Moving Pictures – From a Peep-Show to a Major Industry

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Moving Pictures – From a Peep-Show to a Major Industry

Abstract

Within their first five years (1896-1901), Thomas Edison’s moving pictures escalated from a peep-show novelty to a multi-million-dollar business catering to the immigrants and the working-class masses. By 1906, several genres such as the western, science fiction, fantasy, crime, romance, and newsreel and documentary were established. The new industry not only attracted millions to movie theaters it also attracted entrepreneurs and investors seeking profits, respectability, and recognition. This paper argues that socially and economically, the time was right for a mass medium that would appeal to those who were unable to read or with little knowledge of the English language. Once the silent movies established themselves as a democratic medium, they aspired to become an art form bringing culture, class, and literature to the patrons who readily embraced whatever the movies offered. From action-adventure to comedy and romance to history and fantasy, the movie could do no wrong. It was the boundless appetite for movies that sent the filmmakers in search of a production system that could meet the demand. The answer emerged in the form of a studio system – a model that resembled the automotive assembly line. The paper describes how the key players fought for a larger piece of the pie and what emerged once the dust settled.

1. A Nation of Immigrants

During her first 100 years, the United States facilitated and encouraged immigration, welcoming foreigners to settle in a vast country. Immigration was considered to be in the national interest since it allowed individuals to better themselves as it strengthened the United States. Under the axiom “e pluribus unum” (from many, one), U.S. presidents have frequently reminded Americans that they share the immigrant experience of beginning anew in the land of opportunity.

Beginning in the 1880s, an era of qualitative immigration restrictions began as certain types of immigrants were barred: prostitutes, workers with contracts that tied them to a particular employer for several years, and Chinese. In the 1920s, quantitative restrictions or quotas set a ceiling on the number of immigrants accepted each year.
In the year 1850, the population of New York was 590,000. It more than tripled within the next 30 years reaching 2 million in 1880. Within the next 20 years, it would double—reaching 3.8 million in 1900. Between 1880 and 1920, more than 20 million immigrants arrived in the United States. The majority were from Southern, Eastern and, Central Europe, including 4 million Italians and 2 million Jews.

The unskilled and less-educated immigrants who came to the United States seeking greater freedom and economic opportunity arrived with little money and took whatever jobs they could find. They were often vulnerable to exploitation. The garment industries in New York and Chicago thrived at the expense of the emigres who desperately needed work. The Irish worked in the sweatshops from 1850 to the 1880s. During the mid-180s, Germans and Swedes entered the industry. The 1890s brought Italians and Russian and Polish Jews. In Chicago, Germans Jews, and a few Americans and Poles established that city’s garment center. In many cities, the immigrants converted small apartments into contract shops that doubled as living quarters. Some immigrants began working in small shops, eventually owning large clothing firms. Others succumbed to disease, malnutrition, and exhaustion, and never found the path from tenement sweatshop to a better life. According to a report by the Behring Center:

Eastern Europeans introduced the task system. Men and women worked as teams of sewing-machine operators, basters, and finishers, often augmented by pressers and helpers. Payment was for completion of a certain number of garments per day. Price cutting often led to the number of garments increasing over time and workdays extending far into the night. It was not uncommon for a team to work 15 to 18 hours a day for six days but be paid for four days’ work.

It would not be until the three generations before the grandchildren of these immigrants would be fully assimilated into the American tossed-salad\(^1\). For the initial immigrants, the safest, the most logical, and the most convenient places were the neighborhoods with other folks from their own countries. Hence, the Italian-quarter and the

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\(^1\) American culture has often been referred to as a melting pot where people from different cultures are thrown together and they all become a part of a one-big-culture: America. History, however, seems to indicate that people from different cultures do not lose their identities as ingredients in a stew. Instead, people tend to retain their individualities as do different vegetables in a tossed salad. Hence, the metaphor “tossed salad” rather than the “melting pot”.
Jewish quarter in New York, the Swedish and the Norwegian concentrations in Minnesota, and the Polish communities in Illinois (Chicago) and Ohio (Niles and Youngstown).

