

Visual Communication



Vitagraph before Griffith



The "Chaser Theory"



The Other Worlds of Joe Steinmetz

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THE "CHASER THEORY"

I. Another Look at the "Chaser Theory"

Charles Musser

My film, *Before the Nickelodeon*, is an hour-long documentary about Edwin S. Porter, the maker of *The Great Train Robbery*, and the pre-Griffith (1895–1908) American cinema. In many ways the documentary takes a new approach to early cinema, concentrating on the dialectical relations between production methods and approaches to representation. I have also dealt with these issues in a number of articles (Musser 1979, 1981, 1983b).

In one area, *Before the Nickelodeon* appears to take an outdated position that has fallen into disfavor with some film scholars, such as Robert C. Allen (Allen 1977a, 1977b, 1979a). It presents, in the course of its historical narrative, the traditional argument that American cinema declined in popularity during the early 1900s and was "rescued" by the story film. The following article presents my research and analyses on this issue in a more elaborate and closely argued manner than a film could possibly allow.

Historical Accounts

The historical study of American cinema is in a state of exciting disarray. In many cases, accepted pronouncements by several generations of film historians have been called into question and often superseded by new analyses. Issues once considered of little importance are being reexamined and reformulated. One such issue is the shift to story films during the 1896–1907 period. According to many standard histories, a "chaser period" existed during the late 1890s and/or early 1900s, during which cinema's popularity was at a low point.¹ At a time when vaudeville was probably the single most important outlet for films, pictures generally were shown at the end of vaudeville programs as "chasers." In many instances, substantial portions of the audience left before or during the concluding turn of films; in other cases, theaters abandoned moving pictures entirely. This decline in films' popularity generally has been attributed to

the limited variety of motion picture subjects—mostly travel films, news topical, and short comedies. The resolution of this crisis is supposed to be the rise of the story film, particularly one film, *The Great Train Robbery* (December 1903). Such story films renewed audience interest in moving pictures and so encouraged the nickelodeon boom of storefront theaters (see Jacobs 1939).

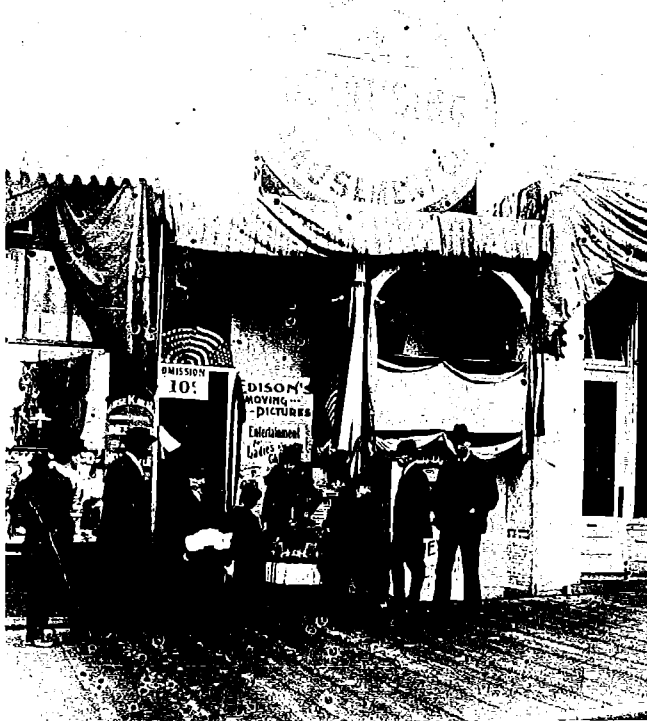
One scholar who has challenged this account is Robert C. Allen. He argues that the chaser period is a myth perpetuated by historians in a self-referential, self-validating system that lacks primary research necessary to prove or invalidate their claims. Based on his research, Allen argues that the chaser period is really a "chaser theory" without any basis in historical reality. As Allen concludes, "From the primary source material I have been able to locate and examine, it does not appear that motion pictures in vaudeville sank to the low level of popularity suggested by most film historians" (1979a:10). Citing a significant number of instances when motion pictures received kudos from the press and trade papers, Allen argues that film programs were never consistently bad enough to chase vaudeville audiences away. According to Allen,

If the chaser theory is undefensible, then why do we find it in so many histories of early American cinema? The reason is a simple, though distressing one: little original scholarship into the exhibition situation existing prior to the nickelodeon has been conducted, and film historians like Sklar, Jowett, Jacobs, etc., concerned with the historical development of the American cinema over a forty or seventy year period, have seen fit to rely entirely upon secondary sources for their information in this area. In fact, Jowett, Sklar, Jacobs and North are heavily reliant upon a single early writer on motion picture history: Robert Grau. . . . His *Theatre of Science* (1914) is the key source for information on the chaser period used by many historians. While it is true that Grau "was there" during the period in question, his account of events fifteen or more years in the past is peppered with inaccuracies, entirely undocumented and contradictory with aspects of his account of the same events contained in his other writings. [ibid:10–11]

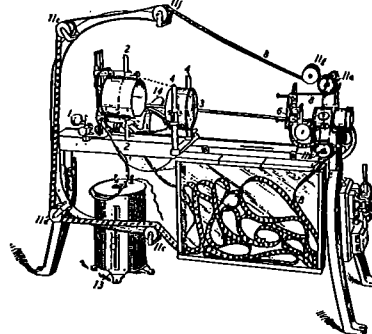
Charles Musser makes films in New York City. He also works as a film historian for the Thomas Edison Papers at Rutgers University. This fall the Papers is publishing a six-reel microfilm edition: Motion Picture Catalogs by American Producers and Distributors, 1894–1908.

While Allen acknowledges that some vacillation occurred based on the newsworthiness of topical films, he argues that producers and exhibitors generally were able to keep their audiences entertained.

Allen's rejection of the chaser period is part of a larger argument. If, as he argues, cinema's popularity did not decline, then the rise of the story film was not a precondition of the nickelodeon boom, nor was it necessarily due to consumer demand. In making his argument, Allen does not locate the shift to story films at the end of the chaser period (ca. 1903). He argues



Great Reduction, Owing to Enlargement of Factory.
THE NEW IMPROVED PORTABLE WEIGHT, COMPLETE, 50 POUNDS.
CINEOGRAPH LESS THAN
THE LIGHTEST, CHEAPEST AND MOST PERFECT PROJECTING MACHINE OF
THE MARKET, ESPECIALLY ADAPTED FOR TRAVELING PURPOSES.



All lenses used in the Cinegraph are ground under our own personal supervision. This is one of the secrets of the clear pictures shown by the Cinegraph. Edson's are any other make of films can be used. Weight of the film is 16 pounds. You are that it is constructed in weight as little as possible. It can be set up or removed in less than ten minutes. It is made of the best material available. The CINEGRAPH complete, with an adjustable camera stand, Stand, Lens, Condenser, Objective Lens and Lens, is made of the best material. Testimonials, Catalogue and list of 250 latest subjects of films can be had on application. The Cinegraph is the only film in operation at any time at the factory and salesrooms.

S. LUBIN, MANUFACTURING OPTICIAN,
41 South Eighth Street, Philadelphia, Pa.

Lubin's Cineograph from early 1897. It still shows a continuous band of film. From the *New York Clipper*. Photograph by Suzanne Williamson.



CIRCUS CANVASES,
Poles and Stakes, BELT, Flags, Etc.
Agents for **KIDD'S PATENT CIRCUS LIGHTS.**
IMPROVED LAMP PATENT, KEATS, N.Y., FOR SALE.
HERE WE ARE AGAIN.

**"TAYLOR"
CIRCUS TRUNKS.**

Barnum & Bailey, 1023 East Pearson.
 Klingling Bros., 160 East Pearson.
 Peregrine-Wells Bros., 75 East Pearson.
 Are you in the land wagon? Hand us a word.
 C. A. TAYLOR TRUCK WORKS,
 1,428 Broadway. 130 W. Madison,
 New York. Chicago.

EVERY THING NEW
UP-
TO-
DATE
W. J. WINTERBURN & Co.
SHOW PRINTERS
142 MONROE ST. CHICAGO

JAS. C. LYNCH,
MAKER OF THE
WALL TRUNK
Patent
Theatrical
Canvas Cover, Steel Bound
Two Trays.



IF YOU DON'T USE A
"Central Circus Trunk"

that fictional "features" of approximately 500 to 1000 feet began to dominate U.S. filmmaking around 1907 and views it as a *reponse* to (not a cause of) the rise of the nickelodeons. For Allen, the nickelodeon era increased demand for film product and hence required a steady rate of production. Making story films was more predictable and efficient: film companies could easily mass-produce them, maximizing their profits. The switch to fictional films was thus the studios' choice, even though audiences, in fact, continued to find actualities attractive (Allen 1977a:9–17, 1977b:217).

Allen's point of view has found considerable acceptance among a new generation of film historians. Thus, I find myself in an unusual historiographic position: my research leads me to defend the "undefensible" by offering qualified support to some of those historians Allen has somewhat casually dismissed. While questioning historical research and documentation is crucial in assessing the value of any analysis, Allen's criticism of previous research methodologies may be too sweeping and dismissive. For instance, Jacobs did do a significant amount of original re-

search for *The Rise of the American Film*. Although Jacobs's footnotes are too meager, his bibliography does include sources that Allen does not use (e.g., *Views and Film Index*) as well as sources that neither Allen nor I have yet consulted (*Leslie's Weekly, Film Reports*, etc.). From his research, Jacobs proposed a time frame for the chaser period—1900–1903—that is different than Grau's—1898–1901 (Jacobs 1939:5, 584).

Allens attribution of the "chaser theory" to Grau alone is incorrect, since comments about cinema's earlier difficulties appear with some frequency between 1903 and 1910. In fact, such observations appear both prior to Grau's *Theatre of Science* (1914) and in a variety of sources. One source used by Jacobs was Gaston Méliès's American 1903 catalogue, which claimed that his brother Georges "is the originator of the class of cinematograph films which are made from artificially arranged scenes, the creation of which has given new life to the trade at a time when it was dying out (Méliès 1903:5; cited in Jacobs 1939:29-30).

Other remarks bearing on the chaser period appeared in trade journals from the early nickelodeon



An audience at New York's Proctor's Pleasure Palace, 1899. From *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Weekly*.

era. The Miles Brothers, one of the first firms to rent films in the United States, remarked in March 1906:

What a change has come over the Moving Picture Turn in Vaudeville and everywhere! Three or four years ago, when the moving pictures came on in the vaudeville theatres, you would see over half the audience [put] on their wraps and take their departure. Notice the present day vaudeville audience. They all stay now until the last "good night" slide is thrown. The answer is: Some of the best brains of the country are now devoted to turning out the finest things in moving pictures.²

Less than two months later, *Views and Film Index* made similar observations:

When the pictures were first shown in the vaudeville houses more than one-half the audience left the theatre when this part of the programme was announced. Such is not now the case. At present very few leave when the pictures are reached, proving conclusively that the people are interested in it.³

Chaser conditions existed at Denver's Orpheum Theatre from about 1901–1902 to about 1903–1904, until a new manager took over:

[Carson] found the audiences standing up, putting on wraps and leaving the house the instant the pictures were put on the screen. This did not suit him. "If we have an act on this bill that the people don't want we will either take it off or we will make it popular," was his remark, and he at once began investigating. He found the usual state of affairs. Suddenly there was a change. The orchestra started up and the stage hands got busy with the effects. People who stood up and started to put on wraps from force of habit paused, sat down and looked at the pictures. There was a "big hand" at the finish. At the next performance the same thing happened and within a week not a soul left the theatre before the close of the pictures.

Then Mr. Carson took a new step. A bill was sent on from the booking agency and there were two awkward waits for stage setting between the numbers. It was impossible to arrange the programme to avoid these. That same week the "Robbery of the Leadville Stage" came on the market and Carson had it. He put it on in one of the waits and had a full equipment of effects. The result was like a flash of powder. The audience stood up and applauded with unprecedented vigor. It was the same thing week after week and Max Fabish, who handles the box office, soon went upstairs and told that a large number of people had bought seats for other performances—repeaters—to see a certain picture a second or third time. This was actual cash picked up that would not have been secured for the house.⁴


UBIN. LARGEST MANUFACTURER IN THE WORLD. 21 S. Eighth St., Philadelphia, Pa.

URE LINES. EDISON FILMS

PATENTED AND COPYRIGHTED.

Replete with Thrilling and Realistic Incidents in Western Scenes.

THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY



New shows to culturalistic hours during Xmas week in New York at the following theatres:

Kurtig & Seamen's Circle Theatre
Practor's 136th St.

Walt's 14th St.
Harlem Opera House
Tony Pastor's
Eden Music
Huber's Museum
Orpheum, Brooklyn
Comedy Theatre
Orpheum Music Hall

SEND FOR FULLY ILLUSTRATED AND DESCRIPTIVE PAMPHLET.

Edison Exhibition Kinetoscope, \$115.00. Edison Universal Kinetoscope, \$75.00.

MAIN OFFICE AND FACTORY, Orange, N. J.
EDISON MANUFACTURING CO., NEW YORK OFFICE, 33 Chambers St.
OFFICE FOR UNITED KINGDOM, 15 Old's Lane Road, Holborn, London, W.C. England.
KINETOGRAPH OFFICE, 31 Regent Street, London, W.1, England.
SELLING AGENTS.

OPERA CHAIRS

WHY not put up your Opera Chairs take chairs have been exchange, and allow a fa

H. D. WARNER
33 FINE Avenue, cor. 13th Street,

From the *New York Clipper*, January 1904. Photograph by Suzanne Williamson.

In 1908 *Film Index* again recalled:

For years [pictures] were used as "house cleaners"—at the end or during intermissions of programmes—and as far back as five years ago managers were declaring that the pictures were being used as "fillers-ins," "emergencies," etc., and the audiences would not stand for them more than a season or two more.⁵

In January 1910, *Moving Picture World* commented:

We who write this, first made the acquaintance of the moving picture in its public aspect in a vaudeville house. This was just after the Lumières made their wonderful success in the year 1896. The moving pictures then became part of the public entertainment shown in the great European cities. For a time it was received with wonderment but ere long it fell in public esteem.

It became what is known in this country as a "chaser." It occasionally preceded the star act of the evening, or it ended the entertainment. The result was apparent and it continued apparent for a long time. People walked around the promenade or went and indulged in liquid refreshment or they left the theatre altogether. The moving picture was tolerated by some, bored others, pleased and interested only a very few.⁶

In short, many pre-Grau references to the chaser period can be found in trade journals and catalogs. They usually place moving pictures at the bottom of the bill where they concluded a vaudeville entertainment. This position in the program traditionally served a chaser function. Such acts were not purposefully bad acts, but they were weak. Many different kinds of acts (not just dumb acts, as Allen suggests [1977b:48–50]) were placed in this position. Some people always left the theater during the last act as

people now leave a football or baseball game before it is over.

The distinction between a weak act and a bad act could be a fine one, which Carl Laemmle, future president of Universal, exploited in an advertisement for the Laemmle Film Service in early 1907:

Do you know what chasers are?

Some of the vaudeville houses about the country are using their moving pictures as "chasers." In other words to chase the people out of the theatre and let them know the show is over.

