

# Early Film Notes

on Early Film

## Movie Audiences, Movie Myth

File

Early Cinema as Invention, Entertainment, Instruction

### Invention and Industry | Popular Perceptions | Early Westerns

#### **Invention and Industry**

In 1877 Governor Leland Stanford of California had a bet to win. Stanford wanted to discover whether or not galloping horses have all four hooves off the ground at some point in their stride; for evidence, he turned to photographer Eadward Muybridge. Muybridge proposed to take a series of rapid-sequence still photographs to prove the point; after some delay--Muybridge was on trial for the murder of his wife's lover--and with considerable help from John D. Isaacs, chief engineer of the Southern Pacific Railroad, the photographic evidence was obtained. The photographs viewed in succession were so close to actual motion that Muybridge took the photos on the road for public exhibition, using projection devices like the Zoetrope and Praxinoscope, and supplementing them with shots of other animals, plant life, and naked humans.

Muybridge's work was one of the earliest American attempts to create moving pictures; other inventors at home and abroad continued his efforts. Other factors besides the spirit of invention which led to the rise of the film industry included industrialization, urbanization, immigration, the growth of the middle class, and the public appetite for novelty, including spectacles like the Wild West Show, minstrel and magic shows, burlesques, melodramas, acrobatics, and magic lantern shows.

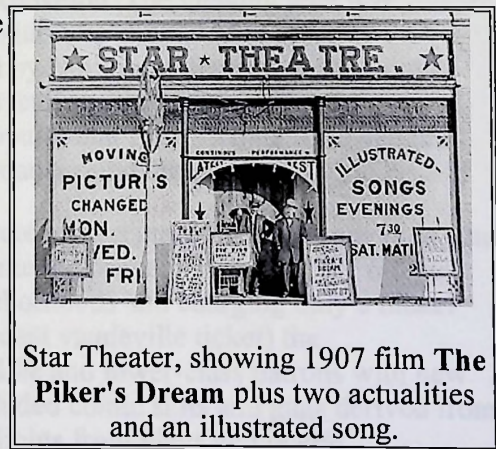
Edison was one of the inventors quickly to follow Muybridge in perfecting the techniques of moving pictures. In 1889 Edison produced his kinetoscope. The kinetoscope's moving pictures were of a higher quality than those of Muybridge, but the projection and viewing machinery were housed in the same unit, thus only allowing one viewer at a time. Despite this limitation in viewing and the very brief running time of the pictures (often only a few seconds each) the kinetoscope proved to be enough of a novelty that "kinetoscope parlors," housing several machines each, were opened in many American cities.

Convinced that moving pictures could become a lucrative enterprise, in 1893 Edison opened America's first movie studio, dubbed "The Black Maria," in East Orange, New Jersey. His first film produced there was **Fred Ott's Sneeze**, a close up shot of one of his employees doing precisely that.

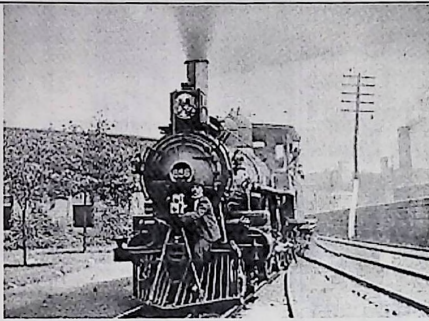
Edison, The American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, and the Vitagraph Company were the leading domestic filmmakers in the 1890s; the Lumiere brothers and Georges Melies were among the pioneering foreign filmmakers of the time. Edison and Lumiere most often produced "actuality" films. These films were simple in content, focusing on everyday events like a baby crying, trolley cars moving, or a tree branch swaying in the wind: they simply capitalized on the sense of novelty the public felt when they saw pictures which could move. Melies, on the other hand, was more interested in the special effects which could be created with moving pictures, and followed in the tradition of the magicians and illusionists of the day; his pictures like A Trip to the Moon conveyed a sense of fantasy and amazed the public through new types of tricks, like people disappearing on film.

By 1893 film technology had improved to the extent that the first screening of a film before a large audience was possible. In 1896 at Koster and Bial's Music Hall in New York City the first group audience was treated to a bill of fare which included films of vaudeville acts and actuality films like seascapes and travelogues.

