

Liverpool Film Seminar

2012 – 2013 series

Every year, Liverpool Film Seminar invites six experts to deliver a series of talks. Topics vary greatly and the series does not focus on a specific aspect of film. Instead, a range of genres and approaches are celebrated, from historical reach to the internet's impact on cinematic material.

Professor Karen Lury (University of Glasgow)

Micro-history and the amateur film: From artefact to anecdote

'And you need not fear lest what is peculiar should not meet with sympathy. Each character, however peculiar it may be, and each object you can represent, from the stone up to the man, has generality.' - Goethe

This paper will present what might be called a small-scale or 'micro-history' of an amateur film located in the Scottish Screen Archive, *The Chief's Half Day*, filmed by W.S. Dobson in 1961 (13.30 mins, silent, colour). The 'Chief' is William Merrilees (OBE) – once 'Scotland's most famous policeman'. Like many amateur films, *The Chief's Half Day* confounds conventional categories: a fictional narrative, it simultaneously documents (or provides a re-enactment) of the plausibly authentic activities of a real 'larger than life' character: 'Wee Willie Merrilees'. In the course of the film, Merrilees talks to a penguin at Edinburgh zoo; visits a hand reared chimp at home; and in the grounds of a local children's home he is welcomed by children of all ages – including one little boy in a wheelchair, other boys on tricycles and one little girl in callipers – and here he donates the dog who recently played 'Grey Friars Bobby' from the eponymous Disney film. This chapter will present an analysis of this idiosyncratic text and offer a reflection on the tension between the excitement and confusion generated by the excessive contingency of this and other 'amateur' films, and how this confusion and this excess creates an opportunity to explore the parallel – albeit frequently entangled – concerns of both historiography and film analysis. Specifically I will ally my own approach (and the difficulties therein) to that of historians interested in the potential of small-scale or micro-histories (such as Siegfried Kracauer and Carlo Ginzburg).

I will suggest that by refusing to marginalise, or exclude as trivial, the experiences or representations of children and animals it is possible to revisit and elaborate upon larger (macro) histories of church, child welfare and morality in Scotland. I argue that the peculiarity of the amateur film and its status as both artefact and anecdote,

enables a close-up investigation of objects, and human and non-human agents that prompts larger questions and revisits past assumptions.

Biography:



Karen Lury is Professor of Film and Television Studies in the School of Culture and Creative Arts at the University of Glasgow, Scotland. Her most recent monograph is *The Child in Film: tears, fears and fairytales* (I. B. Tauris, 2010) and she continues to research the figure of the 'child' across a range of media. Her current research focuses on amateur film and is related to her AHRC funded project 'Children and Amateur Media in Scotland' (www.gla.ac.uk/cams). She has also published widely in television studies, including the books, *British Youth Television: Cynicism and Enchantment* (2001) and *Interpreting Television* (2005). Karen is also an editor of the international film and television studies journal, *Screen*.