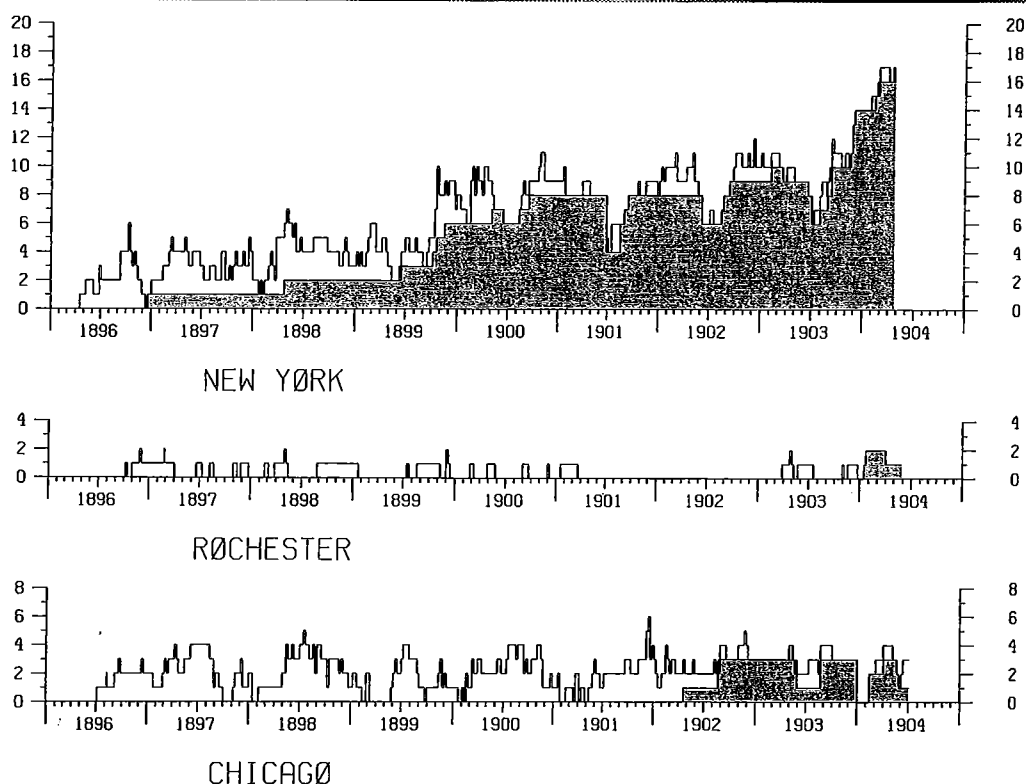
Now just think of that!

Their films are so dead and dull and uninteresting that they use them as "chasers."⁷

While Laemmle's ad was indirectly criticized in the trades for referring to conditions that no longer existed, his usage of the term was not disputed.⁸ This last act, however, was often a chaser in another sense—like beer chasing a shot of whisky. Headline attractions near the end of the bill were followed by an act with less "kick." Although vaudeville managers put films at the end of the bill because they were a weak act,⁹ the above evidence does not indicate that moving pictures were actually removed from the bill—an apparent contradiction that will be explored later. In Denver, the manager moved films out of the chaser position once their popularity was reestablished. Given the frequency of such references, it is significant that no one, to my knowledge at least, took issue with these statements when they were made.

Writing a survey history like *The Rise of the American Film* imposes certain constraints on the depth of one's research into any given topic. While references like those cited above seem to be a sufficient basis for Jacobs's basic assertion, they are recollections of a personal, retrospective nature that need to be illuminated by documentation from the period. Detailed primary source research can help us understand the breadth and depth of this crisis as well as its underlying causes and the specific ways in which it was resolved. Although Allen has researched the 1896–1907 period and offers useful counterexamples to statements by Gilbert Seldes and others whose analyses are hopelessly reductive, his research is too selective. There are many times when film programs were barely mentioned ("and the biography" or "the vitagraph continued" frequently appear in the sources Allen cites) or apparently considered entirely unworthy of notice. Nor does he place this evidence in relation to information of another order—for instance, financial records.

Motion Picture Exhibition Sites Located in Selected Cities: 1896-1904



■ Theaters which showed films for more than one year. Such permanent exhibition sites often closed for the summer months accounting for periodic dips in the number of theaters.

Exhibition Patterns

Although theaters did not, as a rule, drop films from their bill according to the evidence cited above, one potentially significant indication of cinema's commercial status and its popularity can be found by tracing the number of theaters showing films. While the raw material for such a statistical analysis is fragmentary, scattered, and vast, the gathering of such data can and should be done. I have compiled figures for Manhattan and Chicago between April 1896 and March 1904. These data are important for several reasons. New York City was the largest market for films in the United States and the center of the American motion picture, theater, and vaudeville industries. A decline in New York City would be witnessed firsthand by film companies like Edison, Biograph, and Vitagraph. Furthermore, since the national trade journals such as the *New York Clipper* and the *New York Dramatic Mirror* foregrounded industry trends occurring in New York, such developments would be noted by theater managers in other parts of the country. Chicago is another useful example because it served as the urban cultural center for much of the Midwest and was the second-largest production center for films in the United States. Its vaudeville managers operated outside the commercial sphere of the East Coast circuits (e.g., Proctor's, Keith's, Percy Williams's). Their opposition to eastern domination also gave the midwestern exhibitors some room in which to operate.

While this study is the first of its kind for these two key urban centers, George Pratt had done a similar study for Rochester, New York, and both Douglas Gomery and Allen's students have done local studies. Pratt has generously made his research available for this article.¹⁰ Such research is only a beginning, but it is a systematic beginning that can be built on in the future.

Figure 1, "Known Exhibition Sites in Manhattan, Chicago, and Rochester," presents two types of statistical information. The charts show the number of places known to be exhibiting films on a week-by-week basis for 1896-1904. They also make an important distinction between sites where films were shown for short-run engagements and those where they had indefinite runs and became permanent features. Since these charts depend on ads and trade notices, they have certain obvious limitations.¹¹ Many exhibitions occurred that are not included on these charts. The lyceum circuit, burlesque houses, penny arcades relying exclusively on street trade, and summer parks do not show up or are underrepresented. Clearly these charts—like this entire article—do not deal with cinema in rural areas, where traveling showmen relied on quite different forms of exhibition. Since vaudeville houses provided crucial urban outlets for exhibition in the prenickelodeon era, this bias does not undermine the charts' utility for some kinds of analysis.

The purpose of this article is not simply to reestablish the existence of a chaser period but to explore some of the contours of film practice in the prenickelodeon era. While Allen tends to treat the postnovelty/prenickelodeon period between 1897 and 1905 as an undifferentiated period in cinema's history, the data for the chart of "Known Exhibition Sites in Manhattan," in combination with other information, point toward five more or less distinct phases of change and development within New York-based film exhibition.

1 April 1896 to late 1896: Cinema's novelty era: Moving pictures are a new form of screen entertainment. The popularity of films is very high.

2 Late 1896 to mid-June 1899: Cinema is integrated into the mainstream of screen entertainment (the practices of lantern shows and stereopticon programming). The exhibitor functions as a co-creator. Moving pictures generally are treated like other acts by vaudeville managers—short runs, with a corresponding lack of commercial stability.

3 Mid-1899 to late 1900: There is a major expansion of theaters showing moving pictures. Competition forces vaudeville houses to schedule film programs for indefinite runs, making them permanent features.

4 Late 1900 to early 1903: Films generally remain a permanent feature, but their popularity declines as a result of fewer new subjects and audience restlessness with the concept of cinema as a visual newspaper. The industry undergoes a series of commercial disruptions. Meanwhile, tentative steps are taken toward centralizing creative functions inside the production companies.

5 Mid-1903 to 1905: There is rapid expansion of traditional exhibition outlets to a saturation point. Such developments coincide with the rapid ascendancy of the story film. Certain structural changes occur within the industry, setting the stage for the nickelodeon era.

Since my research indicates that the New York-based film industry dominated the nation's film industry in the prenickelodeon era, even though it did not achieve absolute hegemony, such periodization is not as simple for Chicago or Rochester, where advances were made in some areas of film practice but not in others. While detailed comparisons will be made below, Chicago's and Rochester's novelty periods started later and merged into the second period. Moving pictures did not become a permanent feature in Chicago's vaudeville houses until the summer of 1902, almost three years after New York. In Rochester, films became a permanent feature only after the rise of the story film. While the shift to story films occurred during 1903 in all three cities, it did not lead to an expansion in exhibition outlets in Chicago as it did in New York or Rochester. This inability to expand within traditional outlets is one reason that nickelodeon theaters appeared in Chicago many months before they did in New York or Rochester.

Cinema's Novelty Period

From the opening of the Vitascope at Koster and Bial's in New York City on April 23, 1896, moving pictures proved extremely popular with vaudeville-going audiences. Rival motion picture exhibitors rapidly appeared to sell their services to other theater managers. The Latham's Eidoloscope opened at Hammerstein's Olympia in New York on May 11, 1896, and had a successful five-week run. The Lumière Cinematographe first appeared at Keith's Union Square Theatre on June 29, 1896.¹² The *New York Clipper* reported that "nothing has ever before taken so strong and seeming lasting hold upon the patrons of this house as the cinematographe."¹³ At Proctor's 23rd Street Theatre in September, there was still plenty of applause for the Vitascope, and many of the new colored views had to be repeated.¹⁴ The high point of Manhattan's novelty period came during the week of October 12, when the Biograph was at the Olympia, the Vitascope at Proctor's 23rd Street Theatre and Proctor's Pleasure Palace, the Kineopticon at Pastor's, the Lumière Cinematographe at Keith's, and "moving pictures" at Miner's Bowery Theatre. The successful diffusion of moving pictures precipitated their demise by undermining their novelty value. Success led to audience saturation and familiarity followed by a rapid decline in theaters showing "animated photographs." As the week of December 14 began, not a single theater in New York City was showing motion pictures.

In Manhattan, the extensive nature of film exhibition rapidly exhausted the novelty value of moving pictures. Such extensive proliferation did not occur in Chicago, where competition among theaters was apparently less intense—and the New York-based exhibition services were farther away. Chicago's Vitascope premiere also came two months after its New York debut—on July 5, 1896, at Hopkins South Side Theater. The program was well received. The *Chicago Tribune* reported that "it is difficult to obtain standing room at Hopkins South Side Theater these afternoon and evenings and the popularity is due in great measure to the exhibition of Edison's Vitascope."¹⁵ Manager Hopkins, who secured the Vitascope rights for Chicago and Illinois, claimed that moving pictures were "drawing scores of hundreds of people who never before attended this popular form of entertainment."¹⁶ This theater had a virtual monopoly for two months. In mid-September the Lumière Cinematographe opened at Chicago's Schiller Theater, where it remained until mid-March 1897. Except for the Phantascope, which ran for one unsuccessful day in August, and the Animatographe, which had a week run in September, the Vitascope and Lumière Cinematographe were the only services showing films in Chicago through the end of

November. By the end of November, after the Vitascope Company had been clearly undermined, Hopkins abandoned his stake in the exhibition service and hired alternative exhibition services. It was not until the summer of 1897 that as many as four Chicago theaters were showing films. By October 1897, films were no longer being shown in Chicago theaters.

Cinema's novelty period should not be described simply in terms of this initial burst of enthusiasm for moving pictures. This period also had its characteristic methods of representation and production as well as a common industrial structure. These elements and their interrelationship have to be explored. Representational techniques of the novelty period were epitomized by the Vitascope: "lifelike motion" in conjunction with "lifelike" photography and a life-sized image provided the new level of verisimilitude that occasionally compelled theater patrons in the first row to run from their seats when *The Wave* was shown crashing onto the beach or when *The Empire State Express* came charging toward them.¹⁷ At its most effective, the Vitascope exploited this new dimension of projected moving images as a thrill, while other screen strategies were secondary or went unexplored. The comparative lack of complex structures of cinematic meaning that is seen by some historians as proof of the screen's primitive qualities effectively emphasized what was novel in the new invention.

Like Edison's peep-show kinoscope, the Vitascope showed a twenty-second loop of film spliced end-to-end and threaded on a bank of rollers. Raff and Gammon (1896) suggested that each film could be shown "for ten or fifteen minutes if desired, although four or five minutes is better." When, as in most cases, one projector was used, a two-minute wait occurred between films. At Koster and Bial's in New York and at Keith's Theatre in Boston, where two projectors were used, there was no wait. However, films still had to be projected for at least two minutes while a new film was threaded on to the other projector. Thus, each film subject was shown at least six times. As a Boston newspaper noted, "The scene is repeated several times, then the click click stops and the screen is blank. A moment's interval, then a pretty blonde serpentine dancer appears."¹⁸ Although two projectors eliminated waiting time between films, they did not reduce the number of times a film was projected at one showing. Such repetition effectively foregrounded the novel qualities of moving pictures. Little room for or concern with editorial techniques existed in these first exhibitions. Films were shown separately, treated as discrete series of images. Later the problem of the pause sometimes was solved by alternating film subjects with musical selections.¹⁹

Film companies, for all their apparent differences, had many fundamental similarities in the novelty era. Each company not only exhibited films but generally produced or secured its own exclusive supply of films—a characteristic of the Vitascope Company, the Lumière Agency, the American Mutoscope Company with its Biograph, the Eidoloscope and Kineopticon. The heavy booking of New York venues with moving picture exhibitions not only exhausted cinema's novelty value but occurred as many of these companies were losing their exclusive supply of film subjects. By October 1896, the International Film Company and the Columbia Phonograph Company were duplicating Edison films and selling them to independent exhibitors.²⁰ The Edison Company then started to sell its own productions through Maguire and Baucus, undercutting Raff and Gammon. Thus, just as it became possible for exhibitors to function effectively without producing their own films, it became increasingly problematic for these same exhibitors to rely only on cinema's new level of verisimilitude to entertain their audiences. In New York City at least, different aspects of the novelty era unraveled at the same time.²¹

Cinema Lacks Commercial Stability

Although the Lumière Cinematographe reopened at the Eden Musee on December 18, 1896, moving pictures did not return to New York's vaudeville theaters until mid-January 1897. Between mid-December 1896 and early February 1898, at least one and as many as five theaters simultaneously had films on their bills. Vaudeville managers thought of moving pictures as a popular turn that had to be replaced more or less frequently to keep the bill fresh and lively: they were not considered a permanent attraction. During this sixty-week period, Tony Pastor had motion pictures on his bill for twelve weeks during seven different runs. At the other extreme, Keith's hired the Biograph for one run that lasted fifty weeks. The Proctor theaters and Huber's Museum (with its vaudeville theater) fell somewhere in-between.

Only one theater, the Eden Musee, organized its entertainments on principles other than vaudeville. It did not offer its patrons a variety format but took several different media, such as orchestra music and waxworks, and varied these from week to week. Different music and a constantly new supply of waxworks based on contemporary developments in the news supplied the variety. Films were added as a third element in the Musee's programming, easily fitting into this presentational strategy and quickly becoming a permanent feature.

By the beginning of this second period, film loops and the Vitascope virtually had disappeared from major New York theaters. Although exhibition companies like Biograph and the Lumière Agency, which did not use loops, survived and even thrived, the celebration of "lifelike movement" was no longer the basis for cinema's popularity. Topicality of subject matter became an important criterion for spectators and reviewers. Interest was also rekindled as exhibitors began to combine several different views into a sequence to form a "headliner." During the week of March 14, 1897, the Biograph at Keith's Union Square showed "Wonderful Views of McKinley's Inauguration," including *71st Regiment of New York, Troop A of Cleveland (President McKinley's Escort)*, *McKinley and Cleveland in the Carriage of Honor*, and *The Crowds at the Capitol*.²² In June the Biograph showed "Three Marvelously Accurate and Thrilling Views of the Brooklyn Handicap on Opening Day": *The Crowds on the Track*, *The Parade of Thoroughbreds Going to the Post*, and *The Exciting Finish*.²³ Such editorial practices had been used by earlier exhibitors who juxtaposed lantern slides to create a more complex, integrated program. Although the collapse of cinema as a novelty in New York encouraged the development of these new (for cinema) practices, they were applied elsewhere, too. Biograph's McKinley views were shown in both Chicago and Rochester, where they extended people's initial fascination with cinema by adding new elements.