During the mid-1880s, 70 percent of the imports came through New York harbor. The banking grew 250% between 1888 and 1908, compared to the national increase of 26%. New York became the nation’s capital for tourism and entertainment. One opera ticket in 1875 would cost $1. For a theater performance, the admission was 25 cents for the gallery, 50 cents for the pit, and a full dollar for the boxes, where, with the cooperation from the corrupt police force, the theater owners “allowed prostitutes to ply their trade in the balcony” (Gilfoyle, 1992). During this economic boom, lavish and expensive hotels were built for the affluent visitors (Erenberg, 1984) where ladies of the night served a wide variety of clientele ranging from sailors on leave to the old-money gentlemen and the newly-rich playboys (Gilfoyle, 1994).

By 1910, the majority of residents in the nation’s largest cities were foreign-born or children of immigrants. These massive waves of immigrants fueled much of the nation’s industrial growth, however, they remained on the periphery of the American culture. The immigrant workers could neither afford the theatre, the opera, or the symphony performances, and due to limited or non-existent English language skills, nor could they access the news or literature through newspapers, magazines, and books. They worked, bought whatever they could afford and remained in close contact with other immigrants that shared similar language and customs. Nevertheless, before the turn of the century, this group became the main customer-base for an affordable mass medium that didn’t require any reading skills or much knowledge of the English language – the silent cinema.

2. The Magic of Photography

Cinema would not have been possible without the pioneering efforts of a photographer, John Carbutt (1832-1905) who began to use celluloid instead of glass plates for recording photographic images. Taking it a step further, a New Jersey Minister, Hannibal Williston Goodwin (1822-1900) made transparent, non-breakable roll film out of nitrocellulose film base to show pictures during his biblical lectures. Goodwin is credited as the inventor of flexible film that was necessary for the motion picture cameras and film projectors (Barth, 2013). American entrepreneur, George Eastman (1854-1932) who founded the Eastman Kodak Company and brought photography into the mainstream in 1888 by
marketing the Kodak Box camera with the slogan: You press the button, we do the rest. Eastman Kodak released its famous “brownie” camera in 1900. It cost $1. Eastman also manufactured motion picture film for America’s first filmmakers – Thomas Alva Edison, one among them.

During the 1980s, Thomas Edison and his British assistant William Dickson had been working on developing a camera that could record moving pictures. In 1890 Edison and Dickson announced their Kinetograph, a primitive motion picture camera and two years later, in 1892, the pair unveiled the Kinetoscope, a machine that could project the moving images onto a screen. In 1894, Edison held the first public film viewing of moving pictures. The viewers were thrilled and amazed by the marvel of moving images. Edison’s earliest films lasted for about 20 seconds or less because of the amount of film one could put into the film camera. To meet the demand for moving pictures, Edison employed a host of camera operators who went around filming anything and everything that moved to feed the demand for new moving images for the kinetoscope machines. In 1893, Edison built the world’s first film studio, the Cinematographic Theater that became known as the “Black Maria”, in West Orange, New Jersey – the location of Edison’s laboratories.

As technology progressed and longer movies could be made, the films began to tell short stories lasting a few minutes. Edison’s invention soon became the new popular entertainment in cities and towns across the United States. The first public exhibition of projected motion pictures in the United States was at Koster & Bial’s Music Hall on 34th Street in New York City on April 23, 1896.

The projected moving images were shown at the end of the then-popular vaudeville shows. The flickering images were a signal that the show was over, and the customers were to leave. In this role, the moving pictures were known as “chasers”. Fate took an interesting turn when, in 1901, the vaudeville performers went on strike and the movies became the

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2 The Black Maria was a small and uncomfortable place to work. Edison employees W. K. Dickson and Jonathan Campbell coined the name—it reminded them of police Black Marias, (police vans, also known as “paddy wagons”) of the time because they were also cramped, stuffy and a similar black color. Edison himself called it "The Doghouse". This is where Edison’s staff shot the 20 to 30 sec shorts for the kinetoscopes. In 1901, Edison built a glass-enclosed rooftop studio in New York City and the Black Maria was closed in 1901. It was demolished in 1903. A reproduction of the Black Maria was built in 1954 at a part of a museum at the Edison National Historic Site in West Orange.
replaced entertainment moving from a scientific invention and a novelty to a medium that could document, inform, and tell stories.

