

6-2013

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“Going to the Movies”

The Origins of the American Cultural Experience

By

Phoebe Cooper

Submitted in partial fulfillment
Of the requirements for
Honors in the Department of History

June, 2013

ABSTRACT

My thesis examines the cultural formation of the social experience of “going to the movies.” There is no doubt of a unique quality associated with going to the movies that holds a significant place in America’s cultural history. It is quite difficult to imagine life without movies. Their visually stimulating effects successfully captivate our minds and allow for a short period of solace from reality. Furthermore, there is something magical at work in the social tradition of going to the movies where the idea of sitting in a dark auditorium filled with strangers all sharing the same viewing experience. This social tradition began to form at the advent of cinema in the late 1890s and was firmly established in the following twenty years. The interaction between the establishment of a new industry, advancements in aesthetics of the medium, and cultivating urban setting of New York City coalesced to create the fundamental idea people associate with “going to the movies.”

This paper is organized into three chapters. The first chapter focuses on the burgeoning of the film industry in America as a trade analyzing the developments chronologically. Drawing the conclusion that the industry developed as a result of passing through five stages, being a culmination of developments combining technological advancements as well as economic and legal decisions. Chapter two is dedicated to a case study examining the aesthetics in film through Edwin S. Porter’s *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) and D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). By analyzing each film’s aesthetic qualities, one can see a progression in narrative and creative style allowed because of the advancements in technology and industry. Finally, chapter three devotes its entirety to a chronology of how the movies developed as a cultural aspect in New York City from the sole use of primary sources. It was the demanding of multiple kinds of regulations that resulted in a permanent home for the movies. From newspaper and trade paper articles, specifically the *New York Times* and *Moving Picture World*, there is a clear indication that New York City can be credited to forming the experience coined as “going to the movies.” I end my study in at the end of 1917 with the completion of Rivoli Theater because it solidifies the permanent establishment of a movie-going culture. To conclude the paper, a summary of each element in the factor of the initial years of the film industry is explained connecting them to ratify the importance of how such a cultural phenomenon was born.

I am interested in this topic because I have a strong passion for the movies. My grandfather, Sam Horwitz, owned movie theaters in New York City in the 1960s and growing up I always felt a special connection whether through stories or pictures. My grandfather was also an active City Councilman during that time where his role as a politician and exhibitionist in the community worked together, similar to the connection in the early 1900s between the City’s Alderman and industry. Because the *New York Times* was one of the main newspapers in New York during the twentieth century, I chose it as one of my primary sources. I examined over one hundred and forty articles from 1896-1930, to conclude that the formation of “going to the movies” was created in its first twenty years of existence.

Introduction

Chapter I – **Five Developmental Phases of the Early Movie Industry**

Chapter II – **Aesthetics of film in the Development of Movies: A Case Study of *The Great Train Robbery* and *The Birth of a Nation***

Chapter III – **New York City and the Creation of a Culture**

Conclusion

Bibliography

Introduction

“For the spectator’s imagination filled the atmosphere with electricity, as sparks crackled around the swiftly moving lifelike figures...”¹

Visualize an audience sitting in a dark hall. This audience has seen the result of a camera producing at times visually stimulating still photographs artistically crafted to captivate the eye. Given the year is 1896, this audience has not yet experienced the technological feats such as the iPhone, computer, television, or movie. Silently and patiently waiting for the next act in the series of varieties presented at a vaudeville theater in New York City, an unusual thing appears. In the darkened space one can make out a white screen on the stage. A strange motor-like noise begins to murmur becoming louder and more curious. All of a sudden a bright light shoots across the room from the balcony towards the white screen displaying recreations of real life. The moving image is clear in view and presents two young blonde women holding umbrellas swiftly dancing in the constraints of the curious frame of the image. Then, abruptly, the setting changes taking the audience to the edges of a beach where the break of the waves violently crash feeling as though they may spill into the theater. Three more engaging scenes appeared before the awestruck audience but boisterous cheering began long before its conclusion. This first exhibition of moving images, reported in the *New York Times* the following day, established the spectacle of American movie going experience.²

“Going to the movies” is a fundamental part of the Nation’s society and culture. The advent of cinema was a culmination of inventions by Eadweard Muybridge, Étienne-Jules

¹ “Edison’s Vitascope Cheered,” *The New York Times*, April 24, 1896.

² “Edison’s Vitascope Cheered,” *The New York Times*, April 24, 1896.

Marey, the Lumière brothers, Émile Reynaud, Thomas Edison and William Dickson in the 1880s giving birth to a past time people continue to enjoy.³ These early inventors paved they way for a continuation in technological advancements thus facilitating in the progress of cinema. The relatively fast progression from the Kinetoscope to the nickelodeon and eventually the “movie theatre” is telling of the impact technology had on the movie theater exhibition. In particular, in the span of twenty years, after the technological invention, movie theaters developed into much like what they are today. Early films were known as ‘moving pictures’ and were at first for just single viewing use. As the business end of the industry formed with advancing technologies and the positive reception of urban outlets, the ‘movie theater’ gave rise, creating a booming industry that is still thriving today.

It is quite difficult to imagine life without movies. Their visually stimulating effects successfully captivate our minds and allow for a short period of solace from reality. Although at present, surrounded by multiple forms of technology, watching a movie does not necessarily mean the experience it once did. However, there is something magical at work in the social tradition of going to the movies. Somehow, the idea of sitting in a dark auditorium filled with strangers all sharing the same viewing experience is rather enchanting. There is no doubt of a unique quality associated with going to the movies that holds a significant place in America’s cultural history. This paper argues that the interaction between the establishment of a new industry, advancements in aesthetics of the medium, and cultivating urban setting of New York City coalesced to create the fundamental idea people associate with “going to the movies.”

³ André Gaudreault and Tom Gunning, “Introduction: American Cinema Emerges,” in *American Cinema 1890 – 1909 Themes and Variations*, ed. André Gaudreault (New Jersey: Rutgers Press), 9.

Constructing from current scholarship as well as ample primary sources from newspapers and magazines, my argument involves three angles of film study: the formation of an initial film industry, an aesthetic case study of two early films, and the initial reception of film ultimately creating the movie theater. New York City in the first twenty years of cinema's existence serves as an appropriate location when examining the topic because its population essentially formed a distinctive movie culture that had not existed before. My examination begins with the scientific inventions of the camera for moving images following years of patent battles and manufacturers forming trusts to keep control over a lucrative growing industry. While at this time, experiments on film were created at first depicting plain real life scenes eventually creating a narrative for film as a result of the development of the business industry and technological advancements. By examining films chronologically produced as cinema advanced, one can see a clear indication the medium of film was becoming an art form. New York City can be seen as the birthplace of American cinema shaping it as a cultural outing during its young age. In the span of about twenty-years, a technological invention became one of the backbones in American society.

While the historiography of cinema in United States History is immense because there are so many different topics to explore, the focus of its establishment in America allows for a more narrow approach. The study of cinema often includes the history of the European industry of film, which is touched upon in this paper, but I mainly focus on the development in America, more specifically New York City. The study of cinema's formation tends to explain the history as it evolved. With mainly consistent presentations, authors explain the becoming of motion picture presentation in the United States. It is interesting to note that much of the literature surrounding film history appeared in the decades after the first half of the twentieth century. My paper enters a discussion propelled by historians such as, Charles Musser, Tom Gunning, Lewis

Jacobs, Robert Sklar, André Gaudreault and Tino Balio which approaches cinema as a critical development in the early twentieth century. A background of historical accounts enables a discussion and analysis of how these different monumental elements of the industry and productions from the industry culminated to create the new social activity enjoyed by millions.

Two historians in particular, Tino Balio and Lewis Jacobs straightforwardly address the sequence of the development of the movie industry as a development of scientific inventions. In his 1976 anthology, *The American Film Industry*, Tino Balio selects a collection of essays to display the rise of the American film industry beginning with the invention of the “Machine” and completing it with effects of the Paramount Decision in 1948. The way in which Balio comprises his anthology is commendable; I used many of them as a resource providing me with research to further show the direction and development of the industry. In the preface to his book, he writes the purpose for creating such a collection was “designed primarily as a collateral text for undergraduate courses dealing with the development of American film.”⁴ The first essay in the collection, “The Machine,” by A.R. Fulton, argues that the art of motion pictures was the development of a machine. Before it became commonly associated as form of art, he makes clear the argument that ““*motion pictures*” means the device as well as the art.”⁵ In a similar objective, Jacobs arrives at the concurrence exclaiming that movies were “a new art growing out of science and older arts...Born in the laboratory, organized as a medium a new art form.”⁶ This first chapter draws together the facts of an emerging industry developed out of technological innovations and legal disputes. Collectively, the scholarly material used is in agreement with

⁴ Tino Balio, “Preface,” *The American Film Industry*, Ed. Tino Balio (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), 7.

⁵ A.R. Fulton, “The Machine,” *The American Film Industry*, Ed. Tino Balio (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), 19.

⁶ Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of The American Film* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1967), 3.

each other. It is the culmination of these sources, along with primary sources and that create a unique approach to the forming of the industry.

Not often focused on and brought up in a disputed manner are the technicalities surrounding the invention of the projection machine itself. Along with Fulton's chronologic and detailed account including Edison's lack of patent filing and the growing market in Europe, collectively, the authors Charles Musser, André Gaudreault, Tom Gunning, Paul C Spehr, and Robert Sklar successfully convey to the reader that during the decade of 1890, many inventions of the same kind were being developed making it hard to directly point at cinema's actual inventor. Many historians point to the French Lumière brothers with the invention of Cinématographe while some, if solely examining its creation in the United States, point to Thomas Edison. It is both Charles Musser in his book *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing* and his article "Movies and the Beginnings of Cinema" and Robert Sklar in his book *Movie Made America* that give the rightful invention of "Edison's Vitascope" to being that of Francis Jenkins and Thomas Armat.⁷ Although there appears to be no dispute over Edison's company and the invention of the Kinetoscope, often not examined is his indirect connection with the Vitascope, which Musser successfully explains. André Gaudreault and Tom Gunning's introduction to their anthology *American Cinema 1890 – 1909 Themes and Variations* successfully addresses the innovations of cinema's many early inventors. As this new technological medium developed other parts of the industry were affected including how films were exhibited, culminating in the final chapter.

⁷ Musser, Charles. *Before the Nickelodeon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 57. And Robert Sklar. *Movie-Made America* (New York: Random House, 1975), 13.

Throughout the sources presented, there is consensus that the two films *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) and *The Birth of a Nation* were both revolutionary for their time. Balio credits the editing of *The Great Train Robbery* as to why it is so revolutionary, while Tom Gunning credits its ability to tell a narrative story. As for *The Birth of a Nation* all sources credit its *filmic* elements with being revolutionary.⁸ The use of Tom Gunning's "Narrative Discourse and the Narrator System" is used to convey how early *filmic* elements applied to an audience's understanding of a story. Author Tom Gunning and his writings were extremely useful throughout the process in analyzing film and its aesthetic qualities.

When considering a location connected to the emerging film industry, the sources pinpoint many cities throughout America as being important to the fostering of early cinema.

Balio places the center of the production aspect of the industry with New York, Chicago and Philadelphia.⁹ Sklar also attributes these cities and adds Los Angeles to the list.¹⁰ Charles Musser's study on Thomas Edison that New York City was the primary location for the reception of films and film production. This is consistent with Sklar, who explained that in 1908, New York City had a daily attendance rate in nickelodeons nearing around four hundred.¹¹ The bustling progressive atmosphere of New York City hosted the perfect location for the reception of movies. While the sources presented allow of a further examination of the industry, they also enable one to find patterns. This allowed for my unique approach on the subject. After determining there were five stages that formed the business side of the industry, I then focused

⁸ *Filmic* is often a term coined in the film studies world as describing the medium's aesthetic qualities.

⁹ Balio, 16.

¹⁰ Sklar, 14.

¹¹ Ibid, 16.

on the parallel development of aesthetics of films and the exhibition process, concentration on New York City.

This paper is organized into three chapters. The first chapter focuses on the burgeoning effect of the film industry in America as a trade analyzing the developments chronologically. From these developments, one can draw the conclusion that the industry developed through the passage of five stages. These five stages culminated in developments which combined technological advancements with economic and legal decisions. By understanding the chronological progression of the film making technology and successful reception by the public, one can understand the desire to find a way to control the growing industry. An issue not often brought to attention discussing the development of the industry was the multiple patent issues that arose behind the early technologies. With films becoming more than just a novelty in the first ten years of the twentieth century, attention then focuses specifically on how a concrete industry was formed, analyzing the creation and eventual break up of the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC). As a partial effect of the break up of the MPPC found in violation of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, the production side of the industry moved to California and created Hollywood.

Chapter two is a case study examining the aesthetics of Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) and D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). By analyzing each film's aesthetic qualities, one can see a progression in narrative and creative style brought by the advancements in technology and industry. Finally, chapter three devotes its entirety to a chronology of how the movies developed as a cultural aspect in New York City from the sole use of primary sources. Attention is focused on the results of actions taken by the city to improve and therefore establish a movie culture in New York City. Ultimately, formed by regulations

passed by the City's Aldermen, one can see the desire to clean up and make a permanent place for the movies. It begins with the widely used article many historians use to begin cinema's history. From the articles, there is a clear indication that New York City can be credited to forming the experience coined as "going to the movies." I end my study at the end of 1917 with the completion of Rivoli Theater in New York City because it solidifies the permanent establishment of a movie-going culture. To conclude the paper, a summary of each element in the initial years of the film industry is explained connecting them to ratify the importance of how such a cultural phenomenon was born.

