



The First Use of Moving Pictures in Promoting Public Libraries: The Danish Case

Martin Dyrbye

Associate Professor

The Royal School of Library and Information Science

Copenhagen, Denmark

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Abstract:

Today all sorts of libraries in many part of the world are using the film medium and the Internet in their propagation of different activities through showing small sequences through i.e. YouTube or other common multimedia channels. Many of the films are showing how public libraries are able to inspire, surprise and even empower the citizens, when they are seeking information for very different activities, either to get new ideas or other point of views in different matters, for educational and cultural activities, or to be equipped to solve a specific task in an autonomous way. The film medium is a very strong in the purpose of propagation, and this was recognized in the first decades of the 20th century amongst the leading film nations at that time. Professional film experts, as well as leading pioneers in the library movement in i.e. US and Denmark realized the potential of the film medium, the moving pictures, to convince the citizens about the usefulness of the public libraries in different matters. This is documented in the history about the probably first library film, a short documentary made in Denmark in 1922. It shows, how different citizens get professional help to solve their different questions, and the daily work at the library then seems not to have changed fundamentally concerning the different aspects of the library work and the dialogue between the librarian and the lender.

In 1905 the Danish public libraries became organized in a library association, which since then has taken care of their propagation in the society. Different media have been used in order to tell the Danish population about the strength of the public libraries amongst individual lenders as well as interest groups in the society. In many ways the key words in the effort to convince the Danish people about the excellence of the public libraries are:

- Inspiring
- Surprising
- Empowering

In the agitation for the promotion of the public libraries those three words, which also are part of the headline for the agenda of libraries in general today as seen at the IFLA Conference 2012, have been very central and for obvious reasons very much in focus. The citizens using the public libraries are in fact able to get inspiration from the collections in the local public library. Many people are using the public library in order to get inspiration for their leisure time, educational or working matters. In fact many lenders are also surprised of the richness of wisdom, which still are connected to the concept of public libraries. Many of them, too, will be empowered in different ways after their meeting with the local public library.

The public libraries are all reflecting the trends in the development of the society through the ages, especially in their ability to absorb different media in their activities in order to promote their capabilities as institutions, which can propagate the written word, education and culture in the broadest sense as possible (Dyrbye et al., 2005).

The ideas behind the development of modern public libraries in Denmark from the beginning of the 20th century and onwards were indeed very much inspired by the Anglo-American library ideas, or as the Danish head of the Royal Library from (1901-1924) formulated it in 1909, the so-called “library spirit”. It is also well known that many ways of how-to-do the job in practice at the library were inspired by the ideas from abroad, and different sorts of library primers and library journals from US and UK were read diligently (Dyrbye, 1909)

It seems also to be the case concerning the use of different media in order to propagate or advertise the idea of public libraries to the citizens in the local communities. In the beginning of the 20th century it still seems to be reasonable using the printed word, or from time to time the spoken word in the agitation and spreading of information about the public libraries, their function and different possibilities in the ordinary daily life. Even though the public libraries were confronted with new ways of advertising first of all inspired by the development in the contemporary business sector and media houses. One of the most exciting new media in the beginning of the 20th century was the possibilities of showing moving pictures, the later films or movies, for a large public. The art of advertising by moving pictures was a reality in 1916, when the American journalist and expert in moving pictures E. A. Dench, in 1916 got his primer published about *Advertising by Motion Pictures* (Dench, 1915; 1916; 1917).

Mr. Dench was very aware of the reader’s lack of experience of using other media than the written or spoken word in advertising, when he wrote the following sentences about the new possibilities, which arose by using moving pictures in the propagation of different matters. Thus, he wrote in 1916:

“It will probably seem rather strange to you that an invention like the cinematograph, which has achieved widespread fame as a form of entertainment, can perform the functions of advertising, but it is none the less a fact. Wonders have not yet ceased in this every-day world, believe me.” (Dench, 1916, p. 8)

In a way he also forecasted, what he would be concerned about two years later, in 1918, when he made the following statement in continuation of the thinking above:

“It also is not, I am glad to say, a medium confined to any one business or profession. It is, in fact, equally adaptable to the large manufacturer as it is to the smallest dealer in any trade.” (Dench, 1916, p. 8-9)

It is well known today that old, established institutions in a society always might fear the risk of being outdated by of different competitors trying to get a piece of the cake in a given business area. – Until the beginning of the 20th century libraries were not really threatened by other media. Written and printed material dominated the collections, and the public did not really expected to get in touch with other media than the already well known printed books on the shelves.