As the second phase of this second period began in early 1898, the exhibitor's ability to structure images into more complex programs was enhanced by new technology. The commercialization of a combination magic lantern/moving picture machine allowed the exhibitor to cut quickly back and forth between slides and films.²⁴ Such techniques were used for the Eden Musee/Salmi Morse *Passion Play*, which opened at the Eden Musee on January 31, 1898.²⁵ The Cuban crisis and subsequent Spanish-American War also provided a subject around which entire programs could be built. In the first phase of this period, the unit of higher organization generally had been the sequence (fight films being the single obvious exception); during this second phase, exhibitors edited their short films more and more into unified programs.

The Spanish-American War was the dominant feature of this second phase, further propelling moving pictures into the role of a visual newspaper. With the sinking of the *Maine* on February 15, 1898, interest in "war films" increased sharply and by the end of the month films of "the battleship Maine, U.S. Marines and U.S. Cavalry were timely presentations and cheered to the echo"²⁶ at Proctor's Pleasure Palace in New York, where the Biograph had started a new run. Biograph was the first film producer to exploit the war, quickly sending cameraman Billy Bitzer to Cuba.

The sinking of the *Maine* left Keith's Union Square Theatre in an awkward situation: Keith's, which had placed the most emphasis on moving pictures as a vaudeville attraction, had to do without these motion picture headline attractions until April 25, the day war was declared on Spain. For several weeks Keith showed "The Electorama" instead. It was "an ingenious mechanical device illustrating with moving figures, boats, etc. all incidents connected with the blowing up of the battleship Maine."²⁷ By the time Keith's reacquired Biograph's services, the Edison Company had its own films from Cuba on the market. Advertising themselves as "Edison's Wargraph," exhibitors moved into Proctor's 23rd Street Theatre and the Pleasure Palace, while Biograph returned to Keith's. B. F. Keith would not be placed in the same situation again. He made the moving pictures a permanent feature. Since the Biograph, with its large-format film, offered the best technical quality, had access to European subjects taken by its sister companies, and had management that aggressively filmed local subjects, it was the logical choice. Keith also put the Biograph in his Boston and Philadelphia theaters on a permanent basis, giving the Biograph Company an exhibition circuit that was the envy of every other exhibition company in the United States.

Other vaudeville managers, however, did not immediately share Keith's conclusions. Although seven theaters were showing films in New York City two weeks after the war began, by October only four theaters still had films on their bill. When Vitagraph's run at Proctor's Pleasure Palace ended on November 7, 1898, the *New York Dramatic Mirror* reported that "the wargraph was omitted much to the relief of the regular patrons."²⁸ Five weeks later, Vitagraph's run at Proctor's 23rd Street Theatre ended as well. In both cases, Vitagraph tried to broaden its programming to maintain the favor of Proctor's customers. Although Blackton and Smith showed films like *The Vanishing Lady* and *Burglar on the Roof* during September 1898 at both theaters, the Vitagraph lost its place on the bill. Throughout the first half of 1899, moving pictures continued to make brief appearances on the bill of a number of different theaters, including Hurtig and Seamon's Music Hall, Huber's Museum, Dewey Theatre, Star Theatre, Pastor's, Sam T. Jack's, and Miner's Bowery Theatre.

Moving pictures in Chicago, after enjoying a year of continuous popularity and corresponding commercial success, fell from favor in the fall of 1897. By October, no Chicago theater was showing films. As in

New York's theaters, films later reappeared on vaudeville bills, but for brief runs. Although Biograph war films aroused patriotic responses when they were shown at Hopkins Theater in February, March, and April, rival houses did not compete by adding their own film programs for several months. While four or five theaters and summer parks were advertising and showing films (mostly of the war) between May and September 1898, the Kohl and Castle vaudeville houses (the Olympic, Haymarket, and Chicago Opera House) showed films only for one week in one theater. The rash of Chicago film exhibitions receded by October 1898; by February 1899, once again there were no films shown (or at least advertised) in this midwestern center. While the war did increase the number of Chicago venues showing films temporarily, it had no long-term consequences on the commercial relations between film exhibition and vaudeville in that city.

Although war films were very popular in Rochester, they did not seem to impact significantly on exhibition patterns even while the war was going on. The Biograph played for four weeks in March and April 1898, then returned after the war was over for a longer run that began by featuring war films. In New York City, however, the competition between rival vaudeville houses had been intense, with the value of war films leading to a lasting association between the most prominent producer (Biograph) and the most important chain of vaudeville theaters (Keith's). Such a permanent association was a key innovation, which became more generalized during the third period.

Moving Pictures Become a Permanent Attraction

In mid-1899, American Vitagraph was hired to show films at Pastor's Theater in Manhattan and proved to be a permanent feature, running without interruption until Tony Pastor closed its door in 1908 (see Musser 1983a). This initiated a third period, in which the number of theaters showing motion pictures markedly increased and, perhaps more important, major exhibitors of films established long-term, stable relationships with vaudeville theaters and circuits. Pastor's decision to hire the Vitagraph for an indefinite run soon paid rich dividends. When Admiral Dewey arrived in New York City to celebrate his victory over the Spanish fleet in Manila Bay, the *New York Clipper* reported:

The American Vitagraph has been excelling in enterprise during the past week. Several views were taken of the Olympia [the Admiral's flagship] and projected here the

evening of the same day, and the Dewey land parade was seen on Saturday evening, five hours after the views were taken. The Vitagraph is a popular fixture here and continually gains in favor.²⁹

Proctor's theaters did not show films but celebrated Dewey's arrival by exhibiting a cycloramic oil painting of the Manila bombardment. While Proctor's also projected photographic slides of Dewey's reception, moving pictures received much more favorable comment in the press. Proctor's was outdone again the following week. While the American Vitagraph was receiving applause for its enterprise by showing pictures of the yacht races at Pastor's and Koster and Bial's Music Hall only a few hours after their occurrence, Proctor's kept in touch with the sporting event in a cumbersome and ultimately less interesting, less flexible manner. The positions of the boats on the race course were reported to the theater by Marconi's wireless and their progress charted on an immense map between the acts. Such a map was useless during the evenings when most patrons attended the theater and on off days. Manager J. Austin Fynes and owner F. F. Proctor saw the error of their ways and quickly formalized a relationship with William Paley, famed for his films of the Spanish-American War. His Kalatechnoscope opened on October 9 at Proctor's 23rd Street Theatre and two weeks later at the Pleasure Palace on 58th Street, where Paley also had an office and lab facilities that enabled him to put film subjects on to the screen with maximum speed. During the first week, *The Burning of the Nutmeg* was shown on the very day of the disaster. In the trade papers, Fynes announced that he had booked the Kalatechnoscope for an indefinite run,³⁰ and it remained at Proctor houses into the nickelodeon era.

In early November 1899, Percival Waters's newly formed Kinetograph Company began to show films at Manhattan's Huber's Museum, beginning a relationship that would endure for many years. Once the Proctor Circuit expanded to four New York houses during 1900—opening its 5th Avenue Theatre on May 7 and its 125th Street Theatre on August 20—eight Gotham theaters were exhibiting films on a permanent basis. Managers now conceived of films in very different terms than other vaudeville turns. They were permanent fixtures, not acts booked for a few weeks or months at a time. (The diffusion of a reframing device was a minor technical innovation that improved exhibitions and made a permanent service more attractive.³¹) Vaudeville managers apparently recognized that film companies were organizations that needed steady commercial outlets if they were to retain the necessary staff and resources to cover important news events. Vaudeville theaters helped to provide a steady commercial base from which the major exhibi-

tion companies could operate during the 1899–1905 period.

The stability of reliable exhibition outlets had a profound effect on the New York–based American film industry. Thomas Edison's decision to invest in a film studio on 21st Street in New York City was encouraged by the resulting demand for film subjects. Before 1899, the Edison Company had found it expedient to let its licensees take many—if not most—of the films it distributed. By 1900, the company was seeking to centralize production under its direct control. The Edison and Lubin companies began to make and sell multishot films—an indication that producers were asserting their authority more actively in the editorial process.³² The more permanent nature of exhibition sites was an influential factor in enabling producers to begin centralizing creative control in their companies.

The situation in Chicago was very different than New York: No vaudeville managers made films a permanent attraction during 1899 or 1900 (although the Chutes, a summer park, did have a moving picture theater). During the period from early 1899 to mid-1901, the average number of exhibition sites per week declined from an average of 2.4 during Chicago's novelty era to 1.7. Films were shown less frequently in Rochester as well.

How can we account for the discrepancies between New York on one hand and Chicago and Rochester on the other? Competition and past experiences colored the outlook of New York vaudeville managers, who established strong ties with specific exhibition companies. Chicago managers were never under the same pressures to develop such ties. Because New York managers and eastern vaudeville circuits worked closely with film services, the services could initiate film productions that would have been impossible on a speculative basis. Furthermore, cinema as a visual newspaper worked particularly well in the nation's news center—New York. Big events like the America's Cup races and the Dewey parade could be thrown on the screen the night they occurred, a turnaround that rivaled the New York newspapers. In Rochester, it took a week to ten days before films of a news event arrived. The timeliness of such events had faded by the time such films reached Chicago as well. Chicago not only chose to deemphasize New York–oriented news but avoided New York–based exhibitors (with the single exception of the Biograph). Since Kohl and Castle chose not to support Chicago filmmakers in a fashion remotely comparable to their New York counterparts, a large discrepancy in the success and popularity of cinema as visual newspaper was inevitable. Thus, the rivalry between Chicago and New York, which was particularly strong in the areas of culture and entertainment,

had an adverse effect on Chicago cinema in the 1890s. The differences between these cities' relations to cinema continued in the post-1900 period but took on new aspects.

Crisis and Disruption in the New York Film Industry

Although competition had helped to produce rapid expansion in East Coast film exhibition during 1898–1900, its effect during the early 1900s was much less beneficial. By the beginning of 1901, the New York–based film industry had entered a period of serious disruption, contraction, and reorganization. This fourth period had its bright, profitable (and popular) moments, but overall it was a difficult time for those working in the industry. Although eleven theaters are known to have shown films in Manhattan during October 1900, this number would not be exceeded (and only briefly equaled) during the following two years. Space in the New York newspapers devoted to advertising films declined. Thus, by early May 1901, the Proctor Circuit stopped advertising moving pictures, although trade notices indicate that they remained on the bill. It was not until February of 1904 that Proctor's believed that moving pictures had again become a notable attraction and listed them in their ads. During this same period there were also many weeks when Keith's did not bother to list the Biograph in its ads.³³ Enthusiastic reports for moving pictures also became less and less frequent in the trades after 1900. Most important, once moving pictures became permanent features, they moved to the bottom of vaudeville bills to which film programs had not usually been assigned previously.³⁴ This was an open invitation to patrons to leave if they had already seen the films, disliked the subject matter, wished to avoid the still-persistent flicker effect, or wanted to get home before the hour became too late.

The primary sources that I have been able to locate and examine suggest that from late 1900 to mid-1903 the popularity of cinema in urban settings was generally low and the film industry as a whole was in a state of disruption, even chaos. While this decline was not international in nature, a series of specific legal and technological problems hamstrung the American industry, temporarily eliminating or at least curtailing the activities of most American producers.

By 1900, as Thomas Edison was seeking control of the American industry through patent litigation, many companies retired from the arena of commercial and legal strife. Others persisted in the face of great difficulties: the New York exhibitor Eberhard Schneider was fined and his non-Edison films destroyed in

January 1900.³⁵ Vitagraph operated in legal jeopardy throughout most of 1900, and after a three-month truce ending in mid-January 1901, Edison forced the Vitagraph partners to stop making their own productions.³⁶ Biograph's deteriorating finances during 1900–1901 are documented in surviving records.³⁷

Monthly Earnings of American Mutoscope & Biograph Company from January 1, 1900, to January 1, 1901

January	\$23,501.04
February	12,783.88
March	9,315.08
April	10,986.23
May	14,025.66
June	14,822.29
July	5,832.90
August	8,817.93
September	14,361.42
October	5,070.68
November	9,094.96
December	6,220.25
TOTAL	\$134,892.02

January 1, 1901, to July 1, 1901

	Biograph Earnings	Net Earnings
January	\$1,788.54	\$5,372.10
February	3,007.06	5,189.63
March	2,278.62	4,130.62
April	1,953.82	4,954.41
May	(loss) 926.41	(loss) 499.31
June	(loss) 1,261.27	98.44
TOTAL	\$6,840.36	\$19,245.69

Biograph's moving picture service was becoming less profitable (and popular) in part because the company was limited by its large-format projectors. While exhibitors like Vitagraph or Spoor's Kinodrome Service in Chicago were able to show European imports like Méliès' *Cinderella* or G. A. Smith's *Grandma's Looking Glass* on their 35mm projector, Biograph could not do so. In some cases Biograph copied the most successful European subjects, producing *Grandpa's Reading Glass* to compete with Smith's elaborate subject.³⁸ The company could not justify the expense in other instances—even assuming they were capable of making a film as elaborate as Méliès' fairytale films. The logical move for Biograph might have been to switch to a 35mm format, but its executives dared not do so since the different-sized films might have proved a decisive distinction between the Edison and Biograph systems from a legal standpoint.

