

## Early Advertising and Promotional Films, 1893–1900: Edison Motion Pictures as a Case Study

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The extent to which the early motion-picture industry self-consciously used films for advertising and promotional purposes has never been properly recognised. The movies were never 'innocent'. From the very outset, companies did more than make films for sale and profit: the films served other purposes as well and functioned frequently in a duplicitous manner. Audiences may have routinely paid good money to be entertained, informed or even instructed; but many of these films were implicitly – and sometimes explicitly – serving an advertising or promotional agenda. Their underlying purpose was to sell goods and services, and this is nowhere more evident than with the subjects produced at Edison's Black Maria film studio and/or distributed by the Edison Manufacturing Company in the late nineteenth century. The assertion that the predominant function of motion pictures in the kinetoscope era and beyond was to advertise and promote might be debated, but it is not obviously wrong. As early as 1894–5, a film's amusement value, its ability to induce potential patrons to spend 5 cents for a quick look, might be seen as only the necessary precondition for the achievement of this unacknowledged goal.

Although the Edison company exemplified an industry-wide trend, at least in the USA, it may have been more aggressive in these pursuits than many of its rivals. Its pre-eminence in this respect may be explained by a variety of factors. For example, businesses of all kinds may have been eager to trade on an association with the Edison name. Edison and his companies also had unique experience in marketing their own goods and services. And, being first in this field, Edison's film company may have simply occupied it first, assuring its pre-eminence. Moreover, in the wake of the Panic of 1893 and the economic depression that followed, Thomas Edison was determined to off-load his production costs onto other parties – or otherwise minimise film-making-related expenses, often by partnering with celebrities and transportation companies. In this respect, promotional or advertising benefits were emphasised as an important payoff. This might involve, for example, an early use of what we now call 'product placement'. Certainly, other important American film companies pursued similar commercial strategies. The American Mutoscope and Biograph Company rivalled Edison in this regard: it collaborated with the New York Central Railroad in the autumn of 1896, producing *Empire State Express*, which both preceded and sparked the Edison company's ongoing commercial relations with other railroad companies.<sup>1</sup> This is not entirely surprising in that Biograph's first production head, W. K. L. Dickson, had previously been Edison's head of production (as well as co-inventor of Edison's

motion-picture system). At least some of the films discussed here can be presently seen on YouTube; they will be indicated with an asterisk (\*) after the title of the film. I also provide a number for each Edison film, which is based on a filmography that I published as *Edison Motion Pictures, 1890–1900: An Annotated Filmography*. While this may encourage the dedicated reader to pursue further investigations, the numbers also suggest the relative chronological position of each film. I have identified roughly 1,000 Edison films made in the decade between 1891 and 1900.

## PIMPING THE LOVE CHILD FROM THE VERY MOMENT OF ITS BIRTH<sup>2</sup>

Edison's first films from 1893 were designed to draw attention to Edison's newest technology and thus promote it. I have described these films as 'demonstration films' (specifically *Blacksmithing Scene* [no. 16, also known as *Blacksmith Scene*\*], *Horse Shoeing* [no. 17] and *The Barbershop Scene* [no. 18, aka *The Barbershop*\*]). The first film made explicitly for commercial exhibition – *Sandow*\* (no. 26, March 1894) – went further. For this twenty-second motion picture, vaudeville star and famed strongman Sandow was dressed in the bare minimum as he displayed his muscular body before Edison's camera and went through a series of poses. The filming itself was nothing more than a carefully orchestrated media event. All the major New York newspapers covered the story, either sending reporters to Edison Laboratory in Orange, New Jersey, where the filming took place – or making up what transpired for their columns. The story had several possible angles. According to the *New York Herald*:

The strongest man on earth, to quote the play bills, and the greatest inventor of the age met yesterday at Menlo Park [sic], New Jersey. The meeting was an interesting one, and the giant of brain and the giant of muscle found much to admire in each other. Sandow marveled at Edison's inventions, and the Wizard gazed longingly and enviously at the prodigious muscles of the strong man.<sup>3</sup>

The *Herald* had Edison greeting Sandow at the train station. Although this was a complete fabrication that provided its account with some extra punch, Edison did, in fact, shake hands with Sandow at his laboratory since the strongman had promised to waive his fee if he actually met the inventor.

