COM 321, Documentary Form in Film & Television

Hale’s Tours

History
First opened in May of 1905 in Kansas City’s Electric Park, as conceived by Kansas City Fire Chief George C. Hale.

By 1907, there were 500 Hale’s Tours theaters in the U.S. They could also be found around the world—in Havana, Mexico City, Melbourne, Paris, London, Berlin, Hong Kong, Oslo, and other cities.

But, within just a few years, the popularity of Hale’s Tours waned. Most were gone by 1911.

Form
Small movie houses constructed to look like train cars each seated 72 passengers.

A 7-10 minute film that had been shot from the front of a moving train would be projected at one end of the train car.

Machines would rock, vibrate, and tilt the car to simulate train travel.

Accompanying sounds included steam whistles and train wheel effects.

Fans blew bursts of air at the passengers from the rear of the car.

Painted scenery would roll past the side windows.

A human “conductor” might collect tickets and make announcements.

Content (& Presence)
The basic purpose was to create a heightened sense of reality via simple emulation of physical motion—one very common type of presence (the “illusion of non-mediated”). With high physical presence (telepresence), you feel like you’re really “there.”

However, some Hale’s Tours films included some narrative (fictional) components (e.g., From Leadville to Aspen: A Hold-up in the Rockies, 1906).

Related technologies and entertainments
Based on the notion of the 19th century dioramas.

Also related to Lumieres’ “panoramas”—actualities shot with a moving camera (e.g., from a gondola in Venice, or a rising elevator).

Hale’s Tours films are an elaboration of “phantom ride” films (e.g., Interior New York Subway, 1905; The Georgetown Loop, 1903; also, see BFI Screenonline for a nice collection of phantom ride films online).

← Shooting a phantom ride film
Interior of a Hale’s Tours theater

Exterior of a Hale’s Tours theater
References


Hale’s Tours and scenes of the world. Retrieved from http://www.vintagekansascity.com/halestours