Chapter One: Five Developmental Phases of the Early Movie Industry

The modern American film industry progressed through five initial phases in the early 20th century to combine with the films produced and their exhibition ultimately establishing the movie-going experience known today. These developments were a combination of scientific inventions as well as economic and legal decisions. The five phases include: the early technological inventions in the late 1890s, the patents that soon followed, early control over the new industry, anti-trust laws, resulting in the creation of Hollywood. This progression impacted many factors of cinema including the artistic advancement in filmmaking as well as exhibition aspects in the industry. Furthermore, these rather fast evolvments taking place in the first twenty years of the twentieth century stand as one of three aspects that culminated to form today's movie going experience.

It is difficult to recognize one single name in the discussion of the cinema's invention. The term "cinema" has many different associations. Although there are many opinions of what constitutes cinema, fitting in the discussion of movies, cinema can include the act of going to the movies where people in a dark room share the experience of watching the spectacle together. For this reason, it is difficult to pin point any one person with its invention but it can be determined that the result of inventions led to a cultural attraction known as cinema. There were

many early inventors facilitating in the progress of cinema. In the United States, being a litigious nation, there emerged many lawsuits from the scientific discoveries surrounding cinematic technological creations.

The birth of the American film industry began in the late 1880s. With the centuries old phenomenon of simulating animated moving sketches and the rather new invention of photography, it can be claimed that the experiments leading towards moving pictures were conducted by multiple scientists towards the end of the nineteenth century. Often credited as the first inventors of the cinematic apparatus are the French Lumière brothers Louis and Auguste on March 22, 1895 at a public screening of their technological invention.¹² However, in an article written about the event it suggests that the brothers were “using a Kinetoscope of his own invention” seeming as if the mechanism called a Kinetoscope came first.¹³

The Kinetograph was an invention created by Thomas Edison and his assistant William Dickson along with a team of engineers, although many give credit to Dickson himself. A well-known inventor already, Edison used his laboratory for encouragement of inventions, one being the building of a camera capable of taking moving pictures and a projector.¹⁴ While working on his invention of the Phonograph in 1887, Edison began to think about the idea of a motion picture. He wrote in a letter on the subject, “In the year 1887 the idea occurred to me that it was possible to devise an instrument which should do for the eye what the phonograph does for the ear.”¹⁵ Thereupon, from the years 1888 to 1895 the Edison lab worked at developing the

¹² André Gaudreault and Tom Gunning., 4.

¹³ “Conférence de M. Louis Lumière à la Société d’Encouragement pour l’Industrie Nationale.” *Bulletin du Photo-lub de Paris* no. 51 (Apr. 1909) 7 taken from André Gaudreault and Tom Gunning, 5.

¹⁴ Fulton, 22.

¹⁵ Thomas Edison personal letter from W.K.L Dickson and Antonia Dickson, *History of the Kinetograph, Kinetoscope and Kinetophone* (Washington: ___, 1895), 4.

machine. Edison claimed that “The Kinetoscope is only a small model illustrating the present stage of progress with each succeeding month new possibilities are brought into view.”¹⁶

Although developed at the Edison lab, credit for the machine must be also be given to William Dickson who intensely worked on the project. Dickson, with piecing stop-motion photographs together discovered that the moving pictures needed light to pass through each frame with enough space on the celluloid to clip onto a spinning machine (perforations on film) while recording the moving images in a camera.¹⁷ He made this discovery in 1891 and proceeded to develop the film negative and then placing it in a large box-like object powered by a battery motor with the “strip [running] on a loop between an electric lamp and a shutter... [producing pictures] visible by flashes under a magnifying lens as the viewer looked through a slip in the top of the box.”¹⁸ The box that played what the Kinetograph produced was named the Kinetoscope. Edison began applying for patents for them in 1891 and they were granted 1893.¹⁹ Edison was a skilled inventor knowing fully the importance of patents that would eventually and hopefully produce a profit.

Soon after the invention of the Kinetoscope, it became marketable but on a small level. During the summer of 1894 Edison signed a contract “assigning the exclusive domestic marketing rights to the Kinetoscope Company, formed by Norman C. Raff and Frank R Gammon... selling territorial rights on the business of the Kinetoscopes.”²⁰ Edison’s first sale of the machine to Raff & Gammon was for the price of \$250 per machine who then sold them from

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Fulton, 23.

¹⁸ Ibid, 23.

¹⁹ Anthony Slide, *The New Historical Dictionary of the American Film Industry* (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 1998), 110.

²⁰ Gordon Hendricks, “The History of the Kinetoscope,” *The American Film Industry*, Ed. Tino Balio (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), 41

\$300-\$350.²¹ Around this time Edison built the first movie “studio” on his property strictly to film moving pictures signifying a growing market for film production. Furthermore, early Kinetoscope parlors were beginning to open in New York City. Storefronts were filled with Kinetoscopes where people could walk up to the large box, enter coins, glimpse into the box, and forget about the real world for a short while.²² Edison created short films for these boxes, known as “Kinetoscopic records” which would display miniature real-life actions that he recorded at his film studio known as The Black Maria.²³ Commenting on the future of the Kinetograph, William Dickson wrote:

What is the future of the Kinetograph? Ask rather, from what conceivable phase of the future it can be debarred. In the promotion of business interests, in advancement of science, in the revelation of the unguessed worlds, in its education and re-creative powers, and in its ability to immortalize our fleeting but beloved associations, the Kinetograph stands foremost among the creations of modern inventive genius. It is the crown and flower of nineteenth-century magic.²⁴

Dickson believed this revolutionary machine would soon allow for countless filming options giving society a new past time. Technically, the early Kinetoscope film was fifty feet to 150 feet in length with the longest one at the time being 950 feet.²⁵ Typical vignettes displayed short often comedic scenes such as people walking, animals playing and dancing numbers.²⁶ In August of 1894, Otway and Gray Latham along business partner Enoch Rector entered an agreement with Edison to use his Kinetoscopes to display prizefights, altering the camera and projection speed to create a longer viewing time. They eventually formed the Kinetoscope Exhibition Company opening a parlor in New York City with short films showing fights as their

²¹ Fulton., 24.

²² Musser, 42.

²³ Slide., 110.

²⁴ W.K.L. Dickson, “*History of the Kinetograph, Kinetoscope, and Kineto-phonograph*, 1895.”

²⁵ Fulton., 25.

²⁶ Musser., 42-43.

main attractions.²⁷ By August of 1894, realizing the growing popularity of the Kinetoscope by the public, the Edison Company believed it needed to control who was buying the Kinetoscopes. Therefore, the company decided to sell them exclusively to three companies: Raff & Gammon, the Lathams Kinetoscope Exhibition Company and Maguire & Baucus Continental Commerce.²⁸ The Lathams, using the Kinetoscopes in their parlor, would soon use the models to develop a device that would “project” what was appearing in the Kinetoscope so that a whole audience could see it.²⁹

Although being an experienced inventor, Edison should have been more attentive about his patents. When he patented the Kinetoscope he had the chance to also patent it internationally for an additional price of \$150. Unfortunately, Edison did not spend the extra money and as a result, British scientist Robert W. Paul reproduced not only his own Kinetoscope and portable camera but also a projector called the Bioscope displaying it in February 1896.³⁰ It was also around that time that a Bioscope in Germany appeared as well as from the Lumière brothers in France calling their projector the Cinématographe.³¹ In addition to not filing foreign patents, Edison also did not push to create a projector machine and market it for the reason of thinking that if a group of people were seeing one film together it would be less profitable than to have the individual Kinetoscopes where people paid per viewing.³² As a result, Edison cannot be credited for being the first to create the full “movie-going experience.” The novelty of the

²⁷ Musser., 46.

²⁸ Musser., 46.

²⁹ Fulton., 25. In 1895, although not perfected the Lathams introduced their projector, the eidoloscope. Musser., 53.

³⁰ Ibid, 26.

³¹ Ibid, 27.

³² Ibid, 28.

Kinetoscope was soon fading and Raff & Gammon were struggling to keep their business until their discovery of the Phantoscope.

It is a common misconception that Thomas Edison was the creator of movies. The primary document associated with the birth of cinema in the America is the *New York Times* article that reads, “Edison’s Vitascope Cheered,” understandably placing the assumption that Edison invented the Vitascope.³³ In the early months of 1896, with the hopes of finding success in the business, Raff & Gammon partnered with Thomas Armat with the agreement of Edison to manufacture the new machine. In a letter from Raff & Gammon on March 5, 1896, they wrote, “in order to secure the largest profit in the shortest time, it is necessary that we attach Mr. Edison’s name in some prominent capacity to this new machine.”³⁴ Although the letter also stated that Edison claimed no right to inventing the machine, the information presented in *The New York Times* promotes otherwise. The moving images projected on a screen, presented half-size to life-size images of boxing matches, people dancing, or even natural scenes such as the beach captivating audiences.³⁵

Although there were other machines in existence, it was the creation of the Vitascope that led to the birth of “going to the movies.” The machine was first shown to the public on April 23, 1896, at Koster & Bial’s, a well-known music hall in New York City, as one part in a series of acts. Reported in the *New York Times* the next day, the machine was “a curious object... the white screen used on the stage is framed like a picture. The movie figures are about half life size.”³⁶ The new art form was widely accepted. A couple of days later, in speaking on Edison’s

³³ “Edison’s Vitascope Cheered,” *New York Times*, April 24, 1896.

³⁴ Letter from Raff & Gammon to Armat, March 5, 1896, 3:289-90, MH-BA taken from Musser., 58.

³⁵ “Edison’s Vitascope Cheered,” *New York Times*, April 24, 1896.

³⁶ “Edison’s Vitascope Cheered,” *The New York Times*, April 24 1896.

genius machine, the *Times* explained “[the Vitascope] differs [from the Kinetoscope] in that its effect are almost the acme of realism; it differs in its possibilities, which, theatrical managers say, are boundless.”³⁷ The early praise and success of the new entertainment led Edison to “perfect” the machine. He soon saw potential in the new business and for that purpose continued to invest in it. Soon after the debut at Koster & Bial’s, Edison bought two large train cars, built railroad tracks, and then filmed the train cars crashing. He also sent some of his machines to Rome to film the Sistine Chapel.³⁸ It is accurate in saying that Edison played an important role in the beginning years in the creation of film; however, there were many additional people involved in the process that should also receive credit.

As a result of the increasing popularity of motion pictures and technological development, early film companies began to see a need to control the up and coming industry. The films produced in the first ten years of the twentieth century were beginning to see more in depth material due to the technological advancements of creating longer film. There were three main companies or producers of the early films and machines in the first few years of the twentieth century: Edison, Biograph, and Vitagraph.³⁹ The machines manufactured were expensive and the companies tried to keep the commodity somewhat ‘exclusive,’ mainly selling to the vaudeville theaters where smaller theaters would buy up the used equipment when finished with it.⁴⁰ Around the year 1902, penny arcade owners and business men began converting old small peep-show rooms into very small theaters in New York, generally costing around five

³⁷ “Edison’s Latest Invention,” *The New York Times*, April 26, 1896.

³⁸ “Edison’s Latest Invention,” *The New York Times*, April 26, 1896.

³⁹ Tino Balio, “A Novelty Spawns Small Businesses: 1894-1908,” *The American Film Industry*, Ed. Tino Balio (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), 7.

⁴⁰ Jacobs., 5.

cents to see a show thereby coining the name “nickelodeon.”⁴¹ By 1907, the *New York Times* stated that there were already some “500 penny arcades, nickelodeons, moving picture emporiums, and similar centres” in the city.⁴² The exhibition of movies was quickly spreading with positive results from audience attendance.

The monopolistic control of the industry was sought after by numerous patent disputes. Even though it was becoming easier for smaller entrepreneurs to enter the business by 1907, the major film companies desired to maintain control over the rapidly growing industry. It is relevant to note in these years that the industry was dividing into three main facets: manufactures of the machines and films, distributors of the films and finally, the exhibitors of them. Three establishing companies that were the main producers of cameras were the Edison Company, American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, and Vitagraph Company all which desired to hold a monopoly over the whole industry and controlled it almost together.⁴³ Numerous patent disagreements arose in the early 1900s between the companies surrounding the validity of certain patents. Historian Tino Balio summarizes the tumultuous decade writing, “virtually hundreds of legal actions [that] would eventually be filed, creating chaotic conditions in the industry, the lure of profits was so great after 1903 that scores of new companies were formed.”⁴⁴ Already in 1902 the court-prohibited Edison’s film patents on the basis of being too broad, requesting that he needed to reword and reissue them.⁴⁵ Edison applied again specifically concerning the sprocket mechanism used and as a result took the Biograph Company to court. In 1906 he lost the decision but appealed for a third time in 1907. Finally, in March of 1907, after years of

⁴¹ Jacobs., 7

⁴² “Aldermen to Kill Blue Law Rule,” *The New York Times*, Dec. 10 1907.

