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THE EARLY CINEMA OF EDWIN S. PORTER

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Introduction

It might seem an indulgence to have an essay reprinted that is now more than 30 years old, but “The Early Cinema of Edwin S. Porter” has the virtue of raising basic issues that remain part of the debates still swirling around cinema of the early 1900s. Not only does it stand up in most of its essentials, but this effort also retains a freshness (a sense of working through a problem for the first time) and urgency that would be difficult to resurrect. Nonetheless, some introductory comments might provide a useful commentary and historical context for this essay.

This essay represents my entry into serious film scholarship. In the fall of 1976, I was a part-time graduate student at New York University (NYU) taking Jay Leyda’s Griffith/Biograph seminar, in which we systematically viewed D. W. Griffith’s films, made at the Biograph Company, in strict chronological order beginning with *The Adventures of Dollie* (June 1908). The course relied heavily on the Paper Print Collection at the Library of Congress.¹ Griffith was then widely glorified as the father of film art, and my eager classmates often tended to see the first close-up or camera pan in a Griffith/Biograph picture as an important innovation in cinema’s history. Even then, such statements made some of us uncomfortable, and the obvious solution was to look at some films made before Griffith had appeared on the scene. This was not as easy as one might assume. Besides reels of Edison and Lumière films from the 1890s, the Museum of Modern Art then only circulated short collections of films by Georges Méliès and Edwin S. Porter. The Porter reel included a badly mangled version of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1903) and a version of *Life of an American Fireman*, which involved substantial

crosscutting but about which there was already some debate (see below), since a substantially different version of this picture existed in the Library of Congress Paper Print Collection.² In any case, *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) was in decent shape and contained both a close-up and a variety of camera movements (not only a shot that combined panning and tilting but a tracking shot with the camera mounted on a moving train).

This preliminary investigation demanded a visit to the Library of Congress in order to look at pre-Griffith Edison and Biograph films in the Paper Print Collection, following the Leyda model of systematic viewing (rather than being content to look at a few high points). My informal collaborator in the Griffith course was a Fulbright scholar and PhD student at NYU, Ismail Xavier, and in October we made a joint research trip. I was then editing my documentary on studio potter Gerry Williams and the American crafts movement (*An American Potter*), and it was a good moment to put the film aside and gain some distance before locking picture. As luck would have it, I got to the viewing carrels before Ismail and took the pile of Edison films, leaving him with the pre-Griffith Biographs. The basic idea for this essay – as well as for a subsequent documentary (*Before the Nickelodeon: The Early Cinema of Edwin S. Porter*, 1982) – quickly emerged.

I presented my initial findings in January 1977 at the American Seminar on Film at New York University, where my advocacy for the Library of Congress version created a modest uproar. Jay Leyda was worried that I would be blackballed by the Museum of Modern Art (he had substantial experience in this area) and urged that I take a more neutral approach. If memory serves, members of the Museum of Modern Art – including Ted Perry, then director of the Film Department, and film archivist Eileen Bowser – were unready to disqualify their version, but the tone, while heated, always remained friendly. (In fact, Eileen Bowser came to support my continued efforts in this area for many years to come.) I subsequently submitted the essay to the Society for Cinema Studies Student Award for Scholar Writing in the fall. By then I was working in Los Angeles for Alan Landsburg Productions as a segment producer-editor on the documentary TV series *Between the Wars*. I played hooky one day to make some final revisions – and almost got fired. The rebukes seemed an acceptable cost when I received notification that the essay had garnered the prize.

I also took my essay to the 1978 FIAF Conference on Cinema 1900–1906 in Brighton, England, where Noël Burch and André Gaudreault also arrived with articles that treated *Life of an American Fireman*.³ To be honest, this coincidence was somewhat disconcerting. Of course, my own emerging scholarship was deeply indebted to Burch's highly influential *Theory of Film Practice* (1969), and its many insights led most of us to investigate the earliest period of cinema with a new openness. The more junior participants at the conference were, in many respects, his disciples. (One personal highlight of that