As the symmetry of the above quote suggests, the event was staged for the benefit of both parties as a criss-cross of mutual endorsements. Certainly it brought attention to Edison's new commercial venture: the kinetoscope, which would debut in little more than a month. This encouraged orders for machines and whetted the interest of potential spectators. At the same time, it was part of Sandow's efforts to promote both his stage career and, more specifically, his book on physical fitness that would appear just one or two weeks later, entitled *Sandow on Physical Training*.<sup>4</sup> Eleven days after its article on Sandow's visit to the Black Maria, the *New York Herald* published a lengthy and glowing review of the strongman's book. Edison's endorsement was thus followed by another. 'A great many books have treated the same topic, but they have not equaled this in perspicuity,' the reviewer remarked.<sup>5</sup> As an extra boost, on the very day of this *Herald* review, the *New York World* published an article on Edison's new

kinetograph books, and films. It all difficulties seemed self. If Edison by challenging stronger certainly fundamental inaugurate times in the James J. C. Fight\* (no. had to play other parts champion of this ever common in (which sold built career

## PROMOTING

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W. D. Mearns for next series of the principles publicly explained

kinetograph motion-picture system, featuring frames of Sandow.<sup>6</sup> This attention sold books, and it sold peep-hole kinetoscopes that were the only mechanism to view these films. It also sold the myth of Edison at a time when he faced financial and legal difficulties. Whatever anxieties the inventor must have felt privately, publicly he seemed self-confident, relaxed and carefree.<sup>7</sup>

If Edison faced challenges to his patents, Sandow was being kept in the limelight by challenges to his claim as 'the strongest man in the world' from Louis Cyr and other strongmen.<sup>8</sup> The Edison association, instantiated in the Sandow films themselves, certainly gave the aura of authenticity to the vaudevillian's titles, which were fundamentally promotional and commercial in nature. This motion picture also inaugurated a relationship between newspapers and film-making that was used many times in that first year of commercial production.<sup>9</sup> The visit of heavy-weight champion James J. Corbett to the Black Maria on 7 September, resulting in *The Corbett-Courtney Fight\** (no. 54), produced even more copy. Though Edison may have been present, he had to play a more discreet role, given the illegality of prize fighting in New Jersey and other parts of the USA at this time.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, the affinities between the world champion of the ring and the world champion of invention were potential subtexts of this event as well.<sup>11</sup> Anticipating a relationship that would become much more common in the twentieth century, reports of filming became a periodic source of news (which sold newspapers) and publicity for stars and producers (which sold films and built careers).

## PROMOTING PERFORMERS

One reason so many vaudevillians were eager to appear before Edison's kinetograph camera, initially without compensation, had to do with the promotional nature of such exhibitions. The location of the first kinetoscope parlour was not coincidental. By peering into the kinetoscopes at 1155 Broadway, spectators could see the small moving images of theatrical stars performing just a few blocks away. If, after such a glimpse, they were not inspired to go to the theatre immediately, then perhaps they would go to see 'the real thing' later in the week. Or, correspondingly, patrons who had gone to Koster & Bial's might have their memory of that night stimulated by these life-like, if tiny images. Moreover, as these kinetoscope films were dispersed throughout the country, their exhibition encouraged potential visitors to go to New York in order to see the performers in the flesh. Or else they might wait for the arrival of the touring vaudevillians, musicals and plays to their local venue with heightened expectation. A careful perusing of news items in theatrical journals and elsewhere indicates that business managers in the amusement field took this promotional value very seriously. Theatrical columns reported:

W. D. Mann, manager of Hoey's new farce, 'The Flams,' has conceived an advertising device for next season. Edison's kinetoscope and phonograph are to be combined in a reproduction of the principal spectacular and vocal features of the new performance, the instrument to be publicly exhibited in the principal cities weeks prior to the play's appearance.<sup>12</sup>

Mann's advertising scheme was hardly original; it merely articulated the kinetoscope's imagined impact on the careers of performers.

