



## **ANIMATING THE INANIMATE: FILM AND ARCHITECTURE AT THE 1939 NEW YORK WORLD'S FAIR**

**Caitlin McGrath**, *University of Chicago*

### **Abstract**

With more than 500 films at the 1939 New York World's Fair, the potential for film as a medium and cinema as a social institution was on display. The concept of 'display' itself is key to exploring the uses of film at the fair, and its integration in the design of individual pavilions and the fairgrounds as a whole. The fairs and expositions of the Depression era were often sites which intensified the desire to both understand and escape the volatile contemporary moment, and none more so than the New York World's Fair, caught between the devastation of the Depression and the start of World War II. The Fair functioned much like a film set, with visitors as active participants in the fantasy, or more aptly described, the idealized reality. Thus, both film and architecture were utilized in unprecedented ways to produce a convincing illusion of the future.

Advertising had come to occupy center stage at an unprecedented level with commercial interests making their products manifest in the iconic structures of their pavilions – the Wonder Bread building with its instantly recognizable multi-colored dots, the Carrier Air-Conditioning Building in the form of an igloo, the National Cash Register Company with its enormous rotating register keeping a running total of attendance numbers. Within these pavilions film was used to not only further the sales of products like the three-dimensional animated film *In Tune with Tomorrow* where the latest model Chrysler was shown to assemble itself, but also in the government buildings. The City Planners of New York commissioned the documentary *The City* from the acclaimed director Pare Lorentz. In addition there was the experimental use of a multiple projection system with a series of City Symphony-inspired films of New York running simultaneously under headings such as Public Works, Department of Education and so on; an attempt to give audiences an immersion into various aspects of New York City life without dialogue or sound.



Conversely, the Consolidated Edison Building housed The City of Light, where a film sound system was used in conjunction with a light display to bring to life the skyline diorama where a 24-hour day was accelerated into a 6 minute show. Bringing film and architecture together, the Perisphere housed Democracy, one of the fair's largest futuristic dioramas of social planning. As visitors moved through the inside of the dome a rapid 35 mm slide show (advertised as a 'film') of marchers singing the Fair's theme song "Dawn of a New Day" was projected on the ceiling, creating an ethereal image of men and women marching towards the promising future. The exterior of the Perisphere also functioned as a "screen" for nighttime projections, literally inscribing the future onto its own image.

These are just a few examples of the myriad ways film was used in conjunction with architecture to construct a mythic American identity and envision the utopian potential of a new American society. Through film and architecture, themes of myth and history, illusion and escapism, reality and fantasy, education and entertainment, nostalgia for the past and anticipation of the future all intersected at the New York World's Fair of 1939. While these are issues of great interest for understanding the period between the Depression and World War II, I believe they hold even greater importance today as we delve into the issues surrounding cinema as a forming force in contemporary society. A closer examination of the issues that shaped this fervent desire for the future has relevance to our own experiments with the medium beyond our presence in that future dreamed of in 1939.

**Keywords:**