The key court case from this period, *Thomas A. Edison v. American Mutoscope and Biograph*, reached its initial conclusion in mid-July 1901. On July 15, Judge Hoyt Wheeler handed down a decision that recognized Edison's patent claims and allowed him effectively to control the industry. While Biograph appealed to a higher court, it was allowed to continue production, subject to certain restrictions. Production records at the Museum of Modern Art indicate that Biograph ceased making acted films on its rooftop studio and concentrated exclusively on actualities.³⁹ Likewise, the company made monthly financial reports to the courts in event of later attachment. Until February 1902, these records were filed giving Biograph's gross income for the Biograph and the cost of negatives and prints:⁴⁰

	Gross Income	Film Costs
August	\$4,565.66	\$710.00
September	4,357.78	1621.73
October	5,110.13	1402.04
November	4,173.50	792.22
December	4,824.00	1594.10
January	4,074.79	954.87
February	4,373.25	818.98

Biograph's defeat also had adverse effects on the few remaining American film producers. Sigmund Lubin was forced to suspend operations and flee to Europe on the recommendation of his lawyer.⁴¹ Rather than increasing production to maintain an adequate level of new film subjects, the Edison Company acted conservatively and made few acted films. Although Edison film sales increased significantly during the 1901–1902 period relative to the previous year, this increase did not come close to equaling the drop in earnings of only the Biograph Company during the same period.⁴²

The Edison Company: Film Sales and Profits

	Film Sales	Film Profits
March 1900–February 1901	\$49,559.89	\$20,278.26
March 1901–February 1902	\$82,107.82	\$37,433.90
March 1902–February 1903	\$75,695.02	\$28,538.07

The disruption of the industry and the shortage of interesting subjects had adverse effects outside New York City. As Pratt (1979:45) reports, "between March 1901 and January 1903 motion pictures vanished from Rochester theater programs."⁴³ In Tacoma, Washington, the Searchlight Theatre closed its doors in June 1902 due to poor and still-decreasing box office receipts. Ticket sales for the last month and a half of 1900 fluctuated between \$110.10 and \$156.10 a week. Ticket sales for the first nine months of 1901

were somewhat lower on the average. The account books show a declining gate after the McKinley films finished their first run in the fall and early winter of 1901. The following is a weekly breakdown from October 1901 until the theater closed on June 1, 1902:⁴⁴

	Featured Subject	Gate
October 13-19	McKinley Funeral	\$99.25
October 20-26	McKinley Funeral	99.10
October 27-November 2	_____	80.85
November 3-9	_____	81.60
November 10-16	Transformations/Egypt	75.40
November 17-23	Corbett and Fitzsimmons	89.00
November 24-30	Bullfight	88.35
December 1-7	War Scenes	70.15
December 8-14	McKinley Funeral	83.85
December 15-21	Tarrant Fire	82.45
December 22-28	Execution of Czolgosz	148.95
December 29-January 4	Carnival Program	109.80
January 5-11	Carnival Program	61.10
January 12-18	Bulldog Tramp	73.10
January 19-25	Bulldog Tramp	56.40
January 26-February 1	Eiffel Tower	30.90
February 2-8	Eiffel Tower	57.85
February 9-15	McKinley Speech	58.50
February 16-22	Czolgosz Execution	80.35
February 23-March 1	Red Riding Hood	70.35
March 2-8	Cinderella	75.05
March 9-15	Trip Through Egypt	62.50
March 16-22	Rough Riders	71.90
March 23-29	??????	86.00
March 30-April 5	??????	86.30
April 6-13	_____	57.05
April 14-20	Boer War	59.70
April 21-27	Bullfight	60.25
April 28-May 4	Carnival Program	48.00
May 5-11	NY Police Parade	40.40
May 12-18	Queen's Funeral	35.80
May 19-25	Red Riding Hood	35.70
May 26-June 1	_____	29.55

Not only did the box office decline in general, but repeated programs almost always drew less the second and third time around: *Execution of Czolgosz* (December 22-28 vs. February 16-22), *Bullfight* (November 24-30 vs. April 21-27), and *Carnival Program* (December 29-January 4 vs. January 5-11 vs. April 28-May 4). Lacking new and exciting subjects, the Searchlight Theatre closed its doors. Only a few exhibitors, like Lyman Howe, who purchased most of his films abroad and visited a given town once or twice a year, were unaffected.⁴⁵ Predictably, Kodak sales of cinematograph films declined during this period:⁴⁶

1897	\$129,383
1898	72,546
1899	134,654
1900	104,425
1901	85,317
1902	89,153

Judge Wheeler's decision favoring Edison's patent claims was reversed on March 10, 1902, by the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. Biograph announced its victory in the trade papers and quickly revived its business, even as it altered many of its competitive strategies. With the court case behind it, Biograph began to merchandise Warwick films, duped Méliès subjects, and 35mm reduction prints of its own large-format films.⁴⁷ The transition to 35mm was not easy for Biograph and took more than a year to complete—and only then under much commercial prodding. Company executives initially straddled the problem of different-sized films by offering two services—the old Biograph service at \$105 per week and the new "Biographet" service (35mm) at \$65 a week.⁴⁸ The large gauge continued to be used at Keith's theaters, restricting Biograph's selection of films to its own productions. The 35mm service was able to use imported films but did not receive the level of attention that might have made it fully competitive with Vitagraph or the Kinetograph Company. Biograph was hampered by the incompatibility of its two exhibition services. Legal harassment did not end its problems.

Revived competition in 1902 forced the Edison Company to make greater investments in film subjects. Less than two months after Biograph's successful appeal, Edwin Porter began to produce a series of story films: *Appointment by Telephone*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *How They Do Things on the Bowery*, and *Life of an American Fireman*. Porter's move into dramatic story films was abruptly curtailed, however, by the activities of Sigmund Lubin. Lubin had begun to duplicate and openly sell copyrighted Edison films by March 1902. Edison responded with a lawsuit.⁴⁹ The release of *Jack and the Beanstalk*, advertised as completed and ready for sale in late May, was postponed while Edison's lawyers tried to secure a temporary restraining order against their Philadelphia-based competitor.⁵⁰ When they failed, Edison's Kinetograph Department was forced to release the fairytale film without any legal protection for its ownership. William Gilmore, general manager of the Edison Manufacturing Company, directed the company's lawyers to press ahead in a letter filled with frustration:

I do not want to give up the fight if there is a possible way of getting around it, as this man Lubin is continuing to duplicate films that cost us a great many hundreds of dollars to obtain and one particular film that has cost us pretty near a thousand dollars to get the negative, and he simply goes ahead and copies same, making a negative and issuing positive from same indiscriminately so you can see that he is doing our business a great deal of harm and we, apparently have no redress.⁵¹

During the summer and fall of 1902, Edison ceased copyrighting all but a handful of subjects. Judge Dallas then reached a decision in the lower courts on January 22, 1903—one day after *Life of an American Fireman* had been copyrighted—that rejected Edison's method of copyrighting films. As a result, Edison's production all but ceased. Porter's experimentation with dramatic forms was abruptly curtailed and would not resume for six months. Only when Judge Dallas's decision was overruled on April 21, 1903, did Edison's Kinetograph Department resume production.

Allen argues that "to assume the chaser era emerges as a result of the diminishing success of primitive motion pictures to satisfy vaudeville audiences also assumes that American film companies either did not recognize the problem or did nothing to try and solve it" (1979a:6). Yet between roughly January 1901 and early 1903 there was a series of specific incidents that disrupted the activities of all major American producers and most exhibition companies. These incidents did much to prevent them from responding effectively, both quantitatively and qualitatively, to audience expectations. When the dominant, New York-based film industry is considered, Lewis Jacobs's time frame (late 1900–1903) for the chaser period seems quite adequate.

The Situation in Chicago, 1901–1902

In July 1901—at the very moment Edison won his patent victory in the Federal Circuit court—a group of western vaudeville managers that included Kohl and Castle, J. D. Hopkins, and the Orpheum Theatre Company formed a "vaudeville trust" to oppose eastern vaudeville interests then threatening to enter the Chicago market.⁵² As Kohl and Castle prepared for a possible commercial confrontation, the managers began to build a relationship with George Spoor's Kinodrome exhibition service. The Kinodrome Service was in one of their three theaters after July 21, 1901. From October 1901, Kohl and Castle rotated two projectors among their three theaters. The appearance of films related to McKinley's assassination may have encouraged this expansion and underscored the value of having a film service. In May 1902, when the Olympic and Haymarket closed for the summer, the Kinodrome remained as a permanent feature at the Chicago Opera House. When the two houses reopened in late August 1902, the Kinodrome had a permanent position on all three bills. Significantly, moving pictures moved to the chaser position at the bottom of the bill in all these theaters as films became a regular feature. Until this time a turn of films usually appeared in the top half of the bill: in Chicago, once

again, films as an occasional feature apparently received wider approval than they had as a constant presence. The circumstances under which films functioned as "chasers" in the 1901–1903 period should now be apparent. By 1900 (two years later in Chicago), many vaudeville managers had accepted the need to keep motion pictures on the bill. They had built up relationships with a number of different, competing exhibition services; such relationships could not be lightly dismissed. Another unexpected war, hurricane, or presidential assassination could quickly transform the twenty-minute bill of films into a headline attraction. When moving pictures became tedious in the pre-1899 era, managers simply removed them from the bill until audiences were ready to renew their interest—or some noteworthy event demanded their return. By 1900, this was no longer an option many managers felt they could exercise. Yet, given the disruption of the industry, there was an overall shortage of product. Not only was there insufficient investment in new, exciting subjects, but those subjects that were initially popular often ran for many weeks in a single house and were running simultaneously in other houses as well. Avid vaudeville goers might easily have the opportunity to see a single subject many times. By placing films at the end of the bill, such patrons could leave without missing the main acts. The exodus when films were thrown on the screen, however, involved a large part of the audience. Many people never stayed to see the films. Thus, when a Keith manager moved a program of stale films up near the top of his program, patrons enjoyed them because they had not seen them before.⁵³ This suggests that few people indeed stayed for the film programs at the end. Certainly the percentage of the audience that left was high enough to distress those who recalled these conditions in the trade papers of the early nickelodeon era.

If Lewis Jacobs correctly locates the chaser period in 1900–1903, evidence from Chicago allows us to understand why the 1890s were remembered by some as years when the industry was also in a depressed state. In fact, on the basis of quantitative analysis, Chicago conforms to the depression years incorrectly labeled by Robert Grau "the chaser period" (1898–1901). A revival in exhibition sites did occur in Chicago after 1901:

	Weeks	Known Exhibition Sites	Average per Week
February 12, 1899–July 21, 1901	127	214	1.7
July 21, 1901–August 17, 1902	57	132	2.3
August 17, 1902–December 31, 1903	69	221	3.2

A comparison between New York and Chicago reveals that the early commercial history of moving pictures had significant geographical variation. Experiences in one part of the country were different from experiences in another. Although geographical diversity may not be the only reason for the apparently contradictory dates associated with the chaser period by different historians (Allen's criticism of their research is sometimes valid), it certainly is an attractive one. As Janet Staiger observed in relation to the star system, "the more I study U.S. film history, the more I realize that the older histories are less wrong than I used to believe they were. Often, the problems I have with them are not so much in fact but in emphasis, or more precisely in the theoretical assumptions that have determined their choice and arrangement of those facts" (Staiger 1983:10). This appears to be the case with the issue of a chaser period as well. What we need is a systematic research of exhibition patterns in other cities that might illuminate this possibility more clearly.

Allen argues that, because individual films or film programs were sometimes very popular, a chaser period did not exist. My argument is almost the reverse: that the high points for moving pictures in the urban theaters were the hook that made the chaser period possible. Both Allen and I disagree with Gilbert Seldes's assertion that "nothing whatever of interest" occurred in American cinema before 1903 (Seldes 1929:20). My starting point is the many references to the chaser period that Allen either did not locate or dismisses. Allen's position is part of a larger reordering of events in the pre-Griffith cinema that also focuses on the moment when story films became the dominant product of the American industry.

Revival: The Rise of the Story Film

When given the opportunity (or faced with the necessity) of responding to the low popularity of programs or competition from rival companies, film producers generally moved in the direction of fictional narratives after 1901. Edwin Porter's experiments with story films in 1902 are one example. Another is the Biograph Company, which suffered another major setback in April 1903. At this time the company was still using its old-style, large-format film service in Keith theaters—a key source of income. These Biograph films continued to be principally travel and news topicals presented in a variety format, with a few trick films and comedies thrown in for relief. The following is a typical moving picture turn from Keith's Union Square Theatre:⁵⁴

THE AMERICAN BIOGRAPH

The Most Perfect of all Picture-Moving Machines

THE FOUR MADCAPS. (New.)	"TWO'S COMPANY."
Acrobatic dance by a famous troupe from the Winter Garden, Berlin.	An animated reproduction of the famous painting by Vergillio Tojetti.
A QUIET HOOKAH. (New.)	THE GRAND FOUNTAIN.
A vivid and characteristic bit of local color from Constantinople.	Longchamps Palace, Marseilles, France.
AN OCEAN FLYER.	IN THE REDWOODS OF CALIFORNIA
S.S. St. Paul of the American Line, at full speed in the Narrows, New York Harbor, as she appears on her way to Southampton.	(New.) A tourist coaching party on the road to the Yosemite.
AN ATTACK BY TORPEDO BOAT.	THE BLACK SEA. (New.)
Splendid work by a German flotilla in their famous wedge formation. Taken at Kiel.	A beautiful panorama.
A LITTLE RAY OF SUNSHINE.	DIVERSE DIVES.
Comedy scene.	Bathing scene at Bath Beach, L.I.
THE GALETEA BRIDGE. (New.)	A MODERN MIRACLE.
The only bridge to Stamboul. A remarkable picture of Turkish life.	The law of gravitation overcome by the expert swimmers at Bath Beach L.I. Backward leaps from the water to the pier.

Biograph scattered travel views of Turkey throughout its program, rather than consolidating them into a single headline attraction as Vitagraph was then doing. Excepting the relationship between the last two subjects, the organization of the program appears completely random.

Keith's managers were becoming increasingly frustrated by the Biograph programs. In January 1903, Samuel Hodgdon, manager of Keith's Union Square Theatre, put films early in his program. He then reported that "being put on at an early hour in the afternoon, it seemed to catch a class of people to whom it was comparatively new. . . . The views were not particularly brilliant, still . . . it proved to be an excellent attraction at that end of the bill."⁵⁵ Although Hodgdon's solution was temporarily successful and imitated in other Keith theaters,⁶⁴ audiences who came early to Keith's five-hour programs soon became disenchanted, too. If anything, it made the weakness of the Biograph views more apparent and forced the Keith organization to take action.

By early 1903, Vitagraph had realized the popularity and importance of "headline attractions all of which are long subjects lasting from 10 to 20 minutes each." The company claimed to have "The Greatest Exhibition List on Earth."⁵⁶ Almost all the films were purchased from European producers. During the first week of April, Vitagraph took over the Keith Circuit from Biograph.⁵⁷ Afterward, one trade journal observed that the program was "the best series of films seen here in many weeks."⁵⁸ Vitagraph featured such films as Pathé's *Sleeping Beauty* or Edison's *Life of an American Fireman* in many of its programs. Many were held over for two or three weeks because of their immense popularity (Allen 1977b:150).

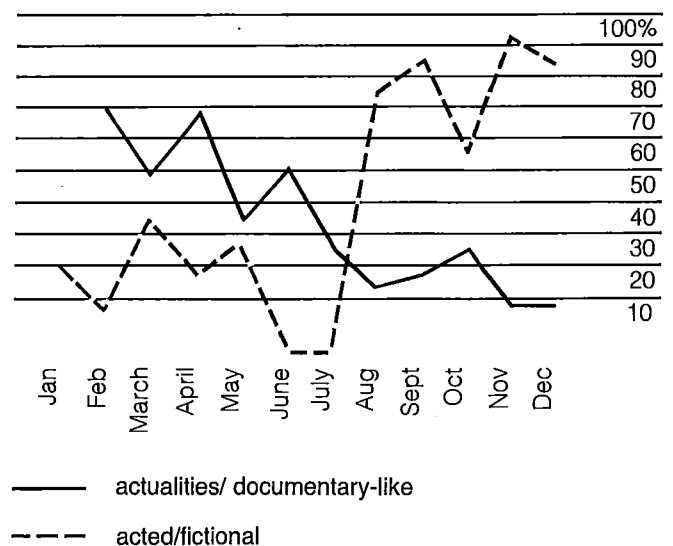
The loss of the Keith theaters as an exhibition outlet in March 1903 forced the Biograph Company to rethink its business strategies, abandon its large-gauge film, and consider the tactics of its competitors. Such a change is evident in the building of a new indoor film studio with electric lighting at Biograph's newly

acquired offices on 14th Street. The studio's completion was announced in a *Biograph Bulletin* dated June 1, 1903.⁵⁹ In the months immediately after the new studio's completion, Bitzer filmed several fictional subjects of more than one shot. *The Haymarket* "depicts in six lively scenes, six lively hours at New York City's famous Tenderloin dance hall 'The Haymarket.'" ⁶⁰ *A Discordant Note* utilized the overlapping action found in earlier Méliès and Edison films like *A Trip to the Moon* (August 1902), *How They Do Things on the Bowery* (October 1902), and *Life of an American Fireman* (November 1902–January 1903). While *The Divorce* (photographed by Bitzer in June 1903), *The Unfaithful Wife* (Bitzer in July 1903), *The Kidnapper* (Bitzer in July 1903), and *Wages of Sin* (Bitzer in August 1903) consisted of several scenes of approximately fifty feet each, each scene was still sold separately—deferring to the exhibitor's traditional editorial role. *The American Soldier in Love and War* (July 1903) consisted of three scenes "to be used in connection with two war views to make a complete story in one film projection."⁶¹ Such cinematic strategies were not new in themselves, but their increasing frequency indicates that the Biograph Company was considering the product appeal of fictional narratives of more than one shot. In August 1903, A. E. Weed, another Biograph cameraman, photographed two comedies "in two continuous scenes"⁶²—*The Burglar* and *Alphonse and Gaston*. Wallace McCutcheon filmed two early "westerns," both using Kit Carson as their principal hero, in the Adirondacks during September: *Kit Carson* (ten scenes and 1,184 feet) and *The Pioneers* (six scenes and 610 feet). These were not offered for sale immediately but used as exclusive headliners for Biograph's revived exhibition service. This service had returned to Keith's Union Square Theatre on August 3, 1903. Biograph's shift to a 35mm format and to multishot comedies and dramas, along with its newly acquired capacity to show European imports by Méliès and Pathé, revived the company's fortunes.