⁴³ Jacobs., 8.

⁴⁴ Balio, 16.

⁴⁵ Tom Gunning, “Movies, Stories, and Attractions,” *American Cinema 1890 – 1909 Themes and Variations*, ed. André Gaudreault (New Jersey: Rutgers Press), 114. (112-132)

litigation, the United States Circuit of Appeals for the Second Circuit declared that both the Biograph Company and the American Mutoscope Company did not in fact infringe on The Edison Company's own patents.⁴⁶ However, in the end of all of the battles, Edison saw some victory because the court found that some of the Biograph Company's foreign associates were in fact infringing on his patents.⁴⁷ Not happy with the results from the court, Edison continued to threaten the other companies, which resulted in an agreement between the Biograph and Edison companies.⁴⁸

The result in the settlement solidified the recognition that there were prominent companies looking to dominate the industry. In an article in the leading trade paper, *Moving Picture World* describing the 1907 settlement, the conclusion of the long litigation was as followed, "the business of manufacturing moving picture films will, as a result of this litigation, be confined to the American Mutoscope and Biograph and the Edison companies."⁴⁹ During this time, being filled with legal battles, the production of film also slowed. Although the companies dominated the early market, small independent companies soon began producing films slowly opening up the market to new competition.⁵⁰ Also at this time, exhibitors of theaters found ways to obtain their own cameras and projectors. Some were imported from abroad, others were copied and traded among show rooms.⁵¹

The agreement between the three major initial film companies resulted in creating a monopoly on the industry. The lawsuit between the Edison Company and the American

⁴⁶ "Edison vs. American Mutoscope and Biograph Company," *The Moving Picture World*, March 1907., 4.

⁴⁷ Sklar., 35.

⁴⁸ Sklar., 35.

⁴⁹ "Edison vs. American Mutoscope and Biograph Company," *The Moving Picture World*, March 1907., 4.

⁵⁰ Balio., 16.

⁵¹ Jacobs, 8.

Mutoscope and Biograph Company ended with both sides acknowledging their separate patents as well as a redesign of the industry. On September 9, 1908, the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC) was formed beginning a “licensing system by which a limited number of production companies would be allowed to produce films provided they pay a royalty fee to the holding origination to pool the various patents.”⁵² The MPPC was designated the name “the Trust” by its opponents and those who were not in the organization were known as independents. The individual companies within the Trust held a “patent pool organized to hold the sixteen key patents owned by four companies—Edison Manufacturing Company, American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, Vitagraph Company of America, and Armat Moving Picture Company.”⁵³ The MPPC then allowed certain groups within the company to use the inventions and/or equipment. The Trust held a strong monopoly over the whole industry only allowing licenses for films for the companies in the Trust. In a report found in the *Motion Picture World* in December of 1908, they claimed, “It has been hinted that the number of film exchanges may be reduced. These have been multiplying in excess to the proportion of exhibitors. If there were fewer of the cheap men in the rental business there would be fewer of the cheap shows; by this we mean the kind of show that is responsible for the spasmodic spells of reform on the part of the authorities.”⁵⁴ Not only was the MPPC formed to create laws surrounding patents, but to “help” regulate the forming industry. The founding of the MPPC also attributed for its founding members being Edison Company and Biograph Company to receive an abundance of royalties.

⁵² For the date: Jeanne Thomas Allen, “The Decay of the Motion Picture Patents Company,” *The American Film Industry*, ed. Tino Balio (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), 120. and André Gaudreault and Tom Gunning, 17.

⁵³ Allen., 121.

⁵⁴ “The Policy of the Associated Film Manufacturers,” *The Moving Picture World*, July-Dec 1908, 520.

The royalties taken in by both the Edison and Biograph companies show a planned action to control the industry. The MPPC collected three main types of royalties that produced lucrative income: ‘machine royalties,’ ‘exhibitor royalties,’ and ‘film royalties.’⁵⁵ Money was charged at every possible moment; from manufacturing projectors to renting the machined to the exhibitors, the Trust collected money. At the end of the year, the money from the royalties was distributed between Edison, Biograph, Armat leaving Vitagraph to receive “one dollar for each projection machine sold.”⁵⁶ The MPPC soon became a monopoly over the industry controlling almost every part of the commerce.

The Trust also dominated the industry by creating a succession of licensing agreements covering all the grounds of the industry. More like terms of regulations, there were five main aspects that were controlled by these licensing agreements: the physical making of the actual film, assemblage of the film production, creating the projection machines, distributing the film, and controlling the exhibition.⁵⁷ In terms of making the actual film, the MPPC dealt solely with the Eastman Kodak Company for the production of celluloid. Kodak was not charged a royalty but collected royalties from licensed producers on behalf of the Trust.⁵⁸ The creation of the Trust meant the granting of licenses to a select group film companies. These companies of the newly formed single “company” included: Edison, Biograph, Essanay, Kalem, Lubin, Pathé Frères, Selig Polyscope, Vitagraph, Kleine and Méliés.⁵⁹ Of these licensed film manufacturers, the Trust limited the length of film that the importers could release and set price levels for the

⁵⁵ Allen., 121

⁵⁶ Ibid, 122.

⁵⁷ Allen, 122.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 122.

⁵⁹ Scott Curtis, “A House Divided: The MPPC in Transition,” *American Cinema’s Transitional Era: Audiences Institutions Practices*, ed. Charlie Keil and Shelley Stamp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 239.

rate exchanges were billed for films. They also strictly regulated these licenses where the members of MPPC deemed it necessary to have a majority vote to let in a new manufacturer. Another reason for the Trusts formation was because they wanted to keep a close hand over the manufactured equipment. Consequently, the Trust collected a five-dollar royalty on each projector sold. The MPPC also held a strong control on the distribution level. Only licensed distributors could accept the leased films and from there the distributor could charge the exhibitor. There was also a minimum rate that exchanges needed to pay for film per month in order to keep their hold. Similar to the Kodak relationship, the distributors were not charged royalties but collected two dollars per week from the exhibitor from the projectors in place of the MPPC.

The last and possibly the most important factor of the industry was the audience's participation in viewing the films. In addition to theaters that were required to pay a two-dollar weekly fee for the projector use, the MPPC only allowed its licensed projector theaters to show only licensed films.⁶⁰ Although seemingly very strict, the dealings within the Trust itself were pretty lenient. As long as licensees were doing business amongst other licensees the market within that was open. It was the MPPC that can be credited to setting specific entities within the industry making it nearly impossible for outside competition.

One way the MPPC continued to find ways to control the growing industry was through its creation of General Film Company. Their biggest form of making money was from collecting royalties from licensed manufactures and rental exchanges. In April of 1910, the company's licensed manufacturers formed their own company called the General Film Company (GFC)

⁶⁰ Allen., 122-123.

hoping to obtain even more monopolistic power.⁶¹ This move was also called vertical integration, combining the production and distribution aspects of the industry. The ten companies that formed the MPPC each bought a share of the General Film Company stock. The General Film Company sought to obtain exchanges, or manufacturing companies, to really control the market. They also set new price standards; licensed manufacturers were required to stay at a ten-cents per foot for positive film prints. The GFC also categorized movie houses based on location, deeming certain houses being more lucrative than others thereupon beginning the classification of movie houses. Rentals fees varied from \$15 to \$125 depending on the theatre's class. The creation of the General Film Company is significant because although they MPPC would eventually dissolve, the "selling practices" established by the GFC remained.⁶²

With the MPPC and General Film Company heading the industry's finances, there was little room for individual capital; however, in the forming of the General Film Company, there were some exchanges that refused to succumb to the Trust's soon-becoming monopoly. By 1912, exchanges that refused be included: I.P.P., Rex Nestor, Thanhouser, Bison, Keystone, Mutual and William Fox's Greater New York Film Company.⁶³ One company of particular importance was that of William Fox's. His license was taken away and his chain of theaters threatened because of his refusal to accept regulations of the GFC. In addition to making independent movies for his own theaters, Fox filed suit against the MPPC under the legal sanction of the Sherman Anti-trust Act in 1913.⁶⁴ Passed by Congress in July 1890, the Sherman Anti-Trust Act was a Federal act that prohibited monopolistic business control. Section Two of the Act states, "Every person who shall monopolize, or attempt to monopolize, or combine or

⁶¹ Ibid, 125.

⁶² Ibid., 126.

⁶³ Jacobs., 83.

⁶⁴ Allen., 126.

conspire with any other person or persons, to monopolize any part of the trade or commerce among the several States, or with foreign nations, shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor.”⁶⁵

The MPPC’s intension can be seen as violating the Sherman Anti-Trust Act in many of their actions. In the January 1916 issue of *Moving Picture World*, an article on the decision wrote, “It will be noted that in the case of the decision it is declared the defendants are engaged in a combination and conspiracy in restraint of trade in violation of the law of July 2, 1890.”⁶⁶ The article went on to list the numerous licensing violations that the Trust created: “the contracts, licenses, and agreements...the license agreements existing between the Patents Company and the licensees, the licenses from the company and exchanges, the licenses from the company to exhibitors, the license agreements between the company and manufacturers of exhibiting machines, the license agreements between the company and the General Film Company, the agreements between the General and the Patents Company...”⁶⁷ In addition to all of the above licensing violations, the Trust also made “interlocking agreements” with their clients, excluded competitors on their grounds of approval, created the General Film Company as a means to gain even more control over the industry, fixed prices, and sought out any violators of their terms.⁶⁸ Although the court hearings went on for some time the Trust lost its official power by 1914, not legally declared disintegrated until 1917.⁶⁹

A culmination of occurrences surrounding the anti-trust Decision solidified the birth of Hollywood and the creation of longer films. In addition to the success William Fox achieved,

⁶⁵ Act of July 2, 1890(Sherman Anti-Trust Act), July 2, 1890; Enrolled Acts and Resolutions of Congress, 1789-1992; General Records of the United States Government; Record Group 11; National Archives.

⁶⁶ “Government Enjoins Patents Company,” *Moving Picture World*, , Jan-Mar Vol. 27 1916, p. 753.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 753.

⁶⁸ Allen., 128.

⁶⁹ Jacobs., 84.

many other “independent” exchanges began to prosper. Both historians Jeanne Thomas Allen and Lewis Jacobs credit the formation of Hollywood as a direct result of the Independent companies seeking refuge from the harassment from the Trusts.⁷⁰ While the Trust was still in business, independent companies invited cameramen and other technical entities to work independently of the Trust often offering them a higher salary.⁷¹ The disintegration of the Trust further strengthened Hollywood’s role in the Industry. It was also the independents who spurred the creation of Hollywood for the reasons of wanting to avoid the Trust. Although the first film company moved out to Southern California in 1907 to shoot movies, it was not until 1913 that an area within Los Angeles was solely devoted to filmmaking, receiving the name “Hollywood.”⁷²

Also arising more frequently with the collapse of the Trust was production of longer films. The Trust’s standardization policies stood in the way of production of longer films in the United States. Although the creation of some longer films were made by independent companies while the Trust existed, it became easier with its disintegration. Exhibitors were demanding longer films for their audiences asking for more “sophisticated stories that could attract more intelligent clientele.”⁷³ Ultimately, the disintegration of the MPPC was positive; it allowed for expansion in the industry permitting for more experimentation of film which fed the nation’s only growing love for moving pictures.

The quickly and newly forming industry developing in the first fifteen years of the twentieth century indicate movies were becoming an important part in America’s culture. Occurring at the time of these industrial developments, manufactures – both in the Trust and independents – were creating films that were developing into narratives. Artistic elements of

⁷⁰ Allen., 129 and Jacobs, 85.

⁷¹ Jacobs., 84.

⁷² Sklar, 68 and Jacobs, 84.

⁷³ Balio., 107.

filming experimented by producers allowed for more in-depth narratives where audience members would develop an understanding of visual symbols and cues. On the exhibition level, cities were beginning to build new theaters for the sole purpose of showing movies. Furthermore, the five initial phases of the business end of the movie industry aided in the creation of the new cultural attraction.

Chapter Two: Aesthetics of film in the Development of Movies: A Case Study of *The Great Train Robbery* and *The Birth of a Nation*

The aesthetics of early moving pictures are telling of the relatively rapid progression of early cinema. Early subject matters were dominated by the technology of the time. They did not tell stories but simply recreated real life actions that awed the audiences. As time progressed and technology advanced, longer film reels were created that allowed longer features to be made. Although sound in film was not invented until the mid twenties, screenwriters wrote short narratives for the early screen. With the technology influencing what could be filmed, this also impacts on how they were exhibited. Early Kinetoscope parlors allowed customers to peek into a box to see short moving images. Soon, short moving pictures appeared in between vaudeville acts later creating their own semi-permanent home in nickelodeons. Often coined as the birth of cinema, the invention of the projector allowed for first time a mass audience enjoy the moving pictures together. Two films representative of the early era of cinema, Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) and D.W. Griffith's *Birth of A Nation* (1915), stand as the evidence of the progression of the industry. Furthermore, through analyzing the narratives and aesthetics one can begin to understand the progression of early moving pictures is telling of the industry that exists today.

