

### **“Not a Serial” The film industry’s distrust of the incomplete narrative’**

In 1917 *The American Girl* (1917) was advertised in *Moving Picture World* as ‘A SERIES – Not a Serial’ which would ‘appeal to thinking Exhibitors because it contains all the elements of a successful SERIES and none of the drawbacks of a Serial’. It was one of a number (or series) of films promoted with the emphasis that they were complete in themselves or, like *The Goddess* (1915), because they were ‘not a serial... not a conglomeration of stunts thrown together without rhyme or reason’ (*Motion Picture News*).

Accounts of the emergence of the film serial have emphasised its importance for the film industry in attracting the regular patron. Yet this needs to be placed in the context of the ambivalence and suspicion evident in the comments above. In part this is explained by the serial’s low-brow connotations: advertisements reassured exhibitors considering booking *The Goddess* that it was in fact a ‘continued photoplay in chapters’. In part it belonged to a debate about the nature of cinema-going and its relationship to other forms of entertainment. Links between the serial in print and on the screen led to objections that the leeway possible in a reader’s serial consumption contrasted with the handicapped serial viewer, forced to watch individual instalments at a particular, regularised time and place (‘The Serial Feature’, *Motography*, 1914). In addition, serial screenings involved the exhibitor in a significant commitment to a set programme months in advance as well as an established infrastructure capable of sustaining this pattern of distribution and consumption.

This debate and these conflicting pressures were not limited to the 1910s. Across the history of the film serial, filmmakers have devised strategies in response to the ‘drawbacks’ of the serial format, from releasing serial and feature versions to a standardised narrative structure based on repetition rather than development. In examining this, my paper explores the rigidity and flexibility of the film serial format. It looks at the relationship between serial, series and feature not in order to identify different categories but for the part this played in an industrial process of adaptable regularity.

### **Guy Barefoot**

Guy Barefoot is Lecturer in Film Studies at the University of Leicester. His publications include *Gaslight Melodrama: From Victorian London to 1940s Hollywood* (Bloomsbury, 2001). His study of the Hollywood sound serial, *The Lost Jungle*, is due to be published by Exeter University Press in August 2016.