With the increasing number of story films, the motion pictures began to revive. Some minor improvement is apparent in late 1902–early 1903. During December 1902, films were being shown in twelve Manhattan theaters for the first time in a given week. By late 1903–early 1904, the number of New York theaters showing motion pictures began to grow rapidly. In March 1904, seventeen different theaters were showing motion pictures in Manhattan.

By the second half of 1903, fictional films were being produced with increasing frequency. European dramas like *Tracked by Bloodhounds* and *Daring Daylight Burglary* introduced the chase film to American audiences. The Edison and Biograph companies responded in November 1903 by making *The Great Train Robbery* and *The Escaped Lunatic*. Such

story films were not yet the dominant product for American producers, but by late 1903 they were the kind of cinema emphasized at urban theaters. In their Sunday newspaper advertising, Kohl and Castle announced the featured subject of moving pictures for their three Chicago theaters. If this material is broken down into actuality/documentary-like subjects and acted/fictional narrative categories, the following chart is generated:



Note: In some cases the title of the film(s) was not given or its category was not apparent. The two percentages, therefore, often do not add up to 100%.

In Rochester, moving picture shows reappeared in March 1903 on a sporadic basis. The increasing frequency of moving picture exhibitions in late 1903 coincided with the appearance of story films on the bill. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Jean D'Arc* were among those featured in Rochester houses that fall. The exhibition of *The Great Train Robbery* in late January 1904 created tumultuous excitement. The Kinetograph Company's exhibition of the film at Cook's Opera House "scored the biggest moving picture hit ever made in Rochester."⁶³ The following Sunday it was shown at another theater where crowds packed the house from gallery to orchestra. No standing room was sold and a great many were turned away. Two weeks later, "in response to many requests, a return engagement [was] arranged."⁶⁴ As a result of *The Great Train Robbery*, the Kinetograph Company continued to show films at Cook's Opera House during the regular vaudeville season. Sunday film shows were also put on at another local theater.

Further improvements in projection technology, appearing around 1903, must have added to cinema's popularity. A Rochester critic in November 1903 found the Biograph showing films at Cook's Opera House to be "an exceptionally good machine, the views being unusually clear and steady."⁶⁵ The Biograph undoubtedly had a multiple-blade shutter, which reduced flicker. This innovation first appeared in the United States on the Bioscope Projectors of the Warwick Trading Company, London⁶⁶; Biograph, which used the Bioscope for projecting 35mm films, apparently patented the device on May 19, 1903.⁶⁷ Other companies gradually adopted it as well. Such technical improvements increased the level of visual pleasure as the doldrums of the early 1900s were ending.

By late summer or early fall 1904, story films were the dominant product of the American industry. They were made with increasing frequency because they sold so well: that is, because they were so much more popular than actualities, they justified the added expense of production. Biograph was the first American company to make them the keystone of its business policy. With Wallace McCutcheon acting as director, Biograph's staff made *Personal* in June, *The Moonshiners* in July, *The Widow and the Only Man* in August, *The Hero of Liao Yang* in September, and *The Lost Child* and *The Suburbanite* in October 1904. Biograph's success with this policy—as well as Pathé's entrance into the American market—put considerable pressure on the Edison Company to respond in kind.

A survey of Edison film sales for the 1904–1906 period can be used to analyze the composition of Edison negative and print production, confirming this shift.⁶⁸ For the March–July 1904 period, the data can be represented in the following table:

Subject Type	Number in Category	Negative Feet	Print Feet	Print to Negative Ratio
Actualities	40 (82%)	5,045 (68%)	42,915 (38%)	8.5
Staged/fiction	9 (18%)	2,335 (32%)	69,560 (62%)	29.8
Total	49	7,380	112,475	15.2

By the second half of Edison's 1904 business year (August 1904–February 1905), a clear shift had occurred:

Actualities	8 (38%)	1,525 (16%)	7,610 (3%)	5.0
Staged/fiction	13 (62%)	7,790 (84%)	214,705 (97%)	27.6
Total	21	9,315	222,315	23.9

In this second chart the commercial importance of staged/acted films is obvious (even exaggerated, since there were no major filmable news events to boost actuality sales). Feature-acted films had become the principal source of income for the Kinetograph Department. A statistical analysis for the 1904–1906 period shows a steady relationship between actuality and fictional films in terms of negative production and prints sold:

March 1904–February 1905				
Subject Type	Number in Category	Negative Feet	Print Feet	Print to Negative Ratio
Actualities	48 (69%)	6,570 (39%)	50,525 (15%)	7.7
Staged/acted	22 (31%)	10,125 (61%)	284,265 (85%)	28.1
Total	70	16,695	334,790	20.0

March 1905–February 1906				
Subject Type	Number in Category	Negative Feet	Print Feet	Print to Negative Ratio
Actualities	21 (48%)	6,940 (36%)	60,580 (14%)	8.7
Staged/acted	22 (52%)	12,382 (64%)	365,060 (86%)	29.5
Total	43	19,322	425,640	22.0

March 1906–February 1907				
Subject Type	Number in Category	Negative Feet	Print Feet	Print to Negative Ratio
Actualities	49 (80%)	7,715 (47%)	118,438 (14%)	15.4
Staged/acted	12 (20%)	8,750 (53%)	741,490 (86%)	84.7
Total	61	16,465	859,928	52.2

Furthermore, the bulk of print sales for actualities in 1905 and 1906 came from three major news events: Roosevelt's inauguration, the Russo-Japanese Peace Conference, and the San Francisco earthquake. In many instances, no prints of an actuality subject were sold. Except for a few specific and comparatively rare instances, the public had lost interest in actuality subjects.

In arguing that the shift to narrative film production occurred after the rise of the nickelodeon around 1907, Allen (like others before him) relied on the number of titles copyrighted to reach his conclusion. This approach has a methodological weakness, as the above chart makes clear. Quantification of subject by titles offers little insight into the type of film that sustained the company financially. Since producers sold film prints to exhibitors and exchanges on a per foot basis, five-sixths of the Edison Company's gross income in film production came from staged/acted films, almost all of which were story films. An example demonstrates the skewing of information that results from basing an analysis on copyrighted titles. Thomas Edison copyrighted forty films in 1906; twenty-nine of these were actualities taken by R. K. Bonine in Hawaii. Bonine's films were from 75 to 770 feet in length, totaling 3,700 feet of negative. In contrast, ten fictional films by Porter were copyrighted during the 1906 calendar year. These varied in length from 60 to 1,000 feet and totaled 6,815 feet (all but one was a story film). One film in 1906, *Dreams of a Rarebit*

Fiend (470 feet) sold 192 copies or 90,240 feet, while all of Bonine's Hawaii films combined sold only 29,060 feet. Although we do not know exactly how much time Bonine spent on his Hawaii trip, it almost certainly did not exceed the two months Porter spent working on *Dreams of a Rarebit Fiend*. Bonnie, who was only a part-time cameraman and spent much of his time working at the Edison lab in West Orange, was paid \$35 a week while Porter was paid \$40. Porter, however, tied up a studio, employing actors and a production staff that included Wallace McCutcheon (\$40 per week), William Gilroy (\$15 per week), and several others.⁶⁹ The cost of *Dreams of a Rarebit Fiend* was therefore much higher than the cost of Bonine's Hawaii films but was easily justified by the sale of prints.

From the summer of 1904 onward, story films were made in substantial quantities and consistently outsold the actualities that companies like Edison continued to produce, although with decreasing frequency. This decline was a response to slumping sales for most actuality subjects and increasing sales for most longer fictional films. Excepting occasional hits like films of the San Francisco earthquake, actuality material continued to be manufactured primarily because (1) local actuality footage was desired by vaudeville houses renting films from the Kinetograph Company (Percival Waters's Edison-associated exhibition company) and it was considered expedient to accommodate them, and (2) such films were so inexpensive to make that a small profit could be gained on a local subject if two or more prints were sold. This shift to acted features was not, as Allen argues, a result of the nickelodeon era, but rather one of the things that made it possible.

The shift from actualities to fictional narratives is also reflected in the construction of many films from the 1903–1904 period that contain elements of both. Two promotional descriptions of *Life of an American Fireman* alternately emphasized the documentary-like depiction of American firemen and the story of a firechief. Porter's *Romance of the Rail* and even *The Great Train Robbery* grow out of the train subgenre of travel films, as did Biograph's somewhat later *Hold-up of the Rocky Mountain Express* (April 1906). Porter's comedy *European Rest Cure* spoofed the travel genre even as it incorporated many of its conventions into a fictional form. This transition from actuality to fiction was happening on many different levels simultaneously (Musser 1984).

The increased production of story films further heightened the popularity of moving pictures by offering more variation (less repetition) in programs. As *Variety* noted late in 1905, shortage of product had been an important cause of the chaser period:

As a matter of fact the picture machine is one of the most valuable things about a variety house. There is a certain portion in any audience that will cut the last act no matter what it will be. If the picture machine is the last, they stay in for the specialty immediately preceding it, and instead of losing the value of some three hundred dollar headliner the manager gets credit for that and it is the fifty or seventy-five dollar pictures that the next to the last patron cuts. In the present day when a special train is hired and a branch railroad tied up for a set of train robbing or wrecking pictures, the offerings are really excellent and those who remain and watch them get sometimes what is really the best act on a bill. The picture machine is here to stay as long as a change of film may be had each week.⁷⁰

Film's low cost when compared to other acts with equivalent entertainment value and its increased popularity are commercial factors that pointed toward the specialized moving picture show, with lower costs and lower admission prices. And by late 1904–early 1905, enough story films also were being made to keep nickelodeons supplied with a changing program of films.

Other changes in the film industry also made the nickelodeon era possible. Until 1904, exhibition services rented a projector, operator, and reel of film to the theaters. Later in the year, however, Percival Waters—whose Kinetograph film service was in heavy competition with Biograph, Vitagraph, and the Kalatechnoscope—began to train theater electricians to run the films and simply rented a reel of moving pictures—a commodity, not a service—to the theaters at a lower price. Vitagraph and other old-line services were soon forced to follow his example.⁷¹ Such rationalization helped to inaugurate cinema as a form of mass entertainment with the nickelodeon era.

Although New York City was the center of the American film industry, had a broad exhibition base, and was the site of many innovative commercial and industrial practices, nickelodeons did not first appear there but in the urban, industrial cities of the Midwest like Pittsburgh and Chicago. (According to at least one source, Eugene Cline's Chicago storefront film theater was the second of its kind in the United States, after Harry Davis's theater in Pittsburgh.)⁷² As *Views and Film Index* remarked in May 1906, "These enterprises are practically new to this city, but are now springing up in all the boroughs. Smaller places could boast of these moving picture shows long before it was ever thought that New York would ever have one."⁷³ Why Chicago and not New York? The different structures of the entertainment industries in both cities offer one key explanation. If, as George Kleine asserted, every vaudeville house in the country had moving pictures on its bill,⁷⁴ films were being shown at only four vaudeville theaters in Kleine's hometown of Chicago in 1905. Because of Sunday blue laws, New York theaters had to have special

Sunday shows that did not allow for singing, dancing, etc. Moving pictures were an effective way to circumvent these laws and "to evade any contact with the authorities"⁷⁵ in New York, Rochester, and other cities where blue laws were in effect. Since Sunday was the working classes' only day of rest and recreation, traditional entertainment venues could accommodate the growing popularity of moving pictures. In Chicago there were no Sunday blue laws, and vaudeville, burlesque, and other theaters showed the same programs all week long. As a result, traditional structures were much less accommodating to moving pictures and alternative exhibition practices such as storefront theaters appeared earlier.

The nickelodeon boom did not alter the established popularity of moving pictures as the closing turn of a vaudeville program. At the beginning of 1907, a *Billboard* representative reported that "moving pictures are making a good impression in Boston Town and all the houses employ them as features instead of as 'chasers' as formerly."⁷⁶ Two months later, *Moving Picture World* was happy to report:

The continued popularity of moving pictures, which are a feature of almost every vaudeville bill in the country, is illustrated by a story which Manager Percy Williams, of the Orpheum Theatre, New York, tells on himself. One week, when Mr. Williams had fairly outdone himself in preparing the Orpheum bill, and every act was a big headliner, many of the salaries running into four figures, he met a friend on the street. The friend greeted the manager and said: "I was over to see your show the other night, Mr. Williams, and I think that it was about the best show I ever saw." Mr. Williams thanked him and as a matter of curiosity asked him what act he liked best. The friend answered, "I think those moving pictures were about the best I ever saw."⁷⁷

During the same year, the New York Theatre gave a vaudeville program that did not include moving pictures. *Variety* reported that "the audience expected them, remaining seated after the curtain. This happened on Sunday night and moving pictures will probably be installed."⁷⁸ Although moving pictures closed the program, their popularity was well established.

Conclusions

Is my disagreement with Allen's revisionist history only concerned with the sequencing of specific events, or are there larger implications in the different models we propose? Our methodological approaches to the issues differ in significant ways. Allen's initial work in cinema was informed by the perception that exhibition was being ignored by many film historians. While Allen has usefully refocused attention on this neglected area, his work has been hampered by a disinterest in production. Exploration of the dynamic interaction between production and exhibition would lead, for example, to the conclusion that commercial disruptions in production were adversely affecting the entire industry.

Our analyses have different ideological implications, too. Allen's denial of the chaser period ignores, in some respects, the inadequacies of motion picture capitalists and American capitalism at the turn of the century. From Allen's point of view, these entrepreneurs appear to be in control of their destinies. In fact, the chaser period helps to explain why American cinema was dominated by European productions, since disruptions comparable to those that plagued the American industry did not occur in England or France. Likewise, the assertion that producers were able to impose story films on an American public that still preferred actualities denies the contradictions inherent in the competitive capitalism of the 1900s (other producers and exhibitors would have appeared to fill this void). Allen suggests that film industry leaders were able to dictate the terms of change, offering a conspiracy theory of big business that might be applicable to the motion picture industry of the 1930s but is misleading when applied to 1903–1907.⁷⁹ The historical reality was quite different: In shifting to story films, the industry's entrepreneurs were responding to the demands of a situation—the needs of exhibitors and the preferences of their patrons—they only partially understood and certainly did not control.

Renewed interest in film history, which mushroomed in the 1970s, challenged the work of elder historians in a manner that was necessary and generally beneficial to the discipline. Like many young historians, Allen argued that panoramic histories of American cinema too often endowed statements with the appearance of reliability as they repeated each other's conclusions. Soon, however, many believed that the panoramic histories of American cinema were not only capable of mistakes but that they were so unreliable that their analyses carried little weight. The pendulum swung too far in this direction. Specialization and an impressive array of footnotes became enough to privilege the work of a new generation—particularly since few people had done the same or equivalent research. We cannot afford to underrate what previous generations of historians have accomplished.