The media development changed radically the beginning of the 20th century, when the moving pictures, movies and the cinemas almost went from strength to strength globally. The situation at that time is in some ways similar to the later media development in the modern and post-modern society. Just think about the consequences of the introduction of broadcast, radio and television, and the development in the last decades, when the Internet, the World Wide Web, YouTube, facebook and Twitter totally changed our conception of different media and their possibilities and the media behavior.

In respect to the library development many people, the lenders as well as the librarians have raised the relevant question each time new media were invented and spread in the society, namely what consequences might it have for libraries and the sake of the book.

This was also the case with the successive spreading of moving pictures, movies or films in the first decades of the 20th century. In 1918 the question about the connection between the libraries and the moving pictures was raised in *The Library Journal*. The editor dedicated parts of the volume 43, No. 2 of the *Library Journal* from February 1918 to the theme about movies and the libraries, because:

““The Movies” have of late years been considered the chief rival of the libraries for public attention, but it is now found that the two may act in concert, to their mutual benefit and the common good. This number of the *Library Journal* is, therefore, specialized on this topic.” The editor was also aware of the fact that “Another field for movie films is in direct library promotion.” (*The Library Journal*, 1918, p. 65).

The articles in the *Library Journal* from 1918 discussed themes, which still even today seems relevant. In the article, “Motion Pictures and Reading Habits” written by Orrin G. Cocks, Advisory Secretary at the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures, the relationship between movies, literature, reading habits and the libraries was discussed. It was “a study of the effects of motion pictures and the reading habits of the American people” and “based on questionnaires sent out to ninety-six librarians in all the states, to which fifty-six answers were received from the head librarians and children’s departments, with their associates.”

In the article the author concluded that “The motion picture for entertainment is here to stay”, and the author mentioned its “growth during the past fifteen years”, which “has been phenomenal”, but: “The time is too short for it to assume stable and settled forms. No one is now able to prophesy what will be accomplished during the next ten years.”

In relationship to the libraries Mr. Cocks made a statement, which also could have been relevant later on in the 20th century, at the time when the next generations of new media were introduced to the mankind:

“The motion picture, moreover, is not an enemy of the library or of the school. To be sure it has a distinct place of its own, but it can be used as a handmaid of both institutions. Its function as an instrument in the development of knowledge and character is unquestioned. It adds to the sum of knowledge largely by indirection. In the course of the discussion of dramatic themes a great mass of facts flows into the mind on the crest of the tide of interest. Having the whole world as its background and setting, it inevitably will play a part in the culture of the American people.”

Those words reminds us today about the development of the modern digital multimedia technology, the World Wide Web and the Internet etc. in the last three decades, which also challenged the well-known and established ways of spreading information, education and culture to the citizens through the old and well established public libraries. The words said by Mr. Cocks are like a *déjà vu*, and then as well as later in the 20th century, when new media were spreading in the society, like i.e. printed cartoons, the radio and television. Librarians might express their skeptical, critical or even hostile towards the new and unknown media, which were regarded as not serious sources of information, but merely instruments of entertainment to simple amusement of the masses. But, as Mr. Cock warned the American librarians: “It follows that the attitude of the librarian should not be destructively critical. Where there are undoubted evils, these should be recognized and done away with.” (p. 70)

Instead of rejecting the films the librarians could change their focus, as many of them really did, also in connection to the later media development, and look upon the potential of moving pictures just like other people involved in culture did, and Mr. Cocks added:

“Fortunately writers are awake to the potency of the motion picture; the producers now see that they have a large part to play in the cultural development of masses of people; the exhibitors are quick to note that they are more than professional entertainers, and both teachers and librarians are thinking seriously about methods of utilizing this great agency for the welfare of the people.”