3. Edwin Porter – A True Pioneer

One of the filmmakers at the Edison Manufacturing Company was Edwin Stanton Porter (1870-1941). Porter was a writer, a cameraman, and an editor. He made a fairy tale, *Jack and the Beanstalk* (1902), a theatrical film with dreams and visions. The film tells a story with the help of several scenes, not unlike chapters in a book. According to Musser (1979), “The scenes are carefully constructed scenes with narrative continuities, which give the audience the information to interpret the spatial relationships between the shots (24). The film was a huge success.

For his next project, Porter turned to a new genre – the documentary. His film, *Life of an American Fireman* (1903) consisted of seven sequences telling the story of a mother and her child being rescued from a building on fire. *Life of an American Fireman* made use of a great deal of material that was already filmed and archived in Edison’s company.

Porter used cross-cutting to show developments in different locations and cutting back and forth between the interior and exterior shots as the firemen went in and out of the building. *Life of an American Fireman* turned out to be a big success for Porter and Edison. However, Porter’s biggest trump card was yet to be played. *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), the most impressive of Porter’s work (Van der Putten, 2012). The film is often credited as the first American narrative film, the first crime film, the first western (Musser, 2004), and the first to mount the camera atop a moving train, and the use of close-up of one of the bandits firing directly at the audience, breaking the fourth wall – something the audiences would witness for the first time.

With the *Great Train Robbery*, Porter and Edison pulled the American film business out of its infancy and captured the imagination of the movie audiences, investors, and other filmmakers who saw the financial rewards in the business of making and showing films. One such filmmaker was D.W. Griffith (1875-1948) who began his career as an actor in a Porter film (*Rescued from an Eagle’s Nest* -1908) and soon became a major film director and producer raising the “chasers” to an art form in themselves.
4. Movies Find a Home

Seeing the popularity of the moving pictures, small business owners converted their shops or restaurants into makeshift movie theaters where the audiences sat at tables and watched the flickering images projected onto a bedsheet while a single musician played frenzied interludes on piano or violin. The first "storefront theater" in the US dedicated exclusively to showing motion pictures was Vitascope Hall, established on Canal Street, New Orleans, Louisiana June 26, 1896 – it was converted from a vacant store. The storefront theaters remained the main outlet for films until they were replaced around 1910 by large modern theaters.

The first theater devoted solely to films, The Electric Theater in Los Angeles, opened in 1902. It was housed in a tent; the theater’s first screening included a short film titled *New York in a Blizzard*. Admission cost about 10 cents for a one-hour show. Nickelodeons developed soon after, offering both movies and live acts.

In the early years, vaudeville theater owners bought films from factories (film studios were called film factories as films were made there) via mail order, rather than renting them, making it expensive to change shows frequently. Starting in 1902, Henry Miles of San Francisco began renting films to theaters, forming the basis of today’s distribution system.

The first cinemas were called “nickelodeons” — *Odeon* is the Greek word for theater, and the cost to attend a movie performance – a nickel. On June 19, 1905, some 450 people attended the opening of the world’s first movie theater, located in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The storefront theater was equipped with 96 chairs and charged each customer five cents.

By 1908, there were nearly 8,000 such theaters in the U.S.; by the end of 1910, their number grew to 10,000; grossing $91 million in the United States. The moving picture shows were 15 to 90 minutes long and changed every couple of days — sometimes daily. The film segments were quickly produced with threadbare storylines. The novelty — and the low price — of the moving pictures filled theaters nationwide.
During the early 1899s, Broadway theater or the opera tickets were out-of-reach for the immigrant but even those with meager salaries could afford a ticket to the nickelodeon. Initially, the nickelodeons were packed with European immigrants and the poorest citizens, the movie halls were open to people from all walks of life, making cinema a “democratic art”. With a large population of immigrants, Chicago became America's number one movie-loving city. For a population to two million people in 1909, it had 407 theaters where the immigrants feeling alienated from much of the life about them, due to their lack of language skills, flocked to the movies where the pantomimes of the silent films were perfectly comprehensible (Lasar, 2010).