Most often these moving pictures were paired with other forms of entertainment and shown at preexisting venues like vaudeville theaters, dime museums, penny arcades, parks, fairgrounds, and travelling stores, although stores began to be converted into small theaters as well. The film shorts were randomly arranged and offered a variety of spectacles to the viewer; these early films had everything to do with novelty and special effect, and very little to do with narrative.



The birth of the narrative film owes something to the fact that between 1902 and 1903, the average length of a film grew from fifty feet to six hundred feet, allowing more time for a story to unfold. (1) (As a reference: a short is usually a film of one or two reels, each reel comprising 1,000 feet of film with a running time of approximately fifteen minutes.) By 1904, narratives accounted for 53% of all copyrighted titles in America, and by 1908, 96%. (2) Exhibitors were free to edit the sequence and duration of scenes in a narrative film, and usually provided narrative commentary for the action onscreen.



Making an actuality film; note camera on front of locomotive

Edwin S. Porter's 1906 film **The Hold Up of the Rocky Mountain Express**

is a good example of the evolution from earlier forms of film to the narrative film. In the first part of the film, the viewer is watching footage shot from the front of a moving train, in the manner of earlier actuality and travelogue films. The second part of the film switches to interior shots and the plot is introduced; although the sequence of scenes provides a linear narrative, the scenes are still rigidly

segmented. Films shot from the front of a locomotive had been shown a few years earlier at the 1903 Saint Louis Exposition. The viewing area was modelled after a railroad car, and the exhibitors attempted to recreate the experience of travelling on the railroad by exhibiting the film at the front of the car, copying the sounds of the train, and rocking the "car" in the style of the real railroad. The exhibit was so popular that Hale's Tours followed the Exposition by taking the show on the road around the country.

Such novel theater spaces, however, were soon replaced with the advent of the Nickelodeon, which by 1906 had become the primary venue for the movies. Usually located in working class neighborhoods and charging only a nickel admission (compared to a twenty-five cent vaudeville ticket) the Nickelodeons attracted millions of middle and lower-class patrons with new attractions daily. These attractions included comic skits and gags derived from vaudeville, dances, erotic scenes, highlights from plays and operas, reenactments of historical events, tableaux from passion plays, prizefights,

and travelogues. (3) Filmmakers even attempted early versions of the newsreel, although they were limited by budget and by technology. The film of the Boer War was actually shot in New Jersey, and the Battle of Santiago Bay was filmed on a New York rooftop.



A movie palace in  
Omaha, Nebraska, 1923

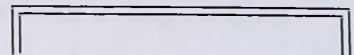
1909 was a watershed year in American filmmaking. Improvements in equipment and editing techniques, the rise of feature films, and the birth of the larger, grander movie palaces figured importantly in the evolution of film, as did the movement of filmmakers and studios to the West coast. Filmmakers including Goldwyn, Selznick, Fox, and Loew attempted to make pictures which would satisfy audience desires, bring in a profit, and show an "American" way of life. Comedies, Victorian melodramas, westerns, and film renditions of literary classics were popular.

The phenomenal growth of the film industry during the second decade of the twentieth century is obvious in the following figures: in 1909, there were 9,000 theaters operating in the United States, and by the dawn of World War I, that number had jumped to more than 20,000. Each evening those 20,000 theaters showed more than 96,000,000 feet of film to 5,000,000 people who paid a collective 3,000,000 dollars for admission. (4) Foreign filmmakers, considered by and large more innovative during this time period and occupying a large share of the American market, were seriously set back by World War I during this decade. By 1914, the U.S. was producing over one-half of all pictures made internationally, and during the following decade that number would increase.

The moving pictures, considered by some at the end of the nineteenth century to be a passing fad, had become a prominent feature in early twentieth century life. Whether this was cause for concern or celebration is the subject of the next section.

### Popular Perceptions of Early Cinema

The Nickelodeons represented a form of



commercial entertainment outside of genteel culture. Millions of working class poor and recent immigrants patronized the Nickelodeons, in large part due to the proximity to working class neighborhoods, the low ticket price compared with other forms of entertainment, and the flexible time schedule in most of these movie houses. Social commentators of the time labelled the Nickelodeon variously as "the academy of the working man," "the speechless pedagogue," and "a grand social worker". (5) In his 1939 text *The Rise of American Film*, Lewis Jacobs comments that "Immigration was at its peak in 1902-03, and the movies gave the newcomers, particularly, a respect for American law and order, an understanding of civic organization, pride in citizenship and in the American commonwealth...more vividly than any other single agency, they revealed the social topography of America to the immigrant, to the poor, and to the country folk." (6) In a recent work, Miriam Hansen takes issue with Jacobs's claim, arguing that early films could not really reveal the 'social topography' of America to immigrants because they did not realistically depict the social and economic problems of recent immigrants. However, Jacobs may instead be arguing that these films presented American types and myths to recent immigrants--a more ideological and legendary 'social topography' than Hansen allows.