Early films left people simply awed by the *moving-ness* of the picture. Subject matters varied but in the very early stages they tended to be simple scenic shots that captivated the eye purely by the fact that the image was moving. Real life recordings such as ocean scenes, wild animals, and even daring wild-life shots, were called 'actualities' and were the most commonly

shown of early film subjects.⁷⁴ The first film premiere reported is telling of the early movie industry and stands as a model for what was to come of the industry. Although not formally titled a film “premiere,” the Vitascope was first shown to the public in April of 1896, at Koster & Bial’s as one part in a series of acts. Reported in the *New York Times* the next day,

An unusual bright light fell upon the screen. Then came into view two precious blonde young persons of the variety stage...when they vanished, a view of an angry surf breaking on a sandy beach near a stone pier amazed the spectators... And a skirt dance by a tall blonde completed the views, which were all wonderfully real and singularly exhilarating.⁷⁵

It is quite difficult to imagine what seeing a movie was like for the first time. Early moving pictures that recreated real life probably seemed like a small dose of magic. It is telling of the time that the first moving pictures people saw were authentic actions— dancing, natural scenery—anything that portrayed movement and not similar to a still photograph. Cinema continued to be a novelty with the industry just beginning to take off. There was not yet a definitive home for them; film companies were still experimenting with subject matters and patent laws were being disputed. With the advancing technology appearing in the early 1900s, more in depth storytelling was made possible which also attracted a wider range of audiences.

The Edison Manufacturing Company was the pioneering production group of early films. The early years of cinema should be characterized as experimental, paving the way for future more in depth stories and aesthetics. Until around 1903, films were usually one minute long, fifty-feet in length and if part of a vaudeville show, it was usually one of ten acts to take up a time slot.⁷⁶ With the many legal battles between film companies surrounding patents from 1901

⁷⁴ Tom Gunning, “Movies, Stories, and Attractions,” *American Cinema*, ed. André Gaudreault (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 114. (112-132) And “Dangers That Encompass the Maker of Moving Pictures...”*The New York Times*, Aug 25 1907.

⁷⁵ “Edison’s Vitascope Cheered,” *The New York Times*, April 24 1896

⁷⁶ Balio., 5.

and 1903 the industry was somewhat debilitated.⁷⁷ During this time period, many of the companies imported films from other markets, such as Europe. In addition to duping foreign films, the Edison Company also released films in the travel genre. Shots of the West Indies, Mediterranean, European getaways and even exotic Middle East seemed to be popular viewing attractions.⁷⁸ It was the years between 1902 and 1904 that the Edison Company began to focus on creating story films.⁷⁹ Elements of story films or narratives included inventive cinematic techniques such as acting gestures, film aesthetics, and a creating of a linear narrative new space. Opening a new genre allowed for endless stories to be told, but creating them for film was difficult at first. Without sound, people needed to be able to understand the flow of the story; a sense of progression needed to be gained from the use of film elements chosen by the director.

The Great Train Robbery

One of the most well known films of the early years of cinema is *The Great Train Robbery*, made by Edwin Porter, for the Edison Company in 1903. The film stretched the common length, creating narrative and aesthetics unprecedented for the time period. Spanning around ten-minutes long and 740 feet, it was also deemed the first western, captivating the audience's attention by following the steps of the bandits robbing a train as well as their capture.⁸⁰ The film successfully joins fourteen shots together to form a sequential narrative.

The shot sequences are a vital aspect of early film aesthetics and are successfully achieved in *The Great Train Robbery*. Without repetition or linear progression the audience would not be able to follow the story. Before the silent era of film took off where title cards could be inserted to help convey the story, early films needed to be engaging and understanding

⁷⁷ Charles Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 235.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 240.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 235.

⁸⁰ For the length, "The Great Train Robbery," *The New York Clipper*, December 26, 1903, 1072.

enough so that the audience could follow the story. Porter's film begins when two men with guns enter a room where one man is sitting (Scene 1).⁸¹ It is unknown to the audience where this room is until a train appears and stops in the open window signifying that this location is a train stop. From the moment the two men, dressed in black, wearing hats and carrying guns enter the room it can be inferred that something bad is taking place. Guns and violence are simple signifiers to the brain that imply danger. Although somewhat confusing when watching for the first time, Porter seems to be having multiple scenes going on at once. While some of the robbers are taking the money, the others are fighting the train conductor. Also, when the bandits are eventually on their horses (scene 9) and the "dancing good guys," often called the posse, are alerted about the robbery (scene 11), one needs to assume that these events happened simultaneously. Presumably, while watching the film the brain intuitively connects the shots when the two plots of converge at the moment the bandits are killed by the posse in the shoot-out (scene 13).

At the time of its viewing, *The Great Train Robbery* was received successfully. Before its debut in December 1903, it was already getting advertisement. The film had its own advertisement in *The New York Clipper* in November declaring a "special notice" saying, "The Great Train Robbery. This highly sensational Headliner will be ready early this month."⁸² Although the film would not debut until December it was encouraged for exhibitors to make their order early. The film finally premiered in December at Huber's Museum in New York City and soon after appeared in many other theaters in the city.⁸³ It was advertised as including "thrilling and exciting incidents in fourteen scenes...In every respect we consider this film

⁸¹ Edwin S. Porter, *The Great Train Robbery* (Edison Manufacturing Company, 1903) DVD.

⁸² "Edison Films," *The New York Clipper*, November 7, 1903, 896.

⁸³ Musser., 254.

absolutely the superior of any moving picture ever made...posed and acted in faithful imitation of the genuine “Hold Ups” made famous by various outlaw bandits in the far West.”⁸⁴ This new type of storytelling for the screen awed audiences. Staged melodramas were a brand new idea for film that only kick started the cinema that is still around today. It took about six months to a year for staged narratives to become the primary filming focus. From March to July of 1904 the Edison Manufacturing Company made forty-nine films, eighty-two percent being actualities.⁸⁵ Displaying a strong progression of the development of the narrative, staged films began to take over as the company’s prime subject. Beginning in August of that year to February of 1905, it completed twenty-one films, sixty-two percent being staged.⁸⁶

In addition to creating an understandable, progressive narrative, *The Great Train Robbery* exhibits early cinematic themes creating genres further placing it as a monumental film. As films later developed into longer features, more rigid genres also fell into place; However, through cinematic techniques, Porter’s film successfully illustrates some of these early genres. Elements of “the western,” “the chase,” and “good v. evil” appear through the use of location, camera set up and editing to pull the climactic story together. Although the film genre of “the western” had not yet existed, Porter’s film suggest that it is shot out west where the expansive frontier, seems to be the perfect place where bandits would be found robbing a train. In actuality, the film was shot on the Delaware and Lackawanna Railroad the latter located near Dover, New Jersey.⁸⁷ As part of the myth of the “western” genre, which includes the sense of vastness of

⁸⁴ “The Great Train Robbery,” *The New York Clipper*, December 12, 1903, 1016.

⁸⁵ Table taken from Charles Musser, “Moving Towards Fictional Narratives,” *The Silent Cinema Reader*, ed. Lee Grieveson and Peter Kramer (London: Routledge, 2003), 97 (87-102)

⁸⁶ Table taken from Charles Musser, “Moving Towards Fictional Narratives,” *The Silent Cinema Reader*, ed. Lee Grieveson and Peter Kramer (London: Routledge, 2003), 98.

⁸⁷ George N Fenin and William K. Everson, *The Western, From Silents to Cinerama* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1962), 47.

land and cowboys, Porter successfully created an atmosphere to produce the feeling of the untamed part of the nation.

The “chase” element of the early cinema was popular and takes up the in the second half of *The Great Train Robbery*. Chases are a linear progression making it a simple thing to piece together on film and can be easy for the audience to understand if filmed correctly. Improper filming with the use of different angles can confuse the viewer and not make sense. The use of trains also added excitement to chases, as seen in Porter’s film. The chase begins when the posse is told about the bandits, presumably occurring right after the little girl wakes up the man knocked unconscious at the train station. The innovative use of parallel editing heightens the anxiety of whether or not the posse will catch the bandits. As all chase scenes come to an end, *The Great Train Robbery* concludes with an intense shootout leaving the bandits dead and the money saved.

The theme of “good vs. evil” is evident in Porter’s film which is an important element that would influence later films. There was no film censorship as of 1903, but the concept of catching the bad guys, and killing them, seems to be a point that Porter wanted to get across.⁸⁸ The viewer is introduced to the bandits as they knock the train telegraph operator unconscious automatically placing them in the wrong. It is because of the use of violence and killing that the viewer is satisfied once they are caught. Through the use of technical camera elements and known story-telling, Edwin Porter successfully created an imaginative narrative that only set the standards for many films in the future.

Moving into 1904, Cinema was still in its exploration stage but moved away from actualities and became more of a social attraction where people could escape into a fictional

⁸⁸ A National Censorship Board was formed in 1909 further talked about in Chapter Three.

world. Historian Tom Gunning, in his essay “Movies, Stories, and Attractions” on early cinema, coined the term “cinema of attractions” to describe the first decade of cinema’s history. He writes, “film production and film shows were still dominated by the shorter, less narratively driven films...the longer films [reveal] their transitional nature, combining attractions with narrative techniques.”⁸⁹ The shift from this “cinema of attractions” to an industry of features occurred through exploration on film and a gradual technological and industry shift.

In the years between *A Great Train Robbery* and *The Birth of a Nation* the industry further transformed. In the span of twelve years, with the creation and eventual break up of the MPPC, Hollywood was born and the building of theaters specifically designed for movies were seen throughout America’s cities. In 1912, *Harper’s Weekly* published an article stating that, “The development of the cinematograph has been followed by a comparatively new form of literature—the photoplay.”⁹⁰ New narrative stories were being written specifically designed for film. As if to prelude D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*, W. Stephen Bush of *Moving Picture World* wrote in October of 1912 about the rather fast progression of a the great art of cinema specifically pointing out the recent development of the feature. He said,

The feature film is a plain and strong appeal to the finer taste, the healthier sentiment and the trained and educated mind... By devoting more time and the highest forms of artistic skill the producers of films have shown a much keener perception of what the public really want and a much higher standard of ethics than the magnates of journalism and current literature... Nothing is more certain than that the motion picture and above all the feature must strike a new path... The triumph of such a production would place the cinematograph above the movable type in importance as a literary and civilizing factor.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Gunning, 115.

⁹⁰ Clara F. Beranger, Beranger, C.F. “Photoplay—A New Kind of Drama,” *Harper’s Weekly*, Sep 7 1912.

⁹¹ Bush, W. Stephen, “New Functions of the Motion Picture,” *The Moving Picture World*, July 6 1912, 21.

It was as if Bush was writing a prelude to Griffith's soon-to-be revolutionizing film. With the public becoming more receptive to an increased amount of in-depth stories paired with innovative aesthetics it becomes clear that the new cultural attraction transformed society. Bush was certainly accurate when he took the position that "The motion picture will forever remain a rich and unfailing source of amusement and entertainment."⁹² With new films appearing weekly for people to see, new developments in technology and the business also aided in this transformation.

The Birth of a Nation

Despite it having one of the most controversial subject matters in the history of film, D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* transformed the cinema of its time. Although it is quite difficult to overcome the overriding sickening racist conclusions of the film, it stands to be dissected as pioneering for its aesthetic achievements in film history. There are two important factors to consider when approaching the film as being so revolutionary; first, its extensive aesthetic qualities for its time and second, its place in history aiding in the further development in the movies as a culture. The film used a colossal twelve reels of film, spanning three hours and twenty-one minutes.⁹³ It was also groundbreaking in its exhibition; split into two parts with an intermission the film was also the most expensive attraction yet costing two-dollars a ticket.⁹⁴ The creator of the film, once an actor and playwright, David Wark Griffith explored cinematic techniques that revolutionized the idea of a story movie.⁹⁵ These cinematic techniques, similar to

⁹² Stephen, 21.

⁹³ Melvyn Stokes, *D.W. Griffith's 'The Birth of a Nation': A History of the Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time* (North Carolina: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3. Most films of the time were only one reel long lasting about fifteen minutes long (4).

⁹⁴ Balio., 109.

⁹⁵ Jacobs., 95. Griffith originally did not want to become an engaged with the movies but set his eyes on writing

The Great Train Robbery, are all choices made by their creator to construct an understandable narrative. Unlike literature, in film, there exist creative visual choices that enable the story to become observed, often coined as *filmic* elements. With the transformation effects of the industry—including the business, technological, and social aspects—Griffith was able to also transform the filmic aspect of the industry.

The plot for the film is relatively simple. Ultimately focusing on the creation of the Klu Klux Klan, the story is a drama surrounding two families originally becoming friends at boarding school but divided by the Civil War. Austin Stoneman's family from the North comprises of Phil, Elsie, and Tod while in the South the Dr. Cameron's family is made up Ben, Wade, Duke, Margaret, and Flora. A love interest develops between the two families; Phil falling for Margaret and Ben for Elsie; however, the Civil War divides the family. The second half of the film focuses on the Reconstruction period where Austin Stoneman is elected Leader of House but due to medical reasons needs to move to the same town as his family friends being that of Cameron's (Piedmont, South Carolina). Austin, promoting a racially equal country elects the "mulatto Silas Lynch" as Lieutenant Governor with the order to go down to the south and organize emancipated slaves. The racist overtones become apparent when Lynch, solely due to his race, begins to instigate carpetbaggers to try and overtake the white southerners. As a result of African Americans receiving more political power in the Nation, Ben Cameron develops the idea of the Klu Klux Klan to rise up against Lynch. The African American character of Gus further creates overwhelmingly racial tensions where Gus chases the youngest Cameron daughter to her death wanting to marry. This results the KKK in the capturing and lynching Gus. Gus's murder results in the climax of the film where a fight between the KKK and a black militia formed by Lynch. In the end, the KKK defeats the militia giving hope that the South will

survive from the effects of the Civil War. Ben Cameron marries Elsie and Phil Stoneman marries Margaret solidifying the two families and metaphorically two side of the Nation. Whilst discussing the epic, it is unavoidable the use of Historian Tom Gunning's term *narrative discourse* as a way to encapsulate Griffith's groundbreaking creation of the story film.

