thus, he gave film theory the same status as the emerging New Criticism in literature and Aestheticism in the Arts.

The creation of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and the Museum of Modern Art Film Library were the most significant efforts to promote the movies as an art. Both institutions provided early support to nascent museum and university film programs across the country. In particular, the exhibition of movies by MOMA represented the recognition of film as both a modern art and as a uniquely American form of expression by the international art establishment.