Although we should not stop questioning the conclusions of historians like Lewis Jacobs, Garth Jowett, and Robert Sklar, we must be careful not to dismiss their work too quickly. We also must be careful not to set up a new, premature orthodoxy. The one-way, intergenerational criticisms of the 1970s need to become the bilateral, intragenerational debates of the 1980s. It is to be hoped that this can be conducted with commitment and passion—as well as good humor and mutual respect.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank George Pratt for aiding me in my research both directly and by example. This article was first presented as a paper at the Columbia Seminar on Film, which meets once a month during the academic year at the Museum of Modern Art. The valuable criticism and suggestions of those present (including Robert Allen) enabled me to revise the manuscript for publication. I particularly benefited from the thoughtful readings of John Fell, Janet Staiger, and Robert Sklar. I would also like to thank John Kesich for designing and manipulating the computer program that created the graphs on p. 28.

Notes

- 1 As Joseph North has demonstrated, these historians did not always agree on the duration of this "chaser period." Some suggested it lasted from approximately 1897 to 1903. Others, like Robert Grau, indicated it lasted from 1898 to 1901. Lewis Jacobs asserted that it went from late 1900 to approximately 1903. Although troubled by these discrepancies, North did not question the existence of a "chaser period" (1973:184–185).
- 2 *New York Clipper*, March 24, 1906, p. 134.
- 3 *Views and Film Index*, May 12, 1906, p. 4.
- 4 *Ibid.*, September 29, 1906, p. 4.
- 5 *Ibid.*, September 5, 1908, p. 3.
- 6 *Moving Picture World*, January 22, 1910, p. 81.
- 7 *Billboard*, January 5, 1907, p. 30.
- 8 See discussion below, particularly the refutation appearing in *Billboard*, January 26, 1907, p. 18.
- 9 Allen cites evidence to this effect in his dissertation (1977b). M. J. Keating, manager of Keith's Theatre in Boston, felt it was best to close a show "with a medium act, as not more than half the audience will remain to see a good one, no matter what it is." Manager Report, Keith Theatre, Boston, November 24, 1902, Keith/Albee Collection cited in Allen 1977b:150.
- 10 Pratt 1979 was the result of Pratt's extensive research in this area.
- 11 The chart for New York was compiled using the *New York Clipper*, *New York Dramatic Mirror*, and *New York World*. Comparisons between the *World* and the *New York Herald* and *New York Journal* indicated that these other two newspapers did not offer additional information as to exhibition sites. For Chicago, the chart was constructed entirely from the *Chicago Tribune*. There were many problems with this task and both charts could benefit from further research and refinement. In Chicago, for instance, "Living Pictures" clearly referred to moving pictures, not the *tableaux vivants* to which "Living Pictures" referred in New York. In Chicago these *tableaux vivants* were usually called "art studies" or "classical living pictures." When films were on an extended run, theaters did not always advertise them as being on the bill each week. A certain amount of second-guessing is involved. I did my best to be consistent throughout.

"SEARCHLIGHT"

CONTINUOUS ENTERTAINMENT

EDISON'S MOVING PICTURES

1 to 5, 6:30 to 10
744 Pacific Ave.

DONNELLY HOTEL.

THIS WEEK'S PROGRAM.

CINDERELLA and the little
Glass Slipper. A great Spectacular
Production, illustrating every scene
of the Fairy Tale.

**DISOLVING SCENIC
Effects**

Grand Ballets

Marvelous Tricks in which
dozens of real
living people take part enjoyed by both
young and old.

President McKinley

N. B.—These highly valuable, educational and historical scenes reproduce the following:

McKinley Funeral at Buffalo, arrival
at City Hall.

The cortege at Washington, D. C.

President Roosevelt at Canton.

Arrival of McKinley's body at Canton.

Leaving the McKinley home.

Funeral at Westlawn Cemetery, and
other scenes of interest.

744 PACIFIC AVE.

(DONNELLY HOTEL)

1 to 5, 6:30 to 10.

ADMISSION, 10 CENTS

OROWELL PRINTING CO. 774 Commerce St., Tacoma.

Searchlight Theater, Tacoma, Washington, 1900–1902. The only prenickelodeon theater for which there is detailed box office information (see p. 35). From the Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

- 12 *New York World*, May 10, 1896, p. 3, and *New York Clipper*, July 4, 1896, p. 280.
- 13 *New York Clipper*, July 11, 1896, p. 296.
- 14 *New York Dramatic Mirror*, October 3, 1896.
- 15 *Chicago Tribune*, July 19, 1896, p. 31.
- 16 *Ibid.*, July 26, 1896, p. 34.
- 17 *New York Telegram*, October 16, 1896, and *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 21, 1896, p. 8.
- 18 *Boston Herald*, May 19, 1896.
- 19 Sangerfest Hall, program, August 30, 1896. Clippings, vol. 5, Raff and Gammon Collection, Harvard Business School Library.
- 20 *The Phonoscope*, July 26, 1896, p. 34.
- 21 The systematic nature of my research for this novelty period again contradicts many of the assessments offered by Allen (1979b). The loss of exclusive control of Edison films, not the states' rights structure that Allen indicates, caused the demise of the Vitascope as a commercial force. Raff and Gammon were also extremely capable of getting the Vitascope into New York theaters (where they controlled the territory), contrary to Allen's assertions (pp. 15, 17). During 1896, the Vitascope projected films for more than 32 weeks in Manhattan vaudeville theaters, the Lumière Cinématographe for 23 weeks, the Biograph for 8 weeks, the Kineopticon for 8 weeks, the Eidoloscope for 5 weeks, and a "Cinographoscope" for one week. The Vitascope was also showing films at Coney Island during the summer of 1896. It was the most frequently used service by vaudeville theaters during 1896 even though the Lumière Cinématographe was considered the better machine; availability and being first in the field were important reasons for its continued success. When the novelty era collapsed, the Biograph Company was the only firm to retain an exclusive supply of films.
- 22 *New York World*, March 14, 1897, p. 158.
- 23 *Ibid.*, June 6, 1897, p. 14B.
- 24 *New York Clipper*, November 1897, p. 617.
- 25 *The Phonoscope*, March 1898, p. 6.
- 26 *New York Clipper*, March 5, 1898, p. 6.
- 27 *New York World*, April 17, 1898.
- 28 *New York Dramatic Mirror*, November 19, 1898.
- 29 *New York Clipper*, October 7, 1899, p. 652.
- 30 *New York Dramatic Mirror*, October 14, 1899, p. 18.
- 31 During the 1890s, films often jumped their sprockets while being projected, so the picture did not register correctly on the screen. At first the projector had to be stopped and the film realigned before the exhibition could continue. In May 1898, Albert Smith developed a movable gate that allowed the film to be realigned during the projection. This invention was incorporated into Edison's 1899 Projecting Kinetoscope and must have been quickly adopted by competitors.
- 32 Edison films included *The Astor Tramp* (1899) and *Love and War* (1899), which survive in the paper print collection at the Library of Congress. Lubin's *The Tramp's Dream* (September 1899) is at the George Eastman House.
- 33 See *New York World*, August 24, 31, 1902; September 7, 21, 28, 1902; October 5, 19, 26, 1902.
- 34 Moving pictures usually moved to the bottom of the bill after playing many weeks at the same theater. At Proctor's 23rd Street Theatre, the Lumière Cinématographe was eleventh of fifteen acts (a good position) during the week of March 8, 1897. Two weeks later it had moved to the bottom of the bill. At the same theater, the Wargraph was eleventh of fifteen for the week of May 9, 1898, thirteenth of fourteen for the following week, and then at the bottom of the bill the following week. The Biograph and then the Wargraph were in favorable slots at Proctor's Pleasure Palace throughout almost all of the Spanish-American War and only later moved to the bottom of the bill. At Tony Pastor's during the week of May 17, 1897, Menchen's Kineopticon was fifth of fourteen, and during the week of August 8, 1898, it was eighth of fourteen. By the week of August 21, 1899, the Vitagraph, a permanent feature, had moved to the bottom of the bill.
- 35 See Equity Nos. 6795 and 6796, *Thomas Edison v. Webster and Kuhn*; Equity Nos. 6882 and 6883, *Thomas Edison v. Walter Issacs*; Equity Nos. 6852 and 6853, *Thomas Edison v. Marc Klaw and Abraham L. Erlanger*; Equity No. 7124 and 7125, *Thomas Edison v. Eberhard Schneider*; and Equity Nos. 7649 and 7650, *Thomas Edison v. "Farmer Dunn" Moving Picture Company*, all in the Circuit Court for the Southern District of New York, Federal Archive and Record Center for the Southern District of New York.
- 36 J. Stuart Blackton to William Gilmore, January 12, 1901, Defendants' Exhibit No. 116, J. Stuart Blackton, testimony, Equity No. 889, September sessions, 1912, *U.S. v. Motion Picture Patents Company*, U.S. District Court, District of Eastern Pennsylvania, Printed Record, p. 1879.
- 37 H. J. Collins, deposition, August 2, 1901, *Thomas A. Edison v. American Mutoscope and Benjamin F. Keith*, U.S. Circuit Court, Southern District of New York. Net earnings include earnings for both the Mutoscope and Biograph parts of the business. The earnings for 1900 are clearly net earnings rather than gross income. These earnings were then subdivided to show net earnings for the Biograph or projected moving picture part of the business.
- 38 This film is in the Library of Congress Paperprint Collection and was copyrighted on October 3, 1902.
- 39 American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, production records, Museum of Modern Art.
- 40 H. J. Collins, deposition, monthly income reports, September 16, 1901, to March 1902, Equity No. 6928. Gross income minus film costs would not yield "net earnings," however, since other costs are not listed. These figures would suggest that the Biograph Company continued to lose money on its projection services during late 1901 and early 1902.
- 41 Sigmund Lubin, testimony, March 11, 1914, *United States of America v. Motion Picture Patents Company*, U.S. District Court, Eastern Pennsylvania, Printed Record, p. 3046.
- 42 Edison Manufacturing Company, Profit and Loss Statements, March 1900 to February 1902, Edison National Historic Site.
- 43 Pratt's explanation for this absence is the traditional one of a chaser period. No one can question that Pratt has done extensive primary source research in this area.
- 44 Searchlight Theatre, Account book, 1900 to 1902, Library of Congress Division of Motion Pictures, Television and Recorded Sound. I appreciate Paul Spehr's bringing this collection to my attention.
- 45 Lyman H. Howe Moving Picture Company, promotional material, 1904, Wyoming Geological and Historical Society. Box office figures indicate no noticeable drop during the period in question. The chaser period was primarily an urban phenomenon. The quantity of product needed to give permanent sites a change of program each week was far greater than what was needed by traveling exhibitors who visited a town two or three times a year.
- 46 Jenkins 1975:279. Unfortunately, figures are not available for the 1903–1905 period. A further check at the Kodak Company Archive proved unproductive: apparently the company has a policy of destroying virtually all records after five years.
- 47 *New York Clipper*, March 22, 1902, p. 92.
- 48 *Ibid.*, March 29, 1902, p. 110.
- 49 Equity No. 36, April Sessions 1902, *Thomas A. Edison v. Siegmund Lubin*, U.S. Circuit Court, Eastern District of Pennsylvania.
- 50 *New York Clipper*, July 12, 1902, p. 444.
- 51 William Gilmore to William Pelzer, July 29, 1902, document file, Edison National Historic Site.
- 52 *Chicago Tribune*, July 15, 1901, p. 2.
- 53 Manager's report, Keith's Union Square Theatre, January 5 and 12, 1903, Keith/Albee Collection, cited in Allen 1977b:150.
- 54 Keith's Union Square Theatre, program, March 23, 1902, Theater Collection, Free Library of Philadelphia.
- 55 Manager's report, Keith's Union Square Theatre, January 5, 1903, cited in Allen 1977b:150.
- 56 *New York Clipper*, March 21 and 28, 1903, pp. 108, 132.

- 57 *New York Herald*, April 5, 1903, p. 10F, and *Boston Herald*, April 5, 1903, pp. 14–15. Initially these were billed simply as "Keith's Moving Pictures," but the "new machine" mentioned in the *Boston Herald* description was subsequently identified as the Vitagraph on April 19, 1903 (pp. 14–15). I have yet to establish whether the Vitagraph took over all or merely part of the Keith circuit.
- 58 *New York Clipper*, April 11, 1903, p. 168. The *Boston Herald* felt that "the new motion picture device far excels its predecessor and is being favorably commented on" (April 12, 1903, pp. 14–15).
- 59 *Biograph Bulletin* No. 6, June 1, 1903, reproduced in Niver 1971:83.
- 60 *Biograph Bulletin* No. 9, August 29, 1903, reproduced in Niver 1971:88.
- 61 *Ibid.*, p. 90.
- 62 *Biograph Bulletin* No. 14, September 21, 1903, reproduced in Niver 1971:104.
- 63 *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, February 14, 1904.
- 64 *Ibid.*
- 65 *Ibid.*, November 15, 1903.
- 66 Edwin S. Porter, deposition, June 20, 1907, *Armat Moving Picture Company v. Edison Manufacturing Company*, Equity No. 8303, U.S. Circuit Court, Southern District of New York.
- 67 "Important Motion Picture Patents," *The Nickelodeon*, October 1909, p. 114, cited in Thompson and Bordwell 1979:7.
- 68 Edison Manufacturing Company, Film Sales, 1904–February 1907, Document Files, Edison National Historic Site. Print-to-negative ratio is the number of projection prints sold per corresponding negative. Thus, by 1904, film companies were selling many more prints of a given acted film than of an actuality.
- 69 Edison Manufacturing Company, payroll books, 1906, Edison National Historic Site.
- 70 *Variety*, December 23, 1905, p. 3.
- 71 Albert E. Smith, testimony, November 14, 1913, *U.S. v. Motion Picture Patents Company*, Equity No. 889, September sessions, 1912, U.S. District Court, Eastern District of Pennsylvania.
- 72 *Moving Picture World*, January 11, 1913, p. 163.
- 73 *Views and Film Index*, May 5, 1906, p. 10.
- 74 *New York Clipper*, September 30, 1905, p. 824.
- 75 *Variety*, December 30, 1905.
- 76 *Billboard*, January 26, 1907, p. 18.
- 77 *Moving Picture World*, March 30, 1907, p. 58.
- 78 *Variety*, August 31, 1907, p. 16.
- 79 Allen's ideological stance is reminiscent of the thesis of corporate liberalism proposed by James Wienstein (1968) and Gabriel Kolko. The basic argument of corporate liberalism is that businessmen running large-scale industry had the necessary power and understanding to control the nature of political, social, and economic change. Such an analysis tends to devalue the impact of working-class and other plebian agitation and organization on American life. In a somewhat different way, Allen's rewriting of the pre-Griffith cinema does the same thing, only on a commercial level.

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II. Looking at "Another Look at the 'Chaser Theory' "

Robert C. Allen

Charles Musser's "Another Look at the 'Chaser Theory' " should be regarded as a companion piece to his recent *Cinema Journal* article. In both articles Musser reports on his recent research on early American film history, casting this research as an alternative or response to the position of a film historian whom Musser identifies as a member of the "new generation": in the case of the first article, Douglas Gomery, and in the present case, myself. Leaving aside the merits of this rhetorical strategy as a vehicle for the presentation of his own, quite important historical investigations, it is significant that in both articles the position Musser takes issue with must be either wrenched out of context or inflated beyond recognition if the "alternative" to it is to be made clear.

Musser applies Gomery's argument regarding economic decision making involved in the coming of sound to the early development of the Vitagraph Company—something Gomery himself has not done. Musser then finds Gomery's "model" not "a sufficient basis for constructing the history of American Vitagraph, nor does it adequately account for the company's success." But, of course, that "model" was never presented as such. That "dispute" is between Musser and Gomery, and the latter is more than capable of speaking for himself (see Gomery 1983).