It is vital to understand Gunning's approach of *narrative discourse* when examining *Birth of a Nation* as it enables the viewer to gain insight as to why Griffith's film is so groundbreaking. Although not coined *narrative discourse* at the time Griffith was making his film, he developed certain filmic elements that culminated in the creation of the story film. Gunning, in his analysis of Griffith films, refers to the work of French literary theorist Gérard Genette's examination of literature and its narrative while modifying and applying its functions to the medium of film.⁹⁶ Rather than focus strictly on the story, Gunning investigates "the telling of storytelling... [or] means of expression of a story," labeling it *narrative discourse*.⁹⁷ In 1915, with film being a relatively new way to tell stories one can examine these early fundamental choices Griffith made in order for the film to make sense and be enjoyable as a narrative. When dissecting a film's filmic discourse he divides the whole production into three linear parts – pro-filmic, enframed image, and editing –all strategically planned by its creator.⁹⁸ The pro-filmic element includes all of the matter that is arranged in front of the camera to be shot – e.g. actors, props, and lighting.⁹⁹ The enframed image, according to Gunning, is how these pro-filmic placements are recorded on the film leaving the last part, editing the joining together of the enframed image in a certain way

⁹⁶ Tom Gunning focuses on breaking down Gérard Genette's term *narrative discourse* and applying it to the medium of film in his chapter, "Narrative Discourse and the Narrator System," *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, Ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 461-472.

⁹⁷ Gunning., 461 and 462.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 467-468.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 466.

that makes sense to an audience.¹⁰⁰ All of these choices enhance films making them more visually captivating. Gunning writes, “The particular stance and tone of its filmic narrator is determined by choices made within the levels of filmic discourse. Therefore the filmic narrator appears in a wide range of forms determined by specific choices within and among the three levels of filmic discourse.”¹⁰¹ When examining *The Birth of a Nation*, it is necessary to see the visual choices Griffith made not only make an interesting narrative but also to establish innovative techniques still used today.

Impressive camera techniques, superb editing, and music are three filmic elements that continuously arise in *The Birth of a Nation*, some possibly un-noticed by the viewer, that are vital to enhance understanding of the linear narrative. Of course, one could go in-depth upon the many artistic choices Griffith made in the span of the three levels of Gunning’s *narrative discourse*; however, the three elements mentioned above are essential when considering its fundamental place in film history. Originally titled *The Clansman*, (based on the Thomas E. Dixon story) the film debuted in Los Angeles on February 8, 1915 with much controversy.¹⁰² The plot of the film is rather simple, yet after the overtly racist acts committed throughout the film and let alone the “birth” of the Klu Klux Klan, it is difficult not to be left speechless when Griffith ends with the title card reading “Liberty and union, one and inseparable, now and forever!”¹⁰³ Although no riot occurred at its premier in LA, the film was controversial.¹⁰⁴ In an article published in the *Los Angeles Times* the day after its premier, it was reported that during

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 467.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 469.

¹⁰² Rick Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 292.

¹⁰³ *Birth of a Nation*. Dir. David W. Griffith. 1915. Netflix.

¹⁰⁴ Henry Christeen Warnack of the *Los Angeles Times* reported that there were seventeen police officers at the premier in his article, “Trouble Over ‘The Clansman,’” *Los Angeles Times* February 9, 1915.

the intermission, the chairman of the board of censors, A.P. Tugwell, “made a speech... He said the board of censors had regarded the production of “The Clansman” as something of tremendous worth to the nation and had refused a request of the City Council to reconsider its approval.”¹⁰⁵ Author of the article Henry Warnack, proceeded to write about the film, commenting, “it is the greatest picture that was ever made and biggest drama ever filmed... This one is prodigious in its size and consummate in art. Not a detail has been slighted.”¹⁰⁶ Although it was not shown in New York for another month, it should be noted that from the beginning it received praise due to its grandiose and prestige in terms of cinematic feat.

The camera techniques in *The Birth of a Nation* further prove its importance in film history. Griffith used techniques such as strategic placement of the camera, sophisticated camera movements, and stylized adjustment of the lens that only amplified the effect of the story. The placement of the camera is extremely important when trying to tell an understandable narrative on film. Like *The Great Train Robbery* the scenes need to line up with proper camera placement in each scene in order for a linear storyline to be clear in the viewers’ mind. When watching any film, if an actor exits a room from one side the shot of him/her entering the next room should be congruent with side that he/she exited from. This is apparent in the multiple scenes shot between Austin Stoneman’s office and the hallway right next to it. As people exit the office from the right, they appear entering the hallway from the left showing a progression of movement and time in the same direction. Another scene where camera placement is key is in the chase scene between the youngest Cameron and Silas Lynch. Throughout the sequence the characters run from one end of the camera and exit on the other side to create a linear progression of a chase

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

even though they may have been shot anywhere in any order. For an almost three and a half hour movie, Griffith consistently places the camera so that the viewer is left simply to enjoy.

There are many examples throughout the film where innovative camera movements appear indicating a shift to focus on the artistic aesthetics of film making. Upon Phil Stoneman's visit with the Camerons it is apparent (mainly through acting) that he instantly falls in love with Margaret Cameron. When the two are taking a walk by themselves, Griffith does something with the camera as an indicator of their love for each other. At first he slowly opens the iris of the camera concentrating the viewer's focus solely on Margaret and Phil. The two are a significant distance from the camera further enhancing the effect of the small circular opening. As they move out of the shot, the lens closes back up and the scene ends. Another incredible innovative technique is Griffith's experiments with camera mobility. There are a couple of scenes in particular where Griffith places the camera on what appears to be a moving vehicle moving backwards with the action appearing in front of the camera moving towards it. In the final scenes, when the hoard of the Klu Klux Klan is about to raid the Piedmont, the camera is placed high up – the height of the horses and is moving backward as the horses are moving towards the camera. The effect is rather thrilling, allowing the viewer to feel as though he/she is moving with the horses. Although *The Great Train Robbery* and *The Birth of a Nation* were made more than a decade apart it is clear that there was vast advancements in the development in the movie industry.

Griffith's strategic camera placements allowed for a smooth editing process. Editing is a painful but undoubtedly necessary process needed during the film to insure continuity. During the shooting of the film Griffith would carry around past negatives to insure continuity in his

shots.¹⁰⁷ Lillian Gish, who played Elsie Stoneman, worked closely with Griffith and commented on the editing saying “Mr. Griffith spent more than three months on cutting, editing and working on the musical score.”¹⁰⁸ Successful editing secures the narrative and allows for the brain to interpret what it sees. Of course, the title cards play a big role in understanding what is happening but the piecing together to shots create a scenes. For example, when Bennie Cameron returns home, the viewer sees a sequence of separate events pieced together by editing to form one flowing short sequence. The youngest Cameron Flora is preparing a meal for Bennies arrival, a close-up of the food is given, and then she creates a dress of cotton for the grand occasion. Bennie slowly walks up to the house and waits outside upset at seeing his house in disarray. The family then enters the main room after Flora sees Bennie outside. A few more shots back and forth of the family and Bennie outside heighten the excitement and happiness that overcomes the family until Flora opens the door to greet Bennie. The sequence is not very different than others; however, the amount of actual film used left for a monumental amount of editing. In total, there was 150,000 feet of film shot and Griffith cut it down to around 12,000 feet.¹⁰⁹ Griffith spent an arduous amount of time in the cutting room to create the proper relationship between shots to form a cohesive narrative.

Although it was common for music to be present in silent films the score of *The Birth of a Nation* significantly reinforced the narrative and enhanced feeling throughout the film. The history of the composition for the film is complicated. It is known that there was two separate scores constructed the film. When the film opened in Los Angeles in February it was debuted

¹⁰⁷ Author Melvyn Stokes also writes that at the ending of a shoot, Griffith would examine the past day’s processed film and work on the editing with the projectionists and cutters., 102.

¹⁰⁸ Lillian Gish taken from, Lillian Gish, *The Movies, Mr. Griffith and Me* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc, 1969), 147.

¹⁰⁹ Stokes., 103.

with a score by Carli D. Elinor having created it while the film was still shooting in the summer.¹¹⁰ However, when the film was brought to New York City for the first time, premiering at the Liberty Theater, it was introduced with a score by conductor Joseph Carl Breil. Martin Miller Marks, in his analysis on the different scores of the film expresses his confidence that the Breil's edition of the score was the one meant for the film with which Griffith assisted in creating.¹¹¹ It is clear that the score Breil had composed was specifically meant for the film; Griffith began working with him when the film finished filming in November 1914.¹¹² Unfortunately, Marks firmly writes that there does not exist one copy of Elinor's score for the film that debuted in Los Angeles.¹¹³ There does exist different versions of Breil's score, which includes original music and extractions from known musical pieces. Although it is unfortunate that there exists mystery in the original scores, it must be noted that the score created by Breil was the first time a director had significant input of his own score.¹¹⁴

The music is another *filmic* element of the film heightening and inducing feelings that further enhance the narrative. For songs not familiar to the viewer, spread throughout the film are motifs created by Breil.¹¹⁵ Jane Gaines and Neil Lerner examine one motif that is particularly important with the creation of the film.¹¹⁶ They focus on the theme of Barbarism in connection

¹¹⁰ Martin Miller Marks, *Music and the Silent Film: Contexts and Case Studies, 1895-1924: Context & Case Studies: 1895-1924* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 131.

¹¹¹ Marks, 131 and 132.

¹¹² Marks writes that Breil had a 6-week deadline for creating the which he began in November, 136.

¹¹³ Marks, 131.

¹¹⁴ Stokes quotes a Charles Berg claiming Griffith's role with music in the film was "the first time that a director had personally undertake control over the musical accompaniment of a major film", 107

¹¹⁵ Marks., 129.

¹¹⁶ Their analysis of the motif can be found in Jane Gaines and Neil Lerner, "The Orchestration of Affect: The Motif of Barbarism in Breil's *The Birth of a Nation Score*," *The Sounds of Early*

to scenes with the main African American characters.¹¹⁷ In any film, perhaps originating from *Birth*, when a viewer hears reoccurring music it is an indicator of a theme. In the first scene of the film the viewer sees African American slaves lined up by what looks like authoritatively approved by an administrative or religious man. The music, Breil's original composition, with the under beat of drums one can detect a colonial feeling of undertones and unknown certainty of the future seeming to hint at the future of the African American race in America. When the title card appears introducing the viewer to Austin Stoneman, the parliamentary leader in favor of giving African Americans power the music shifts from grand to a softer, delicate and somewhat tricky tune, which could be a signal for the "negative ideals" Stoneman fights for. Although not the same exact music but including similar tones is when Austin Stoneman decides to send Silas Lynch to the South hinting negative undertones. This also is apparent with the introduction of the character Gus, with the title card, "A product of the vicious doctrines spread by the carpetbaggers."¹¹⁸ Again, the low drumbeats signal a negative forecast attached with his character. The low drumbeats appear again when Silas Lynch tries to force Elsie into marrying him, hoping to create a "Black Empire" with her as his queen.¹¹⁹ These musical cues almost force the viewer into retrieving the same thoughts throughout the film helping to build a theme of apparent unknowingness and negativity towards African Americans. Although used for racist purposes, Griffith's innovative techniques throughout the film appear in films today where music joins with the visuals to help convey emotion and motifs.

Cinema, Ed. Richard Abel and Rick Altman (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2001), 252. (252-270).

¹¹⁷ Author Martin Marks also touches upon these themes citing Chappell & Co.'s publication of *A Selection of Joseph Carl Breil's Themes from the Incidental Music to "The Birth of a Nation"* indicating the nametag "'The Motif of Barbarism' corresponds to Act I, no. I," 129.

¹¹⁸ Griffith., 1:57:41.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 2:43:46 and 2:44:20

The effects of technological advancements and industrial developments in the film industry are undeniable with the examination of Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* and Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*. The progression of story telling for film clearly advanced, more strictly-screen plays were written and how they were relayed. The silent film era developed from short, simple, over- acted moving pictures to features using intertitles allowing for complex stories. The advancements in technology granted experimentation for more creative ways to film, creating a new standard in the artistic aspect of film. Also changing while films were developing was the exhibition aspect of the industry moving from small storefronts to large movie theaters.