Kinetoscope films were excellent advertising for individual performers. If Edison's motion-picture venture had not been so obviously profitable, it may not have been necessary for Edison's kinetoscope agents Raff & Gammon and Maguire & Baucus to pay performers the respectable sums of money they often received for appearing before Edison's camera. Those fortunate headline performers frequently went on to enjoy long and prosperous careers, while many lesser-known figures became more prominent. The extent to which these films contributed to their success in the short term and in subsequent years is, of course, speculative. Robetta and Doreto could only claim to offer one of several 'Fun in a Chinese Laundry' routines on the vaudeville stage during the 1894-5 theatrical season. Two years after they appeared in several Edison films including *Chinese Laundry Scene*\* (no. 96, November 1894), they were still going strong and called 'old favorites' and 'the two cleverest Chinese impersonators on the stage'.<sup>13</sup> Professor Harry Welton's Cat Circus seemed to enjoy better billing after it appeared before Edison's camera (*The Boxing Cats [Prof. Welton's]\** [no. 41]). But when Welton's act faltered, at least one exhibitor attributed the film to being a view of Professor Trewey, the variety performer and concessionaire for the Lumière cinématographe in England.<sup>14</sup> Frank Lawton (*Trio Dance* [no. 103] and Wilson & Waring of *John W. Wilson and Bertha Waring* [no. 107]) went on to be successes in England, where they may have been first seen in Edison's peep-hole machine. Annabelle Whitford, who performed numerous serpentine and butterfly dances before Edison's camera, eventually became the Gibson girl and a star in Ziegfeld's Follies. Hadj Tahar (*Sheik Hadji Tahar*, no. 74) remained an active performer until July 1926, when he died soon after completing his act at the Palace Theater, New York's premiere vaudeville house.<sup>15</sup> This pattern continued in the era of projected motion pictures. J. Stuart Blackton moved up to top-of-the-line vaudeville after the success of *Blackton Sketches, No. 1* (no. 199, August 1896), more popularly known as *Inventor Edison Sketched by World Artist*\*. He performed for nothing, or rather for charity: his sole personal compensation was the invaluable publicity it gave him.

The earliest kinetoscope films did not promote Edison directly but rather served either as evidence of the inventor's technological wizardry or as the basis for glowing news items about their production.<sup>16</sup> Somewhat later, but even then only very occasionally, did Edison motion pictures become overtly self-promotional in nature. These include *Edison Laboratory* (no. 188, August-September 1896), *Inventor Edison Sketched by World Artist*; and *Mr Edison at Work in His Chemical Laboratory*\* (no. 334, May 1897). Such direct forms of self-promotion were indebted to the more numerous Lumière films that featured the brothers Louis and Auguste, their family, their customers and their factory. *La Sortie de l'usine Lumière à Lyon* (1895) and its two remakes filled this role most explicitly. But virtually every cinématographe programme had at least one picture that featured members of the Lumière family and they were often identified in ads and newspaper copy about the programmes. And since Louis was behind the camera for most of these, Auguste generally became the media star. Edison tried to appear more reticent, less obvious in the way he presented his own mythic figure to the world. It is noteworthy that the only motion picture featuring the inventor from this period was taken at his laboratory (significantly a mock laboratory constructed

inside the Black Maria), in which Edison either showed himself to be an awkward actor or chose to burlesque a popular photograph showing him carefully mixing chemicals (in the tradition of *Blacksmithing Scene* or *The Barber Shop*). The Lumière mixture of family films with advertising was potent but avoided by Edison for reasons that seem consistent with the kinds of subject matter fostered by each organisation.

## ADVERTISING FILMS PRESENTED ON CITY STREETS

Given these early experiences, it is not surprising that advertising films quickly became one of the more popular genres of early cinema. In large cities exhibitions were given for advertising purposes with films and lantern slides projected from rooftops onto canvases at busy intersections. The stereopticon had been used for advertising purposes since the early 1870s. In Chicago, it was reported that a Mr Van Dusen,

exhibits in the open air, by means of mammoth views, interspersed with business cards. The views are so pretty that the public is willing to stand the advertisement in order to see the whole of the views. The idea is novel.<sup>17</sup>

By mid-1872, night-time advertising with the stereopticon had become popular in New York City as 'pictures and business cards are alternately thrown on a large screen'.<sup>18</sup> The Stereopticon Advertising Company was soon projecting advertising images in Herald Square.<sup>19</sup> By the summer of 1897 motion pictures had been readily added to the mix of projected images. According to *The Phonoscope*, a trade journal for the motion-picture and phonograph industries:

A very interesting and novel advertising exhibition is now being given on the roof of the building at 1321 Broadway, facing Herald Square.