Although it was decades away from the Great Depression, the lives of the working classes were much harder than the working classes of the 21st century. People sought escape from their harsh worlds by getting involved in the stories that unfolded on the film screens, and lives of the film stars. Filmmakers caught on to the idea of extending the fantasy world from just the screen images to the whole movie-going experience. New movie theater buildings not only held hundreds of audiences, but their scale, decor, and grandeur reminded one of grand European palaces and Cathedrals. Because of their opulence and extraordinary architectural beauty, these theaters were dubbed as Movie Palaces where the average person was treated like royalty. Comfort was the dominant feature with upholstered seating and air conditioning, where the ushers showed the patrons to their seats. The Movie Palaces were such a commercial success that between 1914 and 1922, 4,000 Movie Palaces opened in the United States.

5. Edison and the Battle for Control

Edison saw the financial potential in moving pictures and took steps to gain control of production, distribution, and exhibition of movies. He formed a company, The Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC) and convinced George Eastman to refuse to sell raw film stock to anyone but Patent Company licensees—a plan to push European film cameras, projectors, and film stock out of the country. Since Edison or Eastman did not own movie theaters, they brought several theater owners under one umbrella—General Film Exchange, a subsidiary of the Patents Company. The General Film Exchange controlled the distribution and exhibition of the movies. He then proceeded to patent the inventions such as the celluloid film, the film camera, and the film projector.
The Patents Company faced stiff competition as several European nations had already begun manufacturing motion picture film stock, cameras, and projectors. Edison and Eastman insisted that motion pictures were their invention and anyone making or showing moving pictures should pay $2 a week as royalty to the Patents Company. Some filmmakers and theater owners complied with the demand. Others refused to pay. The Patents Company hired a team of goons to bust up the film cameras and projection equipment of the non-compliant companies (Smith & Selzer, 2015:82).

Edison and Eastman, the two Anglo-Saxon Protestants were opposed most vehemently by two foreigners: Adolph Zukor (1873-1976), an Austro-Hungarian Jew born in Ricse, Hungary, and Carl Laemmle (1867-1939), a Jew from Laupheim, a small southwestern village in Germany. In the years to come, Zukor would become one of the three founders of Paramount Pictures and Laemmle would go on to create Universal Studio.

Adolph Zukor arrived in New York in 1891. He began as an apprentice to a furrier and soon established his own business. In 1903, he became involved in the movie business as an investor in a chain of movie theaters. In 1912, Zukor established Famous Players Film Company with the primary goal to bring famous stage actors to the screen. The company distributed the French film *Les Amours de la reine Élisabeth* (1912) starring Sarah Bernhardt (Wu, 2010). The following year Zukor produced *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1913) that featured a stage star, James Hackett, and was directed by none other but an old Edison employee, Edwin S. Porter.

Recruiting its performers from the New York stage, Famous Players built a roster of some of the theater’s biggest names including Marguerite Clark, Hazel Dawn, and H. B. Warner. The company also featured cinema’s biggest star of the era, Mary Pickford (Alleman, 2005: 231), and presented theater actor John Barrymore in several pictures including his first two films released in 1914: *An American Citizen* and *The Man from Mexico* (Peters, 1990).

Not many studios from the early years of the movies have survived. The old studios still operating in 2020 are the French studio Gaumont Film Company that began in 1895, Pathé opened in 1896, the Danish company, Nordisk Film opened in 1906, Universal Studios was created in 1912, and Paramount in 1916 (Abel, 1994:10). Paramount is the last major American film studio still headquartered in Hollywood. Zukor and Laemmle, along with several other independent filmmakers filed a case against Edison’s Patents Company.
accusing it of monopolistic practices\(^3\) and restrictions of trade. A case that Edison lost as “a federal court agreed with prosecutors that the Patents Company and General Film had broken every antitrust principle in the book, "terrorizing exchanges and exhibitors" and driving away competitors by "arbitrary, oppressive, and high-handed methods” (Lasar, 2010a). Ironically, another group of independent filmmakers including Charlie Chaplin, Walt Disney, Samuel Goldwyn, David O. Selznick, Mary Pickford, and Orson Welles would file a similar case in 1948 against Paramount Studio accusing it and other major studios of violating the antitrust laws.\(^4\)