There was in Mr. Cocks’ opinion any doubt about the role films might have also outside “the motion pictures theater”, the cinemas, which were in use first of all in the purpose of entertainment amongst the people “during their leisure hours.” People in the cinema might “resent those things which are too openly instructional.” Instead and “despite opposition, we may look for the extensive use of the proper kind of pictures in churches, schools and libraries.” The movies – both in the purpose of entertainment as well as education – were demanded by the public. In a constructive way of thinking about the possibilities of the film media Mr. Cocks suggested a slogan for the future connection between the above mentioned cultural institutions in the society and the moving pictures: ““Intelligent Co-operation.””

As an appendix to Mr. Cocks’ article a list of relevant “Educative Motion Pictures” gave the reader examples in a “short list of sources” which might be “useful” for libraries equipped with auditoriums “with motion picture machines”. Subjects as information about The American Red Cross, The Commission on Food Administration, Industrial and Economic Films and the Bureau of Commercial Economics were mentioned (Cocks, 1918).

One of the leading well-known figures in the area of film advertising, the above mentioned Mr. Dench, was also giving librarians some practical advices about how they could use the moving pictures positively in their daily work. As an authority in his field it was obvious to let him give some advices in *The Library Journal*. His article "Putting Your Library in the Movies" was important, because the starting point for Mr. Dench was questions raised by librarians. In his introduction he wrote thus:

"The other day I received a letter from a librarian who wanted a result-producing photoplay scheme for advertising the local library and community house. I replied that there were several methods by which to stimulate the use of libraries by motion pictures, and as the main difference between these plans was the expense, it was up to the library to adopt the method which came nearest to its appropriation."

But why should libraries at all be interested in the film media? Mr. Dench's answer was very clear:

"The motion-picture, appealing as it does to the eye, presents an appeal that cannot be ignored. It comes on the screen with nothing else to detract one's attention, consequently it is more effective than other publicity channels, and the presentment is so subtle that the spectator is unconsciously aroused to action by the message which the film gives."

Even though the film media had been in use and was well known since the beginning of the 20th century it was still in 1918 just before the end of the 1st World War costly to produce in a minor scale. Mr. Dench gave some practical advices in his articles about how the libraries could use the moving-pictures in advertising in an economically and cost effective way. The cheapest way was to make use of "the animated cartoon", and Mr. Dench made an example: "A subject employed by one library shows an ocean liner which is chased by a submarine and finally torpedoed. The explosion sends letters scattering in all directions, after which they arrange themselves into the advertisement. Then the steamer disappears below to the surface."

It was also very important that the libraries focused on their own local area instead of making use of film as an instrument of advertising more generally. Using the knowledge of the local community and the daily visitors would be an obvious way of using the film media in order to get more publicity and more support to the libraries. The advice from Mr. Dench was clear:

"Film an interview with your patron and introduce some intimate scenes, not forgetting the visualized testimonial. Blend entertainment and advertising."

Technically Dench advised librarians to use sub-titles, texts in the film only if it was necessary, because "it is action by which you have to tell your story." With his great knowledge of the effects caused by the film media Mr. Dench underlined the importance of using visual effects, because: "It is what the spectator sees, not what he reads, that leaves the lasting impression, the paramount point to be reached in advertising by motion-pictures. Moreover, each word consumes one foot of film."

The purpose of Mr. Dench's contribution to the *Library Journal* was not only to give the libraries some ideas of the potential of the film in advertising, but also to make certain technical aspects clear to the reader. His article is also an example of an early manual of "how to do" in an environment far away from the film studios, when librarians might think

about making a film about a library. An ongoing theme in the article is the economic aspects, but also the considerations about the connection between the production and the later circulation of a library film (Dench, 1918)

In continuation of the considerations about the possibilities between films or moving-pictures and the libraries, Mrs. Elmer G. Derr, President, Cleveland Cinema Club, made an appendix to the above mentioned articles, in the Library Journal from March 1918. The film club, she represented, had actually very good experiences in its cooperation with the libraries, which were very important institutions, especially because of their keen efforts to get both all round as well as more special information about the film media, registrations of literature about this more and more important subject. According to Mrs. Derr it was obvious that the cinema club she represented could have a clear benefit of a close connection with the libraries, which also would have obvious advantages of a closer co-operation:

“We believe there is a fine opportunity for the libraries of the country to co-operate with the film-producing companies and the exchanges, especially when standard books are dramatized and prepared for the screen. Advance notice could be given the library, by the producing companies, and the local exchanges could invite an librarian to private screenings and give the date and theaters where the films are to be shown; the library could arrange their books on the subject, posting lists of books and theaters where the story is to be screened upon the bulletin boards of the library.”