Animated films are shown illustrating advertisements. The pictures were all by the International Film Co., 44 Broad Street, and are attracting the attention nightly of thousands of people. As an instance of the enterprise and hustle of the International Film Co., the Democratic Mayor was nominated on Thursday night and on Friday his picture was on the screen at 34th Street.<sup>20</sup>

It was probably not coincidence that the International Film Company was started by two former Edison employees, Charles Webster and Edmund Kuhn. One of their advertising films was *Dewar's Scotch Whisky*\* (1897). Perhaps the most obvious examples of advertising films among the Edison offerings are *Admiral Cigarette*\* (no. 362, July 1897) and *Crawford Shoe Store* (no. 362.1). These films and others like them were explicitly made for open-air advertising, but it seems likely that they were also occasionally shown in theatrical and other settings – for example, as burlesque comedies (*Admiral Cigarette* or *Dewar's Scotch Whisky*) or casual street scenes (e.g. *Crawford Shoe Store*).

To exhibit advertising slides and films, J. Stuart Blackton and Albert E. Smith started the Commercial Advertising Bureau in late 1897. *Lickmann's Cigar and Photo*

*Store* (no. 549) and *North Side Dental Rooms* (no. 550) were two Edison films that were made for this new enterprise in April 1898, shortly before the partners sold the business and began to move into vaudeville exhibition. These two founders of the Vitagraph Company of America – the largest motion-picture producer in the USA between 1906 and 1914 – all but began their motion-picture careers by showing advertising films.<sup>21</sup>

### SOME NEWLY PERTINENT FILMS IN THE PAPER PRINT COLLECTION

As Edison paper prints, submitted to the Library of Congress for copyright purposes, have been put back onto 35mm film, the resulting upgrade in quality has revealed an advertising component to many of these titles. For *Corner Madison and State Streets, Chicago\** (no. 354), signs for various attractions at Electric Park were paraded in front of the camera. *Sutro Baths, no. 1\** (no. 392) displays a large banner proclaiming its hours of operations that would seem an unlikely part of the regular decor. *South Spring Street, Los Angeles\** (no. 470) discretely includes a sign for Tally's Kinetoscope Parlor on the left side of the screen. For *Freight Train\** (no. 479, January 1898), Horst Brothers went to considerable trouble to put large signs on a series of freight cars, which advertised their special hops. What is striking is the way in which such signage went unacknowledged in catalogue descriptions. The placards for Electric Park would appear to be a random occurrence; the well-framed banner at Sutro Baths appears to be displayed by chance. Or so the unsuspecting viewer (or exhibitor) was led to believe. While not always explicitly advertising films, they were clear examples of product placement.

Just as noteworthy, something approaching half of the Edison films made between the autumn of 1896 and the end of 1900 were subsidised by transportation companies or other organisations seeking publicity. James White and William Heise made films of the onrushing Black Diamond Express with the active participation of the Lehigh Valley Railroad, whose executives were eager to present such images of power and speed as an alternative to those of the Empire State Express, then being shown on the biograph to the benefit of the New York Central Railroad. *Black Diamond Express\** (no. 262), which was taken in December 1896, featured a large makeshift sign with the words 'Lehigh Valley Rail Road'. It was so popular that the negative was quickly worn out and the film had to be remade several times over the next few years. *New Black Diamond Express* (no. 817, May 1900) was at least the fourth such negative to be made in as many years. Scenes of Niagara Falls were likewise taken with the assistance of railroad corporations because the site was a favoured tourist destination.

The films made on James White and Frederick Blechynden's tour of the Far West, Mexico and Asia were all made with the cooperation of railroad and steamship companies, which included free transportation and possibly some financial subsidies. They fully recognised that such films promoted tourism. These promotional schemes were, however, more or less covert: the oft-stated claim that such films were a cheap *alternative* to travel deflected attention away from the fact that the films were to a considerable extent made and shown precisely to encourage tourism. Although many actualities such as *Wash Day in Mexico\** (no. 450, November–December 1897) were

touristic scenes, a substantial number were of company trains and ships: *Sunset Limited, Southern Pacific Railway*\* (no. 478, January 1898) and *Afternoon Tea on Board S.S. 'Doric'* (no. 567, June 1898), taken for the Occidental and Oriental Steamship Company, are but two such examples. These short, one-shot films served as building blocks for larger programmes, whether as isolated scenes in a variety programme or for incorporation into evening-length travel lectures. It is quite possible that the primary users of these films were the transportation companies themselves, which used them to promote their services. If this was the case, additional sales of prints were seen as a bonus.