In my case Musser takes what is a very modest reinterpretation of the account of the early years of commercial film exhibition contained in survey film histories, exaggerates it well beyond its original explanatory dimensions, and presents it as a "new, premature orthodoxy." Let me make clear at this point that I have the highest regard for Charles Musser's contributions to the study of early film history. Those contributions are, however, "alternative" to my own work only when the latter is made into a straw man. Presented accurately, my own interpretations and those of Musser bear more points of similarity than of historiographic difference.

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Musser's elaborately constructed argument against my work rests upon what I have called the "chaser theory" and the alternative explanation I have put forward to counter it. Musser's argument collapses, however, when my views on both the chaser theory and a possible alternative to it are set forth accurately.¹ In my dissertation (1977a) and in the article in *Wide Angle* derived from it (1979a), I am careful to delineate exactly what I mean by the chaser theory:

At the heart of this theory is a two-fold assumption: 1) that motion pictures were universally unpopular during this period [roughly 1897–1901, as I say twice on the first page of the article] and 2) that the cause of this public disfavor was probably the repetition of the same types of films—according to Jowett, "scenic shots or fake reproductions of current and historical events."

Even the reader unfamiliar with early American film history might find this "theory" implausibly simplistic (as, indeed, it is); yet it is not unfair to say that it summarizes the treatment of film exhibition during this period in many film histories from 1914 to the present. Gilbert Seldes (1929) observed that "nothing whatever of interest" occurred in the American cinema prior to 1903 (p. 20). Summarizing the prevailing view among film historians at the time, Joseph North wrote in his 1949 dissertation:

While many people had viewed the showings in 1896 and 1897 with enthusiasm, it does seem that a good number of them lost interest in the medium shortly thereafter. . . . Their [the films'] success . . . was only temporary, for in a little more than a year they were relegated to 'the position of "chaser." In the latter state the appearance of the pictures on the screen signaled the audience that the show was over, and that it was time to clear the house for the next performance. *This condition prevailed in all vaudeville houses which exhibited the motion pictures.* [North 1973:184–186, emphasis added]

More recently, Garth Jowett (1975) drawing directly upon North, claimed that "the exploitation of the movies by the vaudeville houses was the lowest point in motion picture history, and almost succeeded in killing off the young medium before it had completely matured and attained its full commercial potential" (p. 29). The reason for the movies' lack of success during this period, Jowett maintained, was "primarily due to the rather dull nature of the films then being turned out. These consisted mainly of scenic shots or fake reproductions of current and historical events, and

audiences soon grew tired of having to watch the same type over and over again" (see also Grau 1914:11–12; Ramsaye 1926:407).

In my article I set about demonstrating that the leveling of the use of films in vaudeville during the period 1897–1901 to the *ubiquitous* status of "chaser"—whether that term is used to signify an act so bad that it literally cleared the house, or an act so poorly received that it served only to signal the end of the bill—is unsupportable on the basis of historical evidence. All I need do to make my quite modest case is to find ample evidence of the successful use of film in vaudeville theaters during this period. And such evidence is abundant in newspaper accounts, theatrical trade papers, and vaudeville managers' report books. Musser himself points out in his essay on Vitagraph that the popularity of films dealing with the Spanish-American War "gave exhibitors like American Vitagraph new opportunities to move up to big-time showmanship" (1983:12)—echoing a conclusion I had reached in a nine-page discussion of the subject in my dissertation six years earlier: "The Spanish-American War was probably the most propitious event in the early history of the American cinema" (1977a:135).

Perhaps the problem lies in my dignifying the accounts of this period in many standard film histories with the term "theory," when "grossly oversimplified generalization" would have been more precise. I engaged in the all-too-easy task of deflating this generalization primarily for two reasons: first, because this blanket generalization (or some slightly qualified version of it) serves far too frequently as the only account of film exhibition between 1897 and 1901 in survey histories and textbooks; and second, because it is supported only by the thinnest layer of historical evidence. But in both my dissertation and in the *Wide Angle* article I go beyond merely pricking the "grossly oversimplified chaser generalization" and attempt to specify some of the functions movies served for vaudeville audiences and the range of film types produced during this early period designed to address audience interests and desires. It is clear (and clearly stated in both dissertation and *Wide Angle* article) that the novelty value of the motion picture soon wore off and that the period following the 1896–1897 vaudeville season and lasting for at least the next six years was one during which producers experimented with various types of films, exhibition venues, and marketing strategies, and, concomitantly, were subject to forces beyond their immediate control: the already established system of popular entertainment into which they inserted themselves, cultural norms, audience expectations, among others.

Musser's summary of my position—"While Allen acknowledges that some vacillation occurred based on

the newsworthiness of topical films, he argues that producers and exhibitors generally were able to keep their audiences entertained"—is simply inaccurate. During the course of a 75-page discussion of the use of film in vaudeville (Allen 1977a), I point out any number of factors that, in specific instances, might have led to audience dissatisfaction with movie programs between 1896 and 1901, among them technical problems (pp. 97–98, 134, 173), unskilled operators (pp. 98–99), obtaining a regular supply of new subjects (pp. 99, 127), print quality (p. 100), diminution of the initial novelty effect of seeing objects in motion (pp. 125, 180), infrequent change of program (p. 133), unimaginative subjects (p. 134), and poor positioning on the vaudeville bill (pp. 149–151). Having surveyed the types of films made during the 1896–1901 period, I conclude (as does Musser) that the most successful function movies served in vaudeville was that of visual newspaper: the depiction of news events of interest to a national audience. My assessment of the consequences of this strategy can hardly be summarized accurately as "acknowledging that some vacillation occurred based on the newsworthiness of topical films":

The heavy reliance of the film producers on topical films naturally meant that the popularity of individual motion picture acts would vary considerably from week to week, since public response was dependent in large measure upon the impact of the news events depicted. The problem was articulated by Thomas Armat in a letter to Thomas Edison in November 1901:

The problem with the motion picture business was that as things are now business runs by spurts. If there happens to be a yacht race or the assassination of a president there is a good run on films for a few months. Then it drops down to a demand that keeps the large force busy about one-fourth of the time while much money is wasted in experimenting with costly subjects that the public will not buy.

It is my contention that the unpredictability of the success of topical films might well have been responsible first for the increased proportion of comic vignettes and finally for the ascension of the dramatic narrative film—these two forms not being dependent for their popularity upon exigencies external to the immediate production situation. The above factors might well have been responsible for some audience dissatisfaction with motion pictures in vaudeville, but there is sufficient evidence to indicate that they did not drag down the motion picture into the "abyss" of chaser ignominy, to use Mast's term. [1979a:10; see also 1977a:147–148]

In short, Musser reduces what I have called the "chaser theory" from the generalization that films were ubiquitously disdained during the period 1897–1901 because they were boring to the innocu-

ous assertion that sometime between 1897 and 1903 films declined in popularity, while, conversely, he stretches my argument from negation of the "chaser theory" narrowly defined to its obverse—that the popularity of films did not decline at any time between 1896 and 1903! His keystone paragraph begins as follows:

Allen's rejection of the chaser period is part of a larger argument. If, as he argues, cinema's popularity did not decline, then the rise of the story film was not a precondition of the nickelodeon boom, nor was it necessarily due to consumer demand. In making his argument, Allen does not locate the shift to story films at the end of the chaser period (ca. 1903). He argues that fictional "features" of approximately 500 to 1,000 feet began to dominate U.S. filmmaking around 1907 and views it as a response to (not as a cause of) the rise of the nickelodeons. [emphasis in original]

If I argued what Musser claims, then the rest of his article might logically follow. But I do not. In my dissertation I state:

Obviously, the motion picture, constantly exposed to vaudeville audiences, could maintain its status as the primary "drawing card" or chief attraction of vaudeville bills only for so many weeks, even with a regular change of individual films. As early as August 3, 1896, the Vitascope had moved from fourth position on the bill at Koster and Bial's (generally regarded as the spot for the second most important act, and the position in which the Vitascope first appeared on April 23) to the closing spot. The closing spot was not the most desirable, as it often came after the position reserved for the "star" of the bill. Performers whose acts were scheduled for the final spot often had to perform over the noise of some departing patrons. . . . More times than not, the motion picture concluded vaudeville performances after 1897. [1977a:125–126]

My suggestion in the *Wide Angle* article that the rise of the narrative film (particularly the comedy) after 1901 helped to solve the inherent instability of a movie industry dependent upon the unpredictability of topical films has already been noted. This suggestion is also contained in my dissertation, so there is no doubt that I locate the beginning of the "switch" to narrative films precisely at the time Musser claims I do not. I wish to quote a portion of that argument in the dissertation so that my position can be seen clearly.

The fact that by 1903 comedy films comprised at least thirty percent of American film output is, I think, best interpreted not as a sign that documentary films were failures in appealing to vaudeville audiences, but that they could not be expected to maintain a high level of appeal week after week, month after month. They were, after all,

dependent to some extent upon eventualities totally outside of the control of filmmakers; presidential assassinations, hurricanes, and wars did not occur every week—at least not in places easily accessible to motion picture cameras. As Armat's letter to Edison points out, some remedy was needed for the irregular-supply problem which afflicted the motion picture industry. Comedy and trick films were certainly popular with vaudeville audiences and were especially useful in attracting juvenile patrons. . . . No longer was it necessary to rely entirely upon news events or exotic locales for motion picture subject matter. The scenic and narrative requirements of the comedy film could be made to conform to the limitations of the studio and its environs. . . . While my sources are silent on the matter, a hypothesis might be generated to the effect that, in part at least, the need to regain control of the production situation provided the impetus for the development of the dramatic narrative film, examples of which began to appear on vaudeville programs in increasing numbers in 1903. The dramatic narrative, like its comic cousin, by creating its own fictional world obviated the need to tie a production to the outside world. [1977a:157–158]

What I have claimed regarding the period ca. 1907 and the rise of the nickelodeon is that the sudden spurt in demand for movies caused by the nickelodeon "boom" of 1906–1908 might have been responsible for the near elimination of non-narrative films as producers were pressed to turn out films quickly and on a regular and predictable basis. I certainly agree with Musser that some of the data I used in suggesting this hypothesis were incomplete—namely the Paper Prints Catalogue—but the suggestion that the nickelodeon explosion and the embracing of the narrative film were, as I put it, not "entirely coincidental" came within the context of a speculative essay in the *Film Studies Annual* (1977b) and was prefaced by this disclaimer: "I have only begun my inquiry into the rise of the narrative cinema, and thus cannot pretend to offer an alternative explanation for its rise satisfying to either the reader or myself." My point, as is clear from the article as a whole, was merely to offer an example of how alternative historical explanations might be generated if certain ontological assumptions about the nature of the cinema were changed.

Musser's claim that I attribute the chaser theory solely to Robert Grau is inaccurate, as his own citation of my comments earlier in his essay reveals. Grau is the historian ultimately relied upon in many survey histories—directly or indirectly—for their discussion of the early years of cinema exhibition. But what of Musser's contention that I overlooked or dismissed any number of comments made between 1903 and 1910 which "suggest that films, in fact, declined in popularity." As it has never been my view that films did *not* "decline in popularity" following their

initial exhibition in vaudeville theaters, these references can hardly be marshaled in refutation of my position. Citation of a thousand references to "the cinema's earlier difficulties" does not alter the irrefutable fact that films were not universally despised between 1897 and 1901. But since Musser has brought them into the argument, let us examine the quality of this counterfactual evidence.

The comments of Gaston Méliès, the Miles Brothers, and Carl Laemmle—made between 1903 and 1907—are all obviously self-serving. The comments of Gaston Méliès, Georges Méliès's brother and American agent, are taken from a 1903 advertising catalog whose purpose was to make Méliès's films appear to be as innovative and important as possible relative to the American product of the time.

The citation from a 1906 article in *Views and Film Index* claims that films were unpopular "when the pictures were first shown in the vaudeville houses." That is demonstrably untrue. The point Musser wishes to make from that article's report on a change in management at Denver's Orpheum Theater is unclear. If it is merely that showmanship could make the difference between a successful film program and an unsuccessful one (which the first-quoted paragraph seems to imply), then that is hardly a startling revelation. In discussing the position of film programs on vaudeville bills at the Keith-Albee theaters in 1902 I conclude: "There is evidence that acts appearing at or near the end of the continuous program [as opposed to the two-a-day system then in use at some other theaters], no matter how good they might have been, often went unnoticed by a good portion of the audience, which did not sit through the entire lengthy bill" (1977a:151).

The editorial Musser cites from the January 22, 1910, issue of *Moving Picture World* is problematic for a different reason. Internal evidence suggests the editorial was written not by an American but by a European and that his references are to British or European variety halls. He refers to people who "walked around the promenade or went and indulged in liquid refreshment." Promenades and bars were common features of English music halls but not of American vaudeville. The author talks of movies being shown in "the great European cities," and, in a paragraph not quoted by Musser, compares the success of films in New York vaudeville in 1910 to his memory of their lack of success in London: "We wondered if the people would rise from their seats and leave the house as they used to do in London." It is fairly obvious that this front-page editorial was written by Thomas Bedding, co-editor of *Moving Picture World*, a Fellow of the Royal Photographic Society, and a Briton. I cannot vouch for his whereabouts during the

period 1897–1901, but as late as December 1908 he was in London, where he addressed the London and Provincial Photographic Association (see *Bioscope*, December 31, 1908, p. 5).

Musser seems to prefer Jacobs's interpretation of the events of 1900 to 1903 to my own. He is certainly free to do so. I invite the reader, if he or she has not done so already, to read carefully the scant two pages Jacobs devotes to vaudeville exhibition of movies between 1896 and 1903. Please note that Jacobs recognizes no difficulties in the use of film as a vaudeville turn until 1901. (The White Rats strike he refers to occurred in 1901, not 1900, as he claims.) According to Jacobs, the use of films during the strike "sharply revealed the strong popular appeal and commercial value of movies." Why, then, if the strike proved film to be so popular in vaudeville, was it immediately "either abandoned . . . or presented . . . at end of their programs, so that the people who did not care to see it could leave"? Jacobs attributes this amazing turn of events to unimaginative vaudeville managers and to the fact that "most movies had hardly advanced beyond their first attempts and continued to show similar subjects with the same reproductive technique." Remember, we're talking 1901 here, not 1897. That, in a nutshell, is Jacobs's interpretation of the chaser phenomenon (Jacobs 1967:4–5).

Musser's next contention is that "Allen tends to treat the postnovelty/prenickelodeon period between 1897 and 1905 as an undifferentiated period in cinema's history." Within the 67-page chapter I devote to this "undifferentiated period" in my dissertation, I discuss not only the effects of the Spanish-American War and subsequent news events upon the use of film in vaudeville, but also the difficulties with the topical film in the 1900–1902 period, the origins of the comic film, the considerable success of Méliès's films in vaudeville, and the initial use of dramatic narratives. It is hard for me to see how it could be said that I treat what is obviously an era of change and experimentation as "undifferentiated."

Before discussing the "alternative" interpretation of this period that forms the bulk of Musser's essay, let me say that I am not at all surprised that scholars should disagree with, alter, modify, revise, or dismiss my work on early film history, most of which came out of the experience of writing a dissertation on the relationship between vaudeville and film in 1977. Film history would be a moribund field, indeed, if historical interpretations were not challenged and changed in the light of new research. Indeed, I have long maintained that if my work had any value at all, it was not in establishing a new "orthodoxy," but as a tentative and unsure foray into what is still largely uncharted

terrain. When I allowed Arno Press to publish my dissertation in 1979, I did so on the condition that I could add a new preface, part of which reads, "I would now maintain that research into this period is not at an end, but at a beginning, and that the principal value of my study lies not in the answers it gives but in the questions it raises and in the as yet unformulated questions its gaps and lapses will, I hope, give rise to." Thus I find the work of Charles Musser, Patrick Loughney, Janet Staiger, David Levy, Tom Gunning, Jon Gartenberg, Marshall Deutelbaum, and others investigating this period to be extremely important in specifying the forces at work in the development of early American cinema—whether the specifics of their findings support or refute my own.