Chapter Three: New York City and the Creation of a Culture

As a result of the developing American movie industry in the early twentieth century, a new cultural experience formed. In the span of fifteen years a technical invention developed into an art form enjoyed by the masses. The exhibition of movies experienced a transformation: Kinetoscope parlors became nickelodeon storefronts finally settling with the construction of theaters specifically built for movies. The moving picture experience was at first an urban commodity. In America, New York City is often credited as birthplace of the movies for a number of reasons. As the leading urban outlet in the Nation, the City and its people acted as tester for the movies and as a result, created the social experience that still exists today. Its diverse and extensive population allowed for a wide range of audiences and a continuous demand for new films. Over the first twenty years of the twentieth century, the City sculpted the cultural experience being “the act of going to the movies.” This then created the demand for regulations regarding censorship and the safety concerns of theatre structures resulted in the construction of new theaters specifically designed to house movies ultimately creating a safe and wholesome home for the new cultural experience.

New York City was the perfect outlet for experimenting with the new technology. Its relationship with the movies began shortly after the technology was invented. Its bustling urban life provided for both a demand and an honest review of the movie experience. The Vitascope was first shown to the public in April of 1896, at Koster & Bial’s as one part in a series of live acts. Differing from the Kinetoscope where one peaked into a box to see moving images, the new Vitascope machine projected images onto a screen in a dark room filled with people. Reported in the *New York Times* the next day, the machine

was described as “a curious object... the white screen used on the stage is framed like a picture. The moving figures are about half life size.”¹²⁰ The screen showed various short moving images of people dancing, a beach scene, and a boxing match. In these early days of exhibition, picture shows were interspersed with other live acts in vaudeville theaters or music halls in addition to small storefront make-shift rooms.¹²¹ At this time, production companies were creating short films. It was reported on May 24, 1900, that Thomas Edison’s company was filming the “biggest moving picture ever attempted... illustrating the entire performance of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West.”¹²² The early days of cinema saw constant experiments. Although early films did not convey a story, audiences were still captivated by *moving-ness* of the image. By 1902, the *Times* reported that as a result of early developments in the movie business, “Practically every theater in the country where vaudeville is either incidental or a feature has its own machine... The views are changed weekly, so that the American public may not be surfeited.”¹²³ For this reason, the City was a perfect outlet for a developing industry where the audiences were constantly seeking the new attraction. As the industry developed over the next few years, the City and its people sought to help form the movie industry.

New York City’s early movie scene was split between the nickelodeons and Vaudeville houses. In vaudeville theaters, a slot was arranged to feature a moving picture. Usually costing around five cents to see a show, these other viewing outlets were coined:

¹²⁰ “Edison’s Vitascope Cheered,” *The New York Times*, April 24 1886.

¹²¹ By 1900 there were more theaters reporting a “moving pictures.” On June 10th 1900 in addition to the known projector at Koster and Bial’s, the Eden Musee reported having “a new moving picture shown here.” Reported in “Theaters and Music Halls,” *The New York Times*, June 10 1900.

¹²² “Biggest Moving Picture ever Attempted,” *The New York Times*, May 25, 1900.

¹²³ “New Things in Moving Pictures...” *The New York Times*, June 29, 1902.

“nickelodeons.” A specific theatre located in the Bowery in 1907 was given particular attention because the projector machine blew up in the middle of the show. This theatre, like many others of the time, was not designed as a movie theater but a make-shift viewing room. The *Times* reported, “There were about seventy-five persons in the place...There were a lot of draperies and hanging around the moving picture machine to lend an Oriental atmosphere. There was plenty of excitement among the tenants in the rear of the building.”¹²⁴ Although a fire had to occur for the news to report about the theater, it is a way to get a sense of how the inside of a theater of that time looked. From once looking into a box of moving images to a desire to enter a dark room, sharing the experience with other people is essentially the birth of the movie experience. Although there was the development of these first theaters for the showing of films, in the first decade of the twentieth century, the main source of seeing a moving picture continued to be in vaudeville houses. Early films displayed in vaudeville houses or make-shift theaters in store fronts were very short consisting mainly of real-life scenes where people were awed purely by the “moving-ness” of the picture. Thrilling shorts of bank robberies, ocean scenes, mountains, wild animals and even daring wild-life shots captivated audiences.¹²⁵ By the early 1900’s the variety of films and the places to watch them developed and New York City took control as the model of exhibition for moving pictures in the country.

The rather fast emergence of movies led to a series of demands concerning regulations. Two kinds of regulations began to be implanted in the movie theater scene around the same time. These concerns were the censorship of the content and types of

¹²⁴ “5-Cent Theatre Burns; Panic on the Bowery,” *The New York Times*, Feb 4 1907

¹²⁵ “Dangers That Encompass the Maker of Moving Pictures...”*The New York Times*, Aug 25 1907.

films shown and regulation of the theatre buildings in the City. Both the morality of the films and the physical safety of the people viewing the films were addressed after continuous problems arose. There had yet to exist any real form of censorship beyond police officers catching exhibitors. Due to the fact that moving pictures did not yet have a permanent home, films, and the theaters in which they were shown were not properly standardized.¹²⁶ In some instances there were fires, stampedes, and the question of the safety of children also arose. As a result, laws were passed and boards were created to help standardize the developing industry. This desire for standardization in the early exhibition is telling of the birth of a new social outing.

New York's early movie scene was prone to many types of danger. The technology was fairly new, as were the exhibitors and their projectionists who rented the machines. The ability to create a visual representation of a standard nickelodeon theatre is available from an article in a May 1907 issue of *Moving Picture World*. Reading off the "ingredients" for such a theatre: "One storeroom, seating from 200 to 500 persons, One Phonograph with an extra large horn, One young woman Cashier, One electric sign, One cinematograph, with operator, One canvas on which to throw the pictures, One piano... one manager, [and] As many chairs as the store will hold."¹²⁷ From this description of early storefronts it is clear that they were not very elaborate, but were looking to fit in as many people possible. The article went on to say that "the worst charge that has been made against the 5-cent theaters is that some of them put on pieces of the blood-and-thunder type, depicting murders, hold-

¹²⁶ The beginning of the fight to regulate movie theaters and Censorship of films began around the same time. Both starting in 1909, the passing of the Theater Bill finally passed through City hall in 1913 from "Aldermen Approve Film theatre Bill," *The New York Times*, July 2, 1913. The Censorship issue was solved with the forming of The Censorship Board in March 1909 from "The Censorship of Film Subjects," *The Moving Picture World*, March (Jan-June), 1909, 325.

¹²⁷ "The Nickelodeon," *The Moving Picture World*, May 1907, 140.

ups, train robberies and other crimes.”¹²⁸ The problem of the morality of the content of moving pictures prompted a desire for censorship from City officials, religious groups, and patrons who all wanted to have some monitoring and control over this new medium.

The topic of censorship and regulations in early New York City theaters regarded both the morality in the content of the film as well as the physical dangers that lurked in the dark theaters. Although these matters arose around the same time, they separated into different concerns; the morality of the films became a question of censorship while the inappropriate behavior due to the darkness of the theatre fell into building safety regulations.

Censorship for films in New York City began in response to the negative connotation movies were receiving at the time. Questions surrounding ethics and negative influence were the main concerns of organizations that wanted to create some form of censorship. In years leading up to the Board’s formation, the City’s Licensing Bureau was in place of regulating films. In a report in *Moving Picture World* around the time of establishment of the Board, additional reasons for the Board’s formation were: “The city’s Licensing Bureau, which for many years was corrupt...Lack of organization among the shows... Couple this with the fact that it is cheaper and easier to produce a picture of crime and vulgarity than to produce a picture without artistic merit.”¹²⁹ By early 1909, The Motion Picture Exhibitors’ Association of the State of New York was already planning to form some sort of film censorship committee and with the prompting from The People’s Institute, a leading semi-official body of the City, they both sat down to discuss possible outcomes.¹³⁰ The

¹²⁸ “The Nickelodeon,” *The Moving Picture World*, May 1907, 140.

¹²⁹ “The Board of Censorship,” *Moving Picture World*, Jan-Jun 1909, 265-266.

¹³⁰ “The Censorship of Film Subjects,” *The Moving Picture World*, Jan-Jun 1909, 266.

Institute completed a study on the moving pictures over the past two years finding that it had not been the fault of the exhibitor for showing indecent films when those films are the only ones available to show. For that reason, a censorship would not only protect the people but also the exhibitor from manufactures and the monitoring police.

Unfortunately, early film producers found it cheaper and easier to create “vulgar pictures and pictures of crime” making it difficult for the exhibitor to get their hands on decent film.¹³¹ The Institute pleaded for cooperation with the Motion Picture Exhibitors’ Association of the State of New York in the creation of a board or committee to shut “out the exhibitors who are a discredit to the business, and [to] maintain a reasonably high standard.”¹³² In February of 1909, *The New York Times* ran an article about the censorship of cheap amusements. It reported that there was a meeting of the Ethical Social League to ““consider the amusements of the people’ ...to improve popular recreations... some constructive work, which in place of harmful amusements would give beneficial or innocuous ones.”¹³³ Many organizations felt that moving pictures had the ability to influence the audience and something had to change. By March of 1909, a Board of Censorship of Motion Picture Program began screening the output of The Motion Picture Patents Company and Independent manufacturers. In the March 1909 edition of *The Motion Picture World*, they claimed, “During an experimental period no film will be put on the New York market unless it is approved by the Board of Censorship.”¹³⁴ With the

¹³¹ John Collier, secretary of the Department of Drama and Music of the People’s Institute taken from “Censorship of Film Subjects,” *The Moving Picture World*, Jan-Jun 1909, 266.

¹³² John Collier, secretary of the Department of Drama and Music of the People’s Institute taken from “Censorship of Film Subjects,” *The Moving Picture World*, Jan-Jun 1909, 266.

¹³³ “Committee to Censor Cheap Amusements,” *The New York Times*, Feb 24, 1909.

¹³⁴ “The Censorship of Film Subjects,” *The Moving Picture World*, March (Jan-June), 1909, 325

creation of such a Board, New York was creating a model for other cities and states to follow.

The Board of Censorship in New York City was formed with the hopes of cleaning up the moving pictures shown throughout the City. With the establishment of a Board of Censorship, the City's movie scene was immensely enhanced. The Board worked with the manufactures in the sense that the manufacturers learned what the Board would and would not approve by placing it on a "white list" which enabled the exhibitors to defend attacks by the police.¹³⁵ The Board consisted of a collection of public figures with a Governing Board of representatives from different organizations throughout the city and an Executive Committee on Censorship of five members – three from public positions and two from the Association of Motion Picture Exhibitors.¹³⁶ The Board received a positive reception in its first month of formation; its members stated, "The campaign looking towards improved vaudeville and better physical conditions in moving picture shows will be pushed ahead rapidly."¹³⁷ Commenting on the role of the Board, *The New York Times* wrote that the theatre exhibitors were pleased to have to work through the Board in order to avoid being arrested for "questionable plays, which they had only rented from the manufacturers."¹³⁸ It also explained to the public how the Board worked: "the manufacturers began to fall in line and sent orders to their playwrights forbidding 'murderers, burglaries,' and other questionable themes as subject for plays."¹³⁹ By May of 1909, the Board reached out to other individual film manufacturers in order to gain

¹³⁵ "The Board of Censorship," *Moving Picture World*, Jan-Jun 1909, 266.

¹³⁶ "The Board of Censorship," *Moving Picture World*, Jan-Jun 1909, 265.

¹³⁷ "The Board of Censorship," *Moving Picture World*, Jan-Jun 1909, 514.

¹³⁸ "Browning Now Given in Moving Pictures..." *The New York Times* October 10, 1909.

¹³⁹ "Browning Now Given in Moving Pictures..." *The New York Times* October 10, 1909.

national approval. In an article stating the Board's plea for cooperation, *Moving Picture World* reported, "In so far as New York is concerned, everything has worked out smoothly between the Censors and the unlicensed film users, but in order to make the movement national in scope it is absolutely necessary that the unlicensed firms shall agree to submit all for their output to the Censorship Board."¹⁴⁰ With the establishment of the Censorship Board, New York City was significantly improving its movie scene allowing for a better movie going experience.

Another issue surrounding morality in early movie theaters was the problem of the dark space. For this reason, they were prone to inappropriate behavior, raising the question of children's vulnerability. In 1911, *The New York Times* ran an article pertaining to the request to clean up the theaters on the basis of the dangers that occur due to the darkness. Commissioner of Accounts, Raymond Frosdick published a report "On the Condition of Moving Picture Shows in New York" requesting for the Mayor of the City (Gaynor) to create a special committee to draft appropriate legislation for "correction in the abuses which had sprung up with the same rapid growth as the moving picture business itself."¹⁴¹ For some time, the Gerry Society had been successful in leading to the arrest of many criminals. The Superintendent of the society claimed, "There is no objection to the moving picture show as a means of entertainment. But the evil lies in the conditions under which so many are given—the dark room, filled with adults and children, absolute without supervision, affording no protection against the evil minded and depraved men who frequent such places and sit beside the innocent boy and girls without a question or

¹⁴⁰ "The Board of Censorship," *Moving Picture World*, Jan-Jun 1909, 630.