Furthermore Mrs. Derr revealed some further ideas she had about the possibilities in the future, if the libraries and the film media were seen as partners. Her points of views were actually inspired by the similar close connection between motion pictures and education. She made a very visionary statement about the future situation:

“The educational value of motion pictures is being recognized and one may expect to see their general use in teaching in the higher elementary grades and high schools and colleges very soon. The introduction of the department of visual education will revolutionize the system of education and greatly shorten the time of school and college courses.”

Also the business life had realized the value of using the film media “in selling and teaching salesmanship to their forces”, and even promoted the spreading of “small portable motion picture machines”.

In her concluding remarks Mrs. Derr were convinced of the viability of the moving pictures, because:

“The possibilities of motion pictures make for efficiency, direct method and conservation of effort. As an art there has been a steady advance and no time, expenses or detail is withheld in making pictures that shall satisfy the artistic sense.”

Furthermore she forecasted that the film medium in the future would be more and more technically refined with more focus upon the qualities of the pictures, “coloring, projection, etc”. The motion pictures was then – as it also is today – “under constant study and experiment”, and Mrs. Derr added, that it would be more and more perfect in the future. In her last remarks, she was sure of the fact, that:

“When a time-defying film has been invented we can have “film libraries” where copies of the best pictures may be preserved. Civic and national history may then be visualized.” (Derr, 1918).

Many of the considerations about the film medium, the moving pictures, mentioned above reflects ideas, which when they were raised first time in the *Library Journal* in 1918 seemed to be visionary and like an utopia seen in the context of the library development then. One of the questions raised after re-reading the articles from 1918 will of course be, if any libraries really did realize the idea of using the moving-pictures as an instrument of propagation?

Two important sources from the first half part of the 1920s about advertising and publicity concerning public libraries, mention the possibilities and the potential of the connection between the motion pictures, films, cinemas, books and libraries, but neither in the *Library Journal* of 1918, nor in the books about advertising and publicity mention anything about the genre *library movies* that means motion-pictures or movies giving an impression as a documentary about the public library and its daily work (Briscoe, 1921; Ward, 1924).

For that reason it seems very interesting that a Danish early documentary, a silent movie was produced in order to propagate the public libraries at the first modern Danish Book Fair in the days of September 16th – 28th 1922. Besides the library film there was also produced a film about books and Danish authors.

The idea of making a movie about the public libraries seems obvious, and the man behind the project was one of the leading Danish library pioneers, the teacher, educator and library agitator, Mr. Jørgen Banke. Besides his daily work as an employee at the State Inspectorate of Public Libraries, he was also very active in the Danish Library Association.

The title of the film is *The Public Libraries in the Municipality of Copenhagen at the Sct. Nicolai Church Building September 1922*, and it was actually made on at least two locations, both at the central public library in Copenhagen, as well as a very short sequence of film at the central library in Vejle, Jutland. It was suggested by Mr. Banke for economical reasons that different larger Danish towns should be a sort of shareholders in his film project, but only the Danish capital and Vejle can today be seen on the preserved film. Its duration is 7½ minutes and it has a length of 203 meters nitrate film.

It was actually as mentioned above a *documentary film*, a term of a genre in modern sense, which actually was invented by the British film director and documentarist John Grierson, who used the term about the American director Robert Flaherty’s legendary film *Nanook of the North*, from 1922, that is as mentioned above the same year the Danish library movie, and probably the first one, was presented to an audience at the Book fair. According to Mr. Grierson the starting point of a documentary is “the creative treatment of actuality”. It should have a script (Hardy, 1966).