But just how "alternative" is Musser's response to my revisionist interpretation of early film history? For the most part his five stages in the prenickelodeon history of American cinema are hardly radical departures from my findings, except for the fifth, for which the least evidence is cited and which Musser himself admits is the most problematic. Musser notes that by 1897 "topicality of subject matter became an important criterion for spectators and reviewers." In my dissertation I note that "by the beginning of the 1897–98 season, motion picture acts based their appeal less on the cinema's ability to render highly iconic representations and more on the subject matter which was represented" (1977a:127). A page or two later we learn that "the Spanish-American War was the dominant feature of this second phase, further propelling moving pictures into the role of a visual newspaper"—a conclusion hardly at odds with that contained in my discussion of the war in both the dissertation and *Wide Angle* article. On page 140 of the dissertation I point out, "Much of the popular appeal of the motion picture in vaudeville during the years following the Spanish-American War was due to its continued use as news vehicle." My contention that "The immediate effect of the use of motion pictures as vaudeville acts was to provide the infant film industry with a stable marketing outlet during its early years" (1977a:318) is directly echoed by Musser: "Vaudeville theaters helped to provide a steady commercial base from which these major exhibition companies could operate during the 1899–1905 period." And finally, Musser claims, "When given the opportunity (or faced with the necessity) of responding to the low popularity of programs or competition from rival companies, film producers generally moved in the direction of fictional narratives after 1901." I hope I will be excused for not finding this an "alternative" explanation.

In short, we wind up not too far away from the interpretation Musser used as his point of departure—at

least the version of that interpretation to be found in my work, rather than that as presented by Musser at the beginning of his essay. Certainly there are some differences: Musser's periodization is more concrete; he quite rightly reasserts the impact of the 1901–1902 patent litigations on the film industry; he corrects my use of incomplete data in computing the number of narrative films made during a given period. For these and other emendations to my work he deserves my thanks. But what impresses me most about his "alternative" interpretation of this period is not its radical departure from my own and other contemporary historians' findings (it does not make such a departure), but rather its confirmation of the conclusion I reached after attempting to survey the exhibition situation in Manhattan between 1906 and 1912:

The extent to which the findings of this study can be generalized beyond Manhattan is a moot question. New York might well turn out to be typical only of New York: factors quite alien to the situation there might prove to be decisive elsewhere. What is needed are studies of exhibition in other cities—large and small, polyglot and homogeneous, in all parts of the country. Only when this task has been accomplished can we safely make generalizations about the nickelodeon. [1979b]

Musser finds the exhibition situation in Chicago during the prenickelodeon years to have been considerably different from that obtaining in New York. How different might each of them be from the situations to be found in St. Louis, Seattle, or New Orleans? And how different still might these urban exhibition situations be from those in smaller cities and towns? In Durham, N.C., for example, the first year-round exhibition site for movies was not established until 1907, and exhibitors in Durham immediately went after a middle-class audience and particularly sought women and children. The same pattern seems to hold for Greensboro, N.C., as well (Allen and Gomery: forthcoming, chap. 8).

The study of early film history is not in "disarray" but rather in an embryonic stage in which there is plenty of room for any serious film historian with patience and a high tolerance for microfilm-induced eyestrain. I plead entirely guilty to foregrounding exhibition concerns in my own work but hardly to the exclusion of production. Had I written what purported to be a comprehensive account of early American film history, then Musser's comment that my work "has been hampered by a disinterest in production" would be an apt criticism, but in a dissertation on *vaudeville* and film, it is difficult *not* to emphasize exhibition over other aspects of early cinema practice. I believe that film history advances not linearly and unproblematically or by the total "victory" of one historian's inter-

pretation over another, but slowly, haltingly, and by virtue of what philosopher Roy Bhaskar (1975) and others have called the "principle of noncontradiction": where two investigators of differing philosophical orientations and methods investigate the same phenomenon and *do not* disagree, we have an empirically grounded basis upon which to build our theories.

Try as he might, Musser cannot argue away those points of noncontradiction. As to his concluding charges that I contend that early film entrepreneurs were "in control of their destinies" or that I embrace a "conspiracy theory of big business," this is nonsense, as anyone who knows my work will immediately see. When Musser devises a theoretically informed interpretation of early American film history that can deal with "the contradictions inherent in the capitalist system," I will look forward to reading it.

Note

- ¹ All references to Charles Musser's work are to the essay in this issue unless otherwise noted.

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III. Musser's Reply to Allen

In "Contra the Chaser Period," Allen clearly states his case: "I disagree with the designation of this era as a chaser period. It is my contention that at the very least the chaser period is a misnomer, at the most a complete misrepresentation of the exhibition situation at that time" (Allen 1979:4). Yet as new information comes to light, the widespread existence of something we can profitably call the "chaser period" becomes more and more apparent. For instance, a 1908 issue of *Billboard* described the prenickelodeon period in Cincinnati in the following terms:

When [pictures] first came out people said it was only a craze—that it would not last—that the people would soon tire of it and after a few years it did seem that the public was really getting tired of moving pictures. One illustration of this seeming indifference was the habit that people got into of walking out of the vaudeville theatre as soon as the moving pictures, which closed the show, would be put on It did seem for a while that the moving pictures would go out of fashion but there was a revival. [June 27, p. 8]

Or as the Manchester (N.H.) *Mirror* reported in 1907: "It was only a short time ago, within two years, that the public having a good show that closed with pictures would leave when the show was over and not wait for the pictures. Now the pictures have driven the shows out."¹ More recently I have found contemporaneous (rather than retrospective) evidence from Pittsburgh newspapers. Describing a 1903 film exhibition at Pittsburgh's only vaudeville house, Harry Davis's Avenue Theater, the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* described conditions as the projection booth burst into flames:

When the film exploded a great portion of the audience was leaving the theater. The cinematographe is used as a sort of interval between the feature acts on the programme and what is termed the "supper show." At the conclusion of the regular acts many of the people in the house leave, and it is the late comers, those who drop in for a few minutes, who stay. The audience was wending its way leisurely to the exits when the explosion occurred. [November 26, p. 1]

The supper show, significantly, was sometimes called "the hour of the chasers" and included the weakest acts on the bill. Less than a year later, conditions at the Avenue Theater had changed. Although moving pictures still closed the bill made up of fifteen acts, "very few people left their seats until it [the film *The Capture of the Yegg Bank Burglars*] was concluded. Such evidence points toward one crucial reason for this revival, even though it was not the only one: the

rapid proliferation of story films, particularly from 1903 onward.

When Allen accuses a group of historians of having made "a complete misrepresentation," one does not suppose he is offering "a modest reinterpretation of their work." When my article suggests that competition between vaudeville theaters, rather than the White Rats strike as Jacobs indicates, resulted in the installation of moving pictures as a permanent feature, this might be considered a modest reinterpretation. Nor would I rule out the possibility that theatrical entrepreneurs perceived general White Rat militancy as a threat that could be reduced by replacing a live vaudeville act with moving pictures. This could have been a contributing factor, although I have no evidence either way. Why Jacobs was so attracted to this explanation is worth considering. As a leftist historian, Jacobs was interested in the way vaudeville capitalists seized on moving pictures to break a union. And for the entertainment industry this served as an early use of machines to displace human workers. Such a process did take place, although not precisely in the way Jacobs suggests. His assessment, nonetheless, remains provocative and has been recast in more sophisticated terms by contemporary historians.

Although reductive comments about the chaser period are unsatisfactory, they do contain a kernel of truth: the film industry was in a state of crisis. "Contra the Chaser Period" rejects this notion of crisis. While Allen admits that exhibitors faced problems "in specific instances," my purpose is to suggest that these problems were far more general. Given the enthusiastic reception generated by Allen's article, it became important to reemphasize the underlying difficulties that plagued the film industry during the early 1900s. Allen's article does present some excellent research; if it had foregrounded cinema's use as a visual newspaper or the exhibition of local actuality subjects rather than dismissing the chaser "myth," my response would be much more positive. The issue is not simply one of facts but how these facts are structured, interpreted, and related to a larger framework.

If Allen qualifies his assertions in "Film History: The Narrow Discourse" (1977), other historians have accepted them with less reservation. One historian uses Allen's "speculation" to place the shift from actualities to fictional narrative in 1906–1907.³ Following Allen's lead, she finds this shift to be a result of, rather than a precondition for, the nickelodeon era. Another historian, after surveying Allen's work, concludes that virtually all films were shown in vaudeville theaters.⁴

Such misperceptions need to be corrected if these historians are to continue their valuable work. If vaudeville provided an important exhibition venue, so did summer parks and traveling exhibitors. One of the weaknesses of Allen's dissertation is its failure to situate vaudeville in relation to other exhibition outlets. Many areas of disagreement between Allen and myself are implicit in my article. While Allen argues that films were sometimes sold to vaudeville theaters (1979:10), I find no evidence for this. All vaudeville houses apparently hired exhibition services or rented films. Allen asserts that actuality films cost more to make than acted narratives in the pre-1907 period, since travel costs were high (1977:13–15). Yet building and maintaining a studio, hiring actors, constructing sets, and keeping studio personnel on staff involved larger, longer-term outlays. Such costs made fictional filmmaking more expensive, even in the early 1900s. If this was not the case, the shift to acted films would have occurred even earlier. Furthermore, some evidence indicates that cameramen's travels (and perhaps even their salaries) were often subsidized by railroad companies.⁵

Allen's work on early cinema often presents new, important information for our consideration. His work, however, has a tendency to push conclusions farther than his evidence comfortably allows. For instance, he notes that on New York's Lower East Side, poor Italian neighborhoods lacked nickelodeons, while Jewish neighborhoods did have such theaters. Allen also points out that these Italian communities were composed primarily of single men who tended to repatriate, while Jewish neighborhoods had a preponderance of families. This valuable information leaves one unprepared for Allen's conclusion—that Italian men "were unlikely to spend part of their paltry earnings on something so frivolous as the movies" (Allen 1983:169). Given the many references to Italians going to movies, another explanation seems more likely: Single Italian males preferred to go to films in nearby entertainment districts like 14th Street while people with families preferred to stay closer to home.

Although I find myself in disagreement with many of Allen's interpretations and aspects of Douglas Gomery's theoretical framework, this does not mean that I see myself as an "alternative." In disciplines more firmly established than cinema studies, historical work proceeds through a dialectical process with previous evidence and interpretation. As new information is unearthed and as our theoretical and ideological frameworks shift, historians bring new perspectives to their field. I not only see my work as greatly indebted to a wide range of scholars who are comparatively new to the field, but also to earlier scholarship. Allen's eagerness to reject past scholarship for deficiencies

of research or ideological correctness not only prevents him from seeing what is valuable in their work, but also invites scrutiny of his own work for its deficiencies and ideological preconceptions. Yet Allen, with the self-assurance of a man who considers himself *the* authority, dismisses my attempt to examine our respective philosophical and political assumptions.

Allen seems most ready to engage my typos and grammar. Re: "disinterest." *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (1971) offers three meanings of the word. One is "absence of interest, unconcern"—exactly the meaning I had intended. Puzzled, I searched other dictionaries and discovered they generally do not list the word. Hard evidence is lacking, but I suspect that Allen after not finding the word in his dictionary, once again jumped to a hasty conclusion based on incomplete research.

Notes

- 1 *Manchester Mirror*, cited in *Moving Picture World*, October 26, 1907.
- 2 *Pittsburgh Post*, October 11, 1903.
- 3 See, for example, Staiger 1981.
- 4 See, for example, Thompson 1982.
- 5 In the case of Bonine's Hawaiian films taken in 1906 for Edison, see *Honolulu Bulletin* (cited in *Views and Film Index*, September 15, 1906, p. 4).

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THE "CHASER THEORY"

I. Another Look at the "Chaser Theory"

Charles Musser

My film, *Before the Nickelodeon*, is an hour-long documentary about Edwin S. Porter, the maker of *The Great Train Robbery*, and the pre-Griffith (1895–1908) American cinema. In many ways the documentary takes a new approach to early cinema, concentrating on the dialectical relations between production methods and approaches to representation. I have also dealt with these issues in a number of articles (Musser 1979, 1981, 1983b).

In one area, *Before the Nickelodeon* appears to take an outdated position that has fallen into disfavor with some film scholars, such as Robert C. Allen (Allen 1977a, 1977b, 1979a). It presents, in the course of its historical narrative, the traditional argument that American cinema declined in popularity during the early 1900s and was "rescued" by the story film. The following article presents my research and analyses on this issue in a more elaborate and closely argued manner than a film could possibly allow.

Historical Accounts

The historical study of American cinema is in a state of exciting disarray. In many cases, accepted pronouncements by several generations of film historians have been called into question and often superceded by new analyses. Issues once considered of little importance are being reexamined and reformulated. One such issue is the shift to story films during the 1896–1907 period. According to many standard histories, a "chaser period" existed during the late 1890s and/or early 1900s, during which cinema's popularity was at a low point.¹ At a time when vaudeville was probably the single most important outlet for films, pictures generally were shown at the end of vaudeville programs as "chasers." In many instances, substantial portions of the audience left before or during the concluding turn of films; in other cases, theaters abandoned moving pictures entirely. This decline in films' popularity generally has been attributed to

the limited variety of motion picture subjects—mostly travel films, news topical, and short comedies. The resolution of this crisis is supposed to be the rise of the story film, particularly one film, *The Great Train Robbery* (December 1903). Such story films renewed audience interest in moving pictures and so encouraged the nickelodeon boom of storefront theaters (see Jacobs 1939).

One scholar who has challenged this account is Robert C. Allen. He argues that the chaser period is a myth perpetuated by historians in a self-referential, self-validating system that lacks primary research necessary to prove or invalidate their claims. Based on his research, Allen argues that the chaser period is really a "chaser theory" without any basis in historical reality. As Allen concludes, "From the primary source material I have been able to locate and examine, it does not appear that motion pictures in vaudeville sank to the low level of popularity suggested by most film historians" (1979a:10). Citing a significant number of instances when motion pictures received kudos from the press and trade papers, Allen argues that film programs were never consistently bad enough to chase vaudeville audiences away. According to Allen,

If the chaser theory is undefensible, then why do we find it in so many histories of early American cinema? The reason is a simple, though distressing one: little original scholarship into the exhibition situation existing prior to the nickelodeon has been conducted, and film historians like Sklar, Jowett, Jacobs, etc., concerned with the historical development of the American cinema over a forty or seventy year period, have seen fit to rely entirely upon secondary sources for their information in this area. In fact, Jowett, Sklar, Jacobs and North are heavily reliant upon a single early writer on motion picture history: Robert Grau. . . . His *Theatre of Science* (1914) is the key source for information on the chaser period used by many historians. While it is true that Grau "was there" during the period in question, his account of events fifteen or more years in the past is peppered with inaccuracies, entirely undocumented and contradictory with aspects of his account of the same events contained in his other writings. [ibid:10–11]

While Allen acknowledges that some vacillation occurred based on the newsworthiness of topical films, he argues that producers and exhibitors generally were able to keep their audiences entertained.

Allen's rejection of the chaser period is part of a larger argument. If, as he argues, cinema's popularity did not decline, then the rise of the story film was not a precondition of the nickelodeon boom, nor was it necessarily due to consumer demand. In making his argument, Allen does not locate the shift to story films at the end of the chaser period (ca. 1903). He argues

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