Edison’s other archrival was Karl Lämmle who became Carl Laemmle once he arrived in the U.S. For 12 long years, he worked as a bookkeeper for a dry goods store in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. Failing to get a raise, he left the job and came to Chicago to start his own business. He saw a five-cent movie show in Chicago; the success and popularity of the moving pictures impressed him. He abandoned the idea of starting a dry goods store, instead, he gathered all his family’s resources and opened a small movie theater, the White Front Theater on Milwaukee Avenue in Chicago where his family members sold tickets, ushered the customers to their seats, sold the refreshments, and ran the projector. The success of his theater encouraged him to acquire a second movie theater. When a distributor failed to supply him with the movies, Laemmle started his own rental service. As the demand for the movies escalated, he launched his own production company: the Independent Motion Picture Company – “IMP” for short.

In addition to rocking the foundation of the Patents Company, Laemmle is credited with two significant contributions to the movie business. With Florence Lawrence, a Canadian actress who worked uncredited for Griffith and the Biograph Company, Laemmle launched her as the first movie star, i.e., the beginning of the star system. And in 1912, he

\(^3\) In the spirit of free trade and market economy, the businesses in the United States of America are allowed to compete by engaging in fierce competitive practices seeking larger market shares, however, the businesses are not allowed to win. If a business could eliminate all its competition, it will become a monopoly – a market situation prohibited by law and Sherman Anti-trust Act of 1890. The outcome of this paradox is that most industries such as automotive, cosmetics, food processing, air travel, broadcasting, publishing, and entertainment become oligopolies. This has been true of the film industry. During the Golden Years of studio system, these were the five dominant studios: Fox, MGM, Paramount, RKO, Warner Brothers. In the recent years, the big five are: Columbia, Disney, Paramount, Universal, and Warner Bros.

\(^4\) The case, U.S. v. Paramount Pictures, et al., reached the U.S. Supreme Court and resulted in a ruling against Paramount Studio, a ruling that became one of the key reasons for the demise of the studio system.
created the Universal Film Manufacturing Company that soon became Universal Studio—a vertically integrated operation combining movie production, distribution, and exhibition, the central elements of the Studio system. In 1915, Laemmle opened the world’s largest film production facility, Universal City Studios, on a 230-acre (0.9-km²) in Los Angeles. Edison made an appearance at the opening ceremony of Universal’s all-electric film studio.

6, Conclusion

For Edison, movies were a novelty; for him, the creative possibilities for moving pictures were exhausted with The Great Train Robbery. For the independent producers such as Carl Laemmle and his other immigrant colleagues—Adolph Zukor, Samuel Goldwyn, Louis B. Mayer, William Fox, and Jesse Lasky—movies were a means for recognition through stretching the limits of creativity and imagination (Gabler, 1989); they had everything to gain by making better, more technically daring films, and marketing them in new and original ways (Lasar, 2010a).

Edison can’t be held responsible for chasing the film industry away from New York or New Jersey. To meet the insatiable demand for movies, the filmmakers moved to Florida and California in search of a better climate and to avoid the dark and bitter cold of the east coast. Florida, with its rains and humidity, lost to southern California that offered more sunny days, more daylight, and a landscape suitable for western dramas that had become popular with the audiences. For all practical purposes, Edison’s Trust was dead long before a federal court declared that the Patents Company and General Film were monopolistic and in violation of the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890. He would remain the beloved genius who invented the light bulb, the phonograph, and the moving pictures. An art form and eventually a global industry—the movies—for which Edison will always be credited as the founding father, slipped through his fingers and moved away to a pleasant southern California town called Hollywood where others would elevate the flickering images to a most wonderous art form that brought joy and tears, entertainment and enlightenment, and culture and literature to humanity.

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