Once we look at these early films as advertising and promotional films, there are major implications that become clear. Most films, as images of someone, something, or somewhere, become a form of advertising or publicity. *Roosevelt's Rough Riders Embarking for Santiago*\* (no. 590, June 1898) helps to promote future New York State Governor and US President Teddy Roosevelt as well as the USA's war with Spain. *Scene on Surf Avenue, Coney Island* (no. 171, June 1896) and *Shooting the Chutes*\* (no. 173, June 1896) promote and implicitly advertise Coney Island. These early motion pictures embodied a dialectical tension, both acting as a new commodity form and promoting other kinds of services and commodities in the era of an emergent consumer society. In a multiplicity of ways, the motion-picture industry was intensively engaged in the commodification of culture from its earliest years.

## NOTES

This chapter is excerpted and adapted from 'Before the Rapid Firing Kinetograph: Edison Film Production, Representation and Exploitation', the introductory essay for *Edison Motion Pictures, 1890-1900: An Annotated Filmography* (Washington, DC, and Friuli, Italy: Smithsonian Institution Press and Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, 1997).

1. Biograph also made groups of films for the US Post Office in 1903 and Westinghouse in 1904, as well as short advertising films of the Gold Dust Twins, mascots for Gold Dust Laundry Powder.
2. This subheading is a friendly nod to those scholars who dabble in biological metaphors when analysing the early years of cinema.
3. 'Edison Perfects His Kinetoscope', *New York Herald*, 7 March 1894, p. 9.
4. Eugen Sandow, *Sandow on Physical Training* (New York: J. Selwin Tait & Sons, 1894).
5. 'Development of a Strong Man', *New York Herald*, 18 March 1894, p. 8E.
6. 'Wizard Edison's Kinetograph', *New York World*, 18 March 1894, p. 21.
7. Gordon Hendricks was, of course, right in claiming that Edison effectively managed an adoring press to build an image that did not neatly correspond to reality.
8. 'The Chance of Sandow's Life', *New York Herald*, 9 April 1894, p. 8; 'Sandow Would Rather Pose' and 'Cyr is the Champion', *New York Herald*, 11 April 1894, p. 12.
9. This relationship of promoting motion pictures while selling newspapers was similar to that relationship between the press and the sporting world. It was quite different from the ways in which cinema was said to function as a visual newspaper.
10. Edison's presence at the filming of the Corbett-Courtney fight went unreported in the press, but Gordon Hendricks located a reminiscence of James Corbett, which suggests the boxer

- did meet the inventor on this occasion (*The Kinetoscope: America's First Commercially Successful Motion Picture Exhibitor* [New York: The Beginnings of the American Film, 1966], p. 109).
11. The affinity between the world champion of boxing and the world champion of invention would become explicit in James Corbett's next play, *The Naval Cadet*, in which he played a young inventor, not unlike Edison.
  12. 'In the Breezy Roof Gardens', *New York Tribune*, 24 June 1894, p. 11.
  13. *Providence Journal*, 16 February 1897, p. 8; *Cincinnati Commercial Tribune*, 20 December 1896, p. 11.
  14. The exhibitor who later attributed Welton's act to Trewey was Englishman William Rock. *New Orleans Picayune*, 25 May 1897, p. 14, cited in Sylvester Quinn Breard, 'A History of Motion Pictures in New Orleans, 1896-1908' (MA thesis: Louisiana State University, 1951), p. 31, published in microfiche in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* vol. 15 no. 4 (Autumn 1995).
  15. 'Acrobat Dies After Act', *The New York Times*, 13 July 1926, p. 19.
  16. It was, in some sense, unnecessary for Edison to be the frequent or overt subject of his films given that the technology was tied to his name so explicitly: 'Edison's latest wonder, the Kinetoscope', 'Edison's Vitascope' and so forth.
  17. 'The Free Stereopticon', *Chicago Tribune*, 1 October 1871, p. 2.
  18. 'The Sign Boards of New York', *Scientific American*, 15 June 1872, p. 400.
  19. 'Our Bulletin', *The New York Times*, 10 October 1872, p. 1.
  20. *The Phonoscope*, August-September 1897, p. 9.
  21. Charles Musser, 'American Vitagraph: 1897-1901', *Cinema Journal* vol. 22 no. 3 (Spring 1983), pp. 4-46.