¹⁴¹ "The Campaign to Curb The Moving Picture Evil in New York" *The New York Times*, Jul 2, 1911.

suspicion until irreparable harm is done.”¹⁴² As a result, many societies and organizations would hand out pamphlets at some theaters in hopes to alleviate crime and warn parents. Part of the original Theatre Bill, which began in City Hall in early 1909, was a call for the cleaning up of theaters for the reason of getting rid of “the evil.”¹⁴³ In regards to curbing the violence against children, reported the November 29, 1911 issue of *The New York Times* on a meeting before the hearing regarding the new theatre bill, “It is provided in the report that... the prohibition of admitting children under 16 years of age unaccompanied by parents, shall stand.”¹⁴⁴ Although the city had not passed the full Bill, there is clear indication that the City desired to make the movie scene a safer environment for people to enjoy. Another major problem that aided the issue of “the evil” was the lack of lighting inside early theaters. For this reason, censorship in the sense of cleaning up the physical space of the theaters to make them safer can be pointed to starting in 1909 when organizations, societies, and city officials brought their case to City Hall.

Although it would take four years, the result from the demand for safety regulations in early New York City movie theaters solidified a permanent movie scene. The request for safer theaters began around the same time the Censorship Board was formed indicating a clear request to clean up a social activity that was becoming more popular. Safety issues surrounding the physical theaters included: fires, stampedes, and improper use of the technology, all causing hazardous conditions in the early makeshift theaters. As a result,

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Finally passed in 1913, Mayor Gaynor reported when it was finally approved in July of 1913, “It is now going on four years since I took the matter up.” From, “Aldermen Approve Film theatre Bill,” *The New York Times*, July 2, 1913.

¹⁴⁴ Punch in the Jaw to Alderman Levine,” *The New York Times*, November 29, 1911.

hearings were held in City Hall to discuss what could be done to improve the growing social activity.

Fires tended to be the most common occurrence in early nickelodeon theaters. They usually started from a projection machine malfunction and due to the lack of regulations they became a common theme. On November 19, 1901, *The New York Times* reported a fire from an explosive projector at Proctor's Pleasure Palace: "The heavy plush curtain which shielded the back of the inclosure commenced to burn. In an instant the entire audience had arisen to their feet and a rush, though not a stampede was begun for the doors."¹⁴⁵ Fabric surrounding the projector was a common and dangerous occurrence usually acting as the culprit for spreading fires. On February 3rd, 1907, the same nickelodeon theatre that burned down in Bowery district was also caused by a projector malfunctioning and spread because of the draperies. The *Times* claimed that the fire "[climbed] rapidly to the roof of the five-story building."¹⁴⁶ Although there were no people hurt in that fire, it prompted a change in small theaters. In response to this specific fire, *Moving Picture World* reported, "New York... is now looking after the safety of the people...the police, acting under instruction, closed 20 Nickelodeons."¹⁴⁷ This demand to close Nickelodeons and penny arcades only increased from the growing number of safety hazards. Another article in *Moving Picture World* stated the reasons why these small theaters were prone to danger: "They occupy, as a rule, a store, the front of which has been taken out and a stage erected in the rear. These so-called theaters have, as a rule, no exits except the front entrance, and in

¹⁴⁵ "Flight from a Theatre Follows Fire Panic," *The New York Times*, November 19, 1901.

¹⁴⁶ "5-Cent Theatre Burns..." *The New York Times*, Feb 4 1907.

¹⁴⁷ "Trade Notes," *The Moving Picture World*, March 1907, 9.

case of a fire a number of lives might be lost.”¹⁴⁸ These concerns prompted conferences where the police and fire department insured that investigations would take place and theaters in violation would be closed.¹⁴⁹ Soon, many small theaters closed for not complying with regulations, which were stated by the Board of Electricity.

Another reason so many theaters were not safe was because proprietors were not investing in the proper technology to keep their theater running safely. *Moving Picture World* reported in March of 1907 that “certain owners are in the habit of buying up *old* and *wornout* machines of types that existed in the early days of cinematography, and by tinkering them up, adding a little here and there, making them work (after fashion), and to this were adding all the film (bought cheap)... the result has been disastrous fires, caused through this inefficiency and carelessness, and although cautioned time and again, little notice was taken, until it resulted in the closing of the places.”¹⁵⁰ This prompted the regulating of machines by the Department of Water Supply and Gas and Electricity to safeguard them against future fires.¹⁵¹ The combination of celluloid being extremely flammable and the use of lanterns to provide light in the projection room resulted in deadly fires. The desire for safer machines and safety regulations were only growing. Multiple adds appearing throughout the trade paper *The Moving Picture World* in 1907 marketing new “Fire-Proof Motion Picture Machine” claiming “excellency and superiority.”¹⁵² As of May, 1907, as a result of incidents, moving picture theaters in New York City, regardless of

¹⁴⁸ “After Penny Arcades,” *The Moving Picture World*, March 1907, 57.

¹⁴⁹ “After Penny Arcades,” *The Moving Picture World*, March 1907, 56-57.

¹⁵⁰ “The Closing of Nickelodeons in New York City,” *The Moving Picture World*, March 1907, 20.

¹⁵¹ “The Closing of Nickelodeons in New York City,” *The Moving Picture World*, March 1907, 20.

¹⁵² Advertisement, *The Moving Picture World*, April 1907, 111.

the type, were required to renew their licenses in order to adhere to new fire and building regulations.¹⁵³

The development of regulations surrounding the actual buildings and the morality of the films in New York City arose together and were considered by the City's Alderman in City Hall for many years. With the industry growing in all aspects, the City saw a need to protect its residents against physical harm and morality in general and also concerns over the general issue of whether movies should be shown on Sundays. Brought to City Hall for the first time in 1908, a public hearing was held, one of the longest in its history to discuss the growing safety matters.¹⁵⁴ The Mayor of New York at the time, George McClellan, conducted the hearings with a summary of the event reported in *The New York Times* the following day. The article stated that the Mayor was to decide whether "moving pictures should be closed on Sundays, and whether the places in which such exhibitions are given safe."¹⁵⁵ Because the Board of Censorship had not yet been formed, issues surrounding the morality of the films were addressed at the hearing. Attending and testifying at the meeting were clergymen, heads of film companies, exhibitors, and patrons all hoping to express their feelings towards the matter. The clergymen desired a clean up of the films surrounding morality issues. At the hearing, they claimed that the moving pictures "were responsible for degeneracy and in some instances actual crime."¹⁵⁶

Owners of theaters, their patrons, and manufacturing companies also attended the hearing to have a say in the matter that would hopefully shape the newly forming industry. In the response to the issue surrounding the films shown, exhibitors agreed to have films

¹⁵³ "Trade Notes," *The Moving Picture World*, May 1907, 137.

¹⁵⁴ "Say Picture Shows Corrupt Children," *The New York Times*, Dec. 24 1908.

¹⁵⁵ "Say Picture Shows Corrupt Children," *The New York Times*, Dec. 24 1908.

¹⁵⁶ "Say Picture Shows Corrupt Children," *The New York Times*, Dec. 24 1908.

screened before they were shown. J. Stuart Blackton of the Vitagraph Company, representing the manufacturers of the films, pleaded that they would not “manufacture any questionable films and [would] keep out importations of such films as far as possible.”¹⁵⁷ In regards to the patrons of the moving pictures who attended the hearing, a petition presented for the mayor. Although these hearings would take place for another four years, this first hearing in 1908 recognizes a strong plea for the establishment of regulation for a clearly developing industry.

Finally at the hearing, the conditions of the theaters themselves came into question. The article stated that Francis V.S. Oliver of the Bureau of Licenses testified to the lack of safety many theaters held. He stated that he found finding exits that “led directly into a swimming pool, another led into an airshaft with a sheer drop of forty feet, still another ran into a fence.”¹⁵⁸ The monumental hearing lasted five hours drawing no conclusions except that Mayor McClellan would take “the matter into his own initiative.”¹⁵⁹ Some of the battle was resolved with the implementation of the Board of Censorship; however, the battle over physical safety for the public continued for five years with continuous Bills unsuccessfully passing through the City’s Aldermen council.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ “Say Picture Shows Corrupt Children,” *The New York Times*, Dec. 24 1908. The issue of censorship was resolved when the Board of Censorship was formed somewhat confusing because the Board was formed around the same time of the hearings but did not begin screening until March of 1909. “The Board of Censorship,” *Moving Picture World*, Jan-Jun 1909, 266.

¹⁵⁸ “Say Picture Shows Corrupt Children,” *The New York Times*, Dec. 24 1908.

¹⁵⁹ “Say Picture Shows Corrupt Children,” *The New York Times*, Dec. 24 1908.

¹⁶⁰ There were many cases brought to city hall and Supreme Court of New York throughout the years from 1908-1913 fighting as to the censorship of theaters and films shown. Mayor McClellan’s act of closing down theaters was deemed invalid by the Supreme Court in New York in January of 1909 leaving the authorities to regulate both the films and the theaters. “Moving Picture Shows Win,” *The New York Times*, Jan 7 1909 and “Picture Shows,” *The New York Times*, January 12, 1909.

A hearing held on December 1, 1911, held particular importance with regards to the industry. The discussion at City Hall regarded the “pending ordinance regulating moving – picture houses and providing police censorship for all films to be shown in this city.”¹⁶¹ Although the establishment of the Censorship Board was already in full effect, there was a desire for an authoritative body to further censor the movies being shown in the city and this was being brought to City Hall attached with the structural reforms of theaters. New additions to the ordinance being discussed included the question of morality censorship and regulations of future theaters. The Bill took years to pass was solely for the reason that many of the Aldermen believed the censorship clause should not be attached to the structural reform to theaters. With the hopes of passing the Bill again in December of 1912, Alderman Ralph Folks, leader of the structural reform Bill finally agreed to vote for the amendment concerning censorship proposed by Alderman Frank Dowling in the hopes that the Mayor would veto the amendment and keep the Folks ordinance.¹⁶² Unfortunately, the Bill was once again vetoed in all by Mayor Gaynor because of the censorship clause.¹⁶³ Commenting on his actions towards the Bill the Mayor said:

The Truth is that the good, moral people who go to these moving picture shows, and very often bring their children with them, would not tolerate the exhibition of obscene or immoral pictures there. A place in which such pictures were exhibited would soon be without sufficient patrons to support it.... I have asked these people who are crying out against the moving picture shows to give me an instance of an obscene or immoral picture being shown in them, so that the exhibitor may be prosecuted, but they have been unable to do so.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ “Want a Censorship of Moving Pictures, *The New York Times*, Dec 2, 1911.

¹⁶² “Pass Film Bill With Censorship Clause,” *The New York Times*, December 18, 1912.

¹⁶³ “Folks Film Bill Vetoed by Mayor,” *The New York Times*, January 1, 1913.

¹⁶⁴ “Folks Film Bill Vetoed by Mayor,” *The New York Times*, January 1, 1913

Although somewhat because a Board of Censorship was already established and running, the protesters were in favor of an official body of censorship with the idea of the Department of Education because they felt the Board of Censorship was not strong enough.¹⁶⁵ The main focus of the Bill sponsored by Alderman Folks dealt with the physical safety hazards of many theaters.

From the introduction of the Film Bill in 1908, the main request was a clean up of the physical structures. The passing of the Bill was tried again in March of 1913 but there were not enough votes for the passage of both the regulation of theater houses and a censorship.¹⁶⁶ Finally, in July of that year, the Aldermen passed the Bill with the exclusion of the censorship clause. An addition to the Bill that pleased the many concerned with the evils that lied in the darkness of the theaters was a change in the auditorium layouts. The new Bill stated, "Only moving picture houses of twenty or more feet in width shall be permitted to have galleries."¹⁶⁷ In response to the added amendment, it ended "a three years crusade by various civic, religious and social bodies for moving picture legislation to the public."¹⁶⁸ The City felt that in order to curb inappropriate behavior it needed to eliminate where it was appearing. In favor of the passing bill Mayor Gaynor said, "We now have in this city a moving picture ordinance that will serve as a model to all the cities of the country. There is no greater solace and comfort to the people of the city than these moving picture shows."¹⁶⁹ In regards to actual Bill passed, Alderman Folks new Ordinance proclaimed: "The increase of audiences in moving pictures houses from 300 to 600, the

¹⁶⁵ From the article, "Censored Motion Pictures," "The unofficial censorship is weak." From, *The New York Times*, December 19, 1912.

¹⁶⁶ "Aldermen Defeat Film Theatre Bills," *The New York Times*, March 12, 1913.

¹⁶⁷ "Aldermen Approve Film Theatre Bill," *The New York Times*, July 2, 1913.

¹⁶⁸ "Aldermen Approve Film Theatre Bill," *The New York Times*, Jul 2, 1913.

¹⁶⁹ "Aldermen Approve Film Theatre Bill," *The New York Times*, Jul 2, 1913.

construction, ventilation, lighting, and heating of future theaters and concentrates the Bureau of Licenses to municipal powers necessary to regulate the business.”¹⁷⁰ Although many theaters were shut down due to violations of the Bill, it paved the way for future movie houses built strictly for film. After the bill was passed Mayor Gaynor commented to *The New York Times* saying, “There is no greater solace and comfort of the people of the city than these moving picture shows. And they are great teachers... And now that we have this ordinance, we have the health and safety and morals of everybody who attends these places completely safeguarded. Yes, this is one of the night that I leave the City Hall happy.”¹⁷¹ These changes in theatre regulations set the foundation for the future of movies exhibition in New York City.