Typical upperclass sentiment on nickelodeons

The power of film was not lost on the scores of journalists, intellectuals, social workers, clergymen, and filmmakers who hailed the medium as a new "universal language." Film fused with millennialist thought as some made the claim that film would restore man to a position he had not known since before the Tower of Babel. Filmmaker D.W. Griffith told actress Lillian Gish that she was "working in the universal language that had been predicted in the Bible, which was to make all men brothers because they would understand each other. This could end wars and bring about the millenium." (7)

At the same time, however, the cry for censorship went up. As early as 1896, when the film **The Kiss** shocked some viewers through its close-up portrayal of a man and a woman kissing, public crusaders had been calling for films

with moral uplift, the banning of all films of dubious character, and even the closing of movie houses: the darkness during screenings was felt to be a breeding ground for sin.

The film industry's reputation improved somewhat when it followed the example of France's Societe Film d'Art, which in 1908 began to bring literary classics to the screen. The American film versions of these literary works were often more Victorian in their values than the foreign films, which gained grudging respect from some of the would-be censors. Stage actors and actresses like Sarah Bernhardt also lent credibility to early film by appearing in these adaptations. Around the same time, grand movie palaces replaced the working-class nickelodeon as the primary venue for American film. D.W. Griffith commented that he wanted to "translate a manufacturing industry into an art and meet the ideals of cultivated audiences." (8)



By 1910, film had gained enough in reputation for Movie World Magazine to campaign for "American made pictures of American subjects." (9) Some in the film industry even felt that as an art form film was superior to earlier modes of expression; a Universal Studios ad from the time reads,

The pens of the mightiest master writers of all time are weak and powerless in their

human influence...that's why millions of people in every clime love Universal moving pictures--see them nightly--talk about them--think about them, and cherish them as a rich gift to humanity. Universal moving pictures are doing mountains of good teaching life's lessons as they never could be taught through any other source. (10)

Among the assets of moving pictures, the ad lists "stirring and moving scenes of the fast-fading but still glorious Western Wild and pioneer life."

If silent film could provide a universal language capable of containing the "ideal" America, then certainly the Western, where action speaks louder than words-- where "antilanguage", as Jane Tompkins has called it, is the norm-- would prove the ideal American vehicle. (11)

## Early Westerns

The earliest Western moving picture was Thomas Edison's **Cripple Creek Barroom** filmed in 1898. A typical actuality film, it utilized the Western location of the saloon without fleshing out a plot or characters. Edison followed this in 1902 with **Romance of the Rails**, a film whose railroad setting would set the stage for Edwin S. Porter's 1903 film **The Great Train Robbery**. Porter's film is widely considered to be the first American narrative film, and it is the point of departure for the flurry of Westerns that followed. Porter's other 1903 release **Life of an American Fireman** was not a Western but provided one of the first last-minute 'damsel in distress' rescues which would become a staple of Western film. Edison's 1906 film **A Race for Millions** contained many other plot devices which would become Western cliches, including claim jumping and the shootout at high noon.

Critics predicted the early death of the Western, citing its substandard plot lines, its inaccurate and shabbily constructed costumes, its lack of a defined hero, and the inadequacy of Eastern exteriors to replicate the landscape of the West. However, the 5,400 silent western features, documentaries, shorts, and serials produced between 1898 and 1930 tell a different story altogether. (12)

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- 3 Miriam Hansen, Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in Amer
- 4 Manchel 1359, and William K. Everson, American Silent Fi
- 5 Quoted in Hansen 64.
- 6 Quoted in Hansen 69.
- 7 Quoted in Hansen 77.

- 8 Quoted in Hansen 64.
- 9 Quoted in Hansen 79.
- 10 Quoted in Everson 25.
- 11 Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything*, 50.
- 12 Larry Langman, *A Guide to Silent Westerns*, ix.