

BOOK REVIEW

Health Education Films in the Twentieth Century

by Christian Bonah, David Cantor, and Anja Laukötter (Editors)

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The volume examines how various organisations within the commercial, governmental, medical and public health spheres used film to express ideas about health within a range of contexts. Whilst the book consists of stand-alone studies that intersect with numerous genres, the introductory chapter does an excellent job of linking the themes and observes the complex nature of the medium of film.

The motion picture impacted the world of medicine in diverse ways. Medical practitioners used films to observe, train, and promote – yet many were suspicious of them amid fears they might encourage the public to self-diagnosis or immoral behaviour. Film gave audiences an opportunity to witness unfamiliar aspects of medicine like microbes and X-rays. Such examples show why health education films are relevant to historians of twentieth century medicine.

The chapters are divided into four sections. The first section focuses on films produced within a commercial context. David Cantor discusses why The Eastern Film Corporation began producing health films, showing that the main aim was to boost the revenue of the company. Christian Bonah explores film archives of the pharmaceutical giant Bayer, which had an in-house production department and used health films not only to educate their audiences, but also to market their products.

The second section deals with non-commercial public health films, produced by local and national governments and health agencies. Miriam Posner's chapter focuses on one film – *The End of the Road* (1919) – to explore themes of venereal disease, sex and commerce. Originally a social hygiene film shown in churches, factories, club houses, and other non-commercial settings, when later shown in theatres the screening environment altered how the film was perceived – from inoffensive and educational to illicit and immoral.

The third section considers health films on an international scale, looking towards organisations that are considered “above” politics like the Red Cross and the League of Nations; and lastly, the fourth section deals with methodological issues surrounding the study of public health films, looking at why corpuses were created and how they shaped the way in which various audiences, including historians, have perceived public health films.

Despite the highly visual subject matter of the book not all chapters make use of film stills as images within the chapters. Whilst the volume may be too comprehensive for the general reader its interdisciplinary focus will make it an interesting read for a wide range of scholars.

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