New theaters built throughout the City indicate the desire of establishing a permanent home for the movies. In 1909, at least 500 moving picture shows were reported in New York City and by 1911, that number rose to 700 moving picture houses accommodating around 250,000 people daily.¹⁷² By 1911, the term of moving picture “shows” progressed to moving picture “plays.” A 1911 *New York Times* article commenting on the rather new spectacle of moving pictures wrote, “The coming of the moving picture theatre as a feature in amusement life cannot be much longer delayed...We are just at the dawn of the moving picture as a feature of modern life.”¹⁷³ At this time in New York City’s history, one can find a growing amount of plots for future theaters to be built as well as the

¹⁷⁰ “Pass Film Bill With Censorship Clause,” *The New York Times*, December 8, 1912.

¹⁷¹ “Aldermen Approve Film theatre Bill,” *The New York Times*, Jul 2, 1913.

¹⁷² For the 500, “Picture Shows,” *The New York Times*, January 12, 1909 and for 700, “700 Picture Shows Here,” *The New York Times*, Nov. 16, 1911.

¹⁷³ “Is the Moving Picture To be the Play of the Future?...,” *The New York Times*, Aug 20, 1911.

building of bigger movie houses indicating that the amusement of going to the movies was moving towards more permanent houses.

The reporting of buying plots of land for the future building of movie theaters displays a confidence that the movie business of the early twentieth century was only growing. In October of 1911, *The New York Times* reported that a Mrs. Del Drago sold her Harlem plot of land for future movie theater. Located on Broadway and 100th Street, she sold it to William Fox, who was leasing it at the time, for a little less than \$500,000 with the intention of “enlarg[ing] the theatre and put[ting] a Summer garden on top.”¹⁷⁴ In a “Real Estate Field Report” by *The New York Times* in November of 1911, it reported another half-a-million dollar deal by William Fox of 200 feet of blockage on Broadway near upper Washington Heights that will seat a capacity of 2,800 people. It went on to say that “Mr. Fox has been an active developer of theaters in the upper west side. Only a short time ago he bought the southeast corner of Cathedral Parkway (110th Street) and Broadway... He is also finishing a theatre on the northwest corner of Broadway and Ninety-Sixth Street and controls the Washington Theatre, at Amsterdam and 149th.” Not only on the upper skirts of Manhattan were theaters being built; In November of 1912 a building on the corner of Second Ave and Eighth Street for the erection of a new moving picture house.¹⁷⁵ Land for movie houses and restoration of older theaters abiding by the new Theater Bill were becoming a popular investment. The reporting of the buying of plots of land for future movie houses signifies a trust in the people of the city to continue to enjoy the popular spectacle.

¹⁷⁴ “Mrs. Del Drago Sells Harlem Plot,” *The New York Times*, October 8, 1911.

¹⁷⁵ “Landmarks Passing on Second Avenue,” *The New York Times*, November 10, 1912.

In Particular, the completion of three large theaters; the Strand Theatre in 1914, Rialto in 1916, and the Rivoli Theater in 1917 in New York's midtown stand as monumental feats for the City and further indicate that movies would be a lasting medium of entertainment. One commonality the three theaters shared was their architect; Thomas W. Lamb. This showed that there was a market dedicated for movie house designing.¹⁷⁶ Although an invited list attended the premier the day before, on April 12, 1914, The Strand Theatre opened its doors to the public on Broadway and 47th Street.¹⁷⁷ The *New York Times* boasted about the new house writing, "the largest and most elaborate moving picture house in New York."¹⁷⁸ The theatre was originally built to house musicals, but upon completion it was converted, marking "the rapid growth from the rebuilt store moving picture theaters."¹⁷⁹ The theater spanned twenty city lots, carried a thirty-piece orchestra, and boasted elaborate decorations.¹⁸⁰ Designed by Thomas W. Lamb, a well known in the field of movie house architects, this was his largest yet designed.¹⁸¹ The *Times* article describes the inside: "The decorations are simple in character, the color in tones being old rose, French gray, and gold. The murals on the side walls represent the sense, and the painting over the proscenium arch is an idealization of the dreams of life."¹⁸² In the article on its opening in *Moving Picture World*, Stephen Bush wrote, "[The architects] not only know how to build structures, but they know how to please the thousands once they have

¹⁷⁶ Each theatre with Lamb as Architect cited below.

¹⁷⁷ "New Strand Opens; Biggest of Movies." *The New York Times*, April 12, 1914.

¹⁷⁸ "New Strand Opens; Biggest of Movies." *The New York Times*, April 12, 1914.

¹⁷⁹ "New Strand Opens; Biggest of Movies." *The New York Times*, April 12, 1914.

¹⁸⁰ For orchestra, "Chicago Film Brevities," *Moving Picture World*, Apr-Jun 1914, 364.

¹⁸¹ "Opening of the Strand," *Moving Picture World*, Apr-Jun 1914, 371"

¹⁸² "New Strand Opens; Biggest of Movies." *The New York Times*, April 12, 1914.

accepted the hospitable welcome.”¹⁸³ He continued to write about its ornate designs inside the theatre, saying, “One cannot stand in the center of the great theatre and gaze at its marvels of beauty and comfort and light and color without feeling a thrill of joy.”¹⁸⁴

The Strand boasted immense technological feats as well. Upon its opening, the theater placed an advertisement in *Moving Picture World* exhibiting its state-of-the-art “Rapid, safe, and convenient... Issues, Counts, Registers, and Protects” automatic ticket selling and cash register machine.¹⁸⁵ The theatre also included “the latest ideas of lighting and ventilation... The air in the auditorium is constantly changed...”¹⁸⁶ The curtain covering the projection screen measured at eighteen by twenty feet and three Simplex machines for projection.¹⁸⁷ The architecture included a two-story rotunda and mezzanine allowing the audience to talk during intermissions. The *Times* article duly noted in its last sentence that “there is a fireproof steel curtain” in addition to the ornate red velvet curtain.¹⁸⁸ To conclude the *Moving Picture World* article, Stephen Bush wrote in inspiration, “The opening night bids fair to establish not only new records of attendance, but new records for the science of exhibition...Here is a theatre in which the film of quality will get its proper fame and housing.”¹⁸⁹ The theatre debuted with the film Rex E. Beach’s adaptation *The Spoilers*, a “romance of Alaska Realistically visualized.”¹⁹⁰ Presented in

¹⁸³ “Opening of the Strand,” *Moving Picture World*, Apr-Jun 1914, 371.

¹⁸⁴ “Opening of the Strand,” *Moving Picture World*, Apr-Jun 1914, 371.

¹⁸⁵ “What: The Automatic Ticket Sellig and Cash Redister...” *Moving Picture World*, Apr-Jun 1914., 140.

¹⁸⁶ “New Strand Opens; Biggest of Movies.” *The New York Times*, April 12, 1914.

¹⁸⁷ “Opening of the Strand,” *Moving Picture World*, Apr-Jun 1914, 371

¹⁸⁸ “New Strand Opens; Biggest of Movies.” *The New York Times*, April 12, 1914.

¹⁸⁹ “Opening of the Strand,” *Moving Picture World*, Apr-Jun 1914, 371.

¹⁹⁰ “The Spoilers,” *Moving Picture World*, Apr-Jun 1914, 186.

three acts, the film consisted of nine reels- closely approaching the epically long twelve reeled- *Birth of a Nation* three years later.

The Construction of the Rialto Theater in midtown Manhattan two years after the Strand is an indication of the growing success of the movie industry. Opening on April 22, 1916 and located between Forty-Second and Seventh, the Rialto stood at in the site of the former Hammerstein's Victoria Theater.¹⁹¹ Although not as decorative outside as the Strand or the soon to be Rivoli, the Rialto did share the same architect, Thomas W. Lamb.¹⁹² *The New York Times* wrote an article after its opening night explaining, "Like the Strand, which preceded it and has served to some degree as the model for all of the finer motion picture theaters in America... It is built in the conviction that the American passion for the movies is here to stay."¹⁹³ Seating 2,000 people, the elaborate theater was built with no stage, only a tall curtain for the display of the movies. Ushers carrying flashlights helped people to their seats, sitting in the large orchestra or in the balcony. As of 1916, the idea of seeing a movie was becoming more of an event; people were not going to see multiple photoplays or a feature in vaudeville, but ventured out to enjoy the spectacle of the movie theatre in addition to the technological aesthetics of film.

The erection of the Rivoli was another prominent theatre of early cinema. Located on Broadway above 49th Street, it opened to the public on December 30th, 1917 under the same director, S.L. Rothapfel, as the Rialto. *The New York Times* article on its opening wrote that the theater "is the direct result of the prosperity long enjoyed by the Strand and the Rialto, and in character of attractions and method of presentation it will take its place with

¹⁹¹ "Rialto Theater to Open April 15," *Moving Picture World*, April 1916, 232.

¹⁹² "Rialto Theater to Open April 15," *Moving Picture World*, April 1916, 232.

¹⁹³ "Rialto Theatre Opens Its Doors," *The New York Times*, April 22, 1916.

those two houses.”¹⁹⁴ Designed by Thomas W. Lamb, this theater was visually more striking as an architectural accomplishment. Eight striking Doric columns lined Broadway with a large pyramid at the top with carved statues. Seating 2,500 people, the Rivoli, like the Rialto, did not have a stage but a platform for the projection of movies.¹⁹⁵

The technical achievements of the Rivoli also indicate the advance in the movie industry. Because the theatre was so large, Lamb brilliantly created an intricate exiting system designing passage-ways to exit through to Seventh Avenue. It also had a state-of-the-art cooling and heating system with modern ventilation.¹⁹⁶ The theater also boasted a strange new commodity that unfortunately would never catch on; *Moving Picture World* wrote, “An entirely new novel feature of the Rivoli will be the introduction of perfume to supplement the appeal made to the other sense.”¹⁹⁷ A compressor with atomizers allowed for different senses of perfume to be sprayed throughout the theatre depending on the desired mood. The theatre also contained the “largest and most complete [grand pipe organ] ever installed in any theatre in the world.”¹⁹⁸ Referring to the grandness of this theatre, and ones similar to it, *Moving Picture World* exclaimed, “The building of this superb structure, artistically presented in conjunction with a program of high-class music, has become the most popular form of entertainment now being offered to the American public.”¹⁹⁹ With the golden age of the silent era approaching, all three theaters would soon see their glory days.

¹⁹⁴ “The Rivoli, Newest Film Palace, Opens,” *The New York Times*, December 29, 1917.

¹⁹⁵ “The Rivoli, Newest Film Palace, Opens,” *The New York Times*, December 29, 1917

¹⁹⁶ “Typhoon Cooling System at the Rivoli,” *Moving Picture World*, November, 1917, 890.

¹⁹⁷ “Rivoli Opens to Public December 27,” *Moving Picture World*, Jan-March 1918, 54.

¹⁹⁸ “Rivoli Opens to Public December 27,” *Moving Picture World*, Jan-March 1918, 54

¹⁹⁹ “Rivoli Opens to Public December 27,” *Moving Picture World*, Jan-March 1918, 54

As evidence suggests, multiple forms of movements took place to establish a permanent home for the newly invented spectacle. As soon as moving pictures became available to the public, the demand for new material was constant. In invention of the moving picture created the idea for people to enter a dark room and all enjoy the art of telling a story. This idea was present from the start when Koster & Bial debuted the Vitascope. Setting aside the technicalities regarding the patent laws and different manufacturing companies, by examining the timeline of movie theater history and film one can see where and how the movies became what they are today. New York City and its urban qualities enabled the small storefronts to develop into the movie theaters of the golden age of films and the newer theaters that exist today. Although fatal accidents occurred, laws regarding regulations were passed to create a safe and enjoyable experience for its citizens. Although Hollywood became the center of production for the movies, New York City can be credited with shaping the cultural birth of the movie experience.

Conclusion

The film industry continued to develop into the twenties; however, the cultural establishment of the “going to the movies” was a direct result of the industry’s fast progression beginning at the dawn of the twentieth century. Essentially, the early successful reception of the cinematic technology allowed for its continued growth in all aspects of the industry. The beginning of cinema displayed realistic scenes captivating its viewers purely because of their *moving-ness*.

In addition to creating a new cultural revolution, a clear division within the industry was formed. Three aspects arising from the advent of cinema are manufacturing, production, and exhibition. The manufacturing facet was a progression of the industry through five elemental stages. The early technological inventions in the late 1890s created the need for the patents, the desire for control over the new industry, anti-trust laws, which ultimately created the birth of Hollywood. The development of the manufacturing facet directly impacted the production aspect saw of the industry. The films *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) and *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) display a clear progression in aesthetic

elements. The creation of the film narrative, experiments of creative camera techniques, and improvement of editing created films for audiences to enjoy. Possibly the most influential aspect of the development of the industry was the exhibition of the films. These three facets combine to allow the industry's continues growth.

The movie industry continued to prosper throughout the twentieth century. Evidence indicates the exhibition of film was creating a prominent outing for people. In 1915 the *New York Times* began to run a column titled, "Notes Written on the Screen."²⁰⁰ This was a dedicated section to let its readers know what movies were featured at theaters each week. Although the industry continues to develop today, the first twenty years of its creation established the cultural outing of "going to the movies."

²⁰⁰ "Notes Written on the Screen," *The New York Times*, March 14 1915.

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