The movie was shoot by the then well-known and one of the best Danish cinematographers, Mr. Poul Eibye. The script writer of the Danish library film was Mr. Jørgen Banke, mentioned above. He was through his job in the State Inspectorate of Public Libraries probably aware of the former mentioned articles in *the Library Journal* from 1918. In many ways the film follows the advices, especially those given by the above mentioned Mr. Dench.

The story is simple, a silent movie, with texts explaining the dialogues between those taking part in the film. It is also well-arranged and realistic. Amongst the “actors” some are recognized as members of the staff from the libraries in Copenhagen and Vejle.

The audience meets through the sequences people – younger as well as mature or elder – who want different sort of information or knowledge about various subjects. Two men just walk into the library asking the librarian at the desk about the biographical data concerning a Dane, Mr. Drakenberg, a man with a mythical status in the Danish history. They are discussing the fact whether the man really was living, became married in an age over 100 years, passing away around the 150 years, or he just was a person from an adventure. The proof of the story was to be found in the newest biographical handbook at the library, and the librarian is able to solve the twist between the two visitors, and even showing them a painting from the book showing Mr. Drakenberg himself. Certainly the two friends were very surprised of the answer they got by visiting the library.

The following sequences are more short and brief, but a throughout theme is that public libraries are able to help people with almost all sort of things concerning getting the right information just in time, when it is necessary. Furthermore the public library is also the place where new technology and modern facilities are in use – goods which still in the 1920s were regarded as very expensive and luxury articles like the telephone and the automobile. Both were more and more spread out in the larger towns, but else ordinary people could not afford having their own telephone or even a car.

In a sequence a lender, a journalist, Mr. Lassen makes a phone call to the public library. Three days earlier he made a request about a pamphlet concerning the rules of alternative spelling. The librarian replies immediately by the phone that it is back on the shelves again, and Mr. Lassen can get it later the same day, because the library’s automobile, bought in 1920, will deliver it very soon to the district library nearby the citizen. The professional lender, the journalist Mr. Lassen was then empowered by the contact with the library.

Another guest at the library, a woman, made a request about music, and different cards from the catalogue appear on the screen convincing the public about the fact that the public library actually bought the newest items about different subjects. The lender seems to be very satisfied about the quick answer, and she preferred the newest and illustrated English title from 1922. It seems obvious that the lady with a keen interest in music got a lot of inspiration after her visit in the public library.

Many people were also concerned about whether it was free or not to lend books at the public library, and it was raised as a question by a guest at the desk. The librarian could assure that everybody could use the public library freely, because it was owned by the municipality and paid by the local taxpayers.

Amongst other questions raised by guests in the library were about the use of open shelves; precise information about certain books and authors in quite different subjects. Even a request of a tailor-made booklist about rabbits and the breeding of them.

After those small, but very informative sequences about a day in the public library 1922 in the municipality of Copenhagen, a short sentence from Vejle in Jutland followed. From a letter from Mr. Banke to the local head of the library it was the idea that the film should bring a scene, where a young couple, just married should ask him about a book with information

about different public formula. Unfortunately only nearly 30 seconds exist today, but the viewer is able to recognize the head of the library standing outside his library, and with a lot of guests either coming or leaving the building (Dyrbye, 2012).

The Danish library film from 1922, even though very short, is an excellent example of, how a public library used a medium like the moving pictures as an effective way of advertising or making publicity. The reception, as mentioned in one of the leading newspapers, of the library film was positive at the Book Fair, but later on, some of the members of the Danish Library Association were a bit skeptic, because “it was not as good, as expected.” Even though, it is a fact that the later library films made by the Danish Library Association were following the trait of the first. What changed was not the message, but rather the use of new possibilities to strengthen it, for example using Technicolor, the sound movie system etc. Fundamentally they also follow the traits of the early theoretical reflections about the relationship between the moving pictures, the film medium, and the public libraries from 1918 and the beginning of the 1920s.

The public libraries are nowadays, as it was the case in earlier times like 1922 closely connected to the concepts of public, educational and cultural welfare. Furthermore, in a way, the first Danish (even the first in the World?) library film also documents the fact that people in 1922, like today, have many purposes and motives for visiting their public library, but still they have rich possibilities to be inspired, surprised or even empowered – and even enriched for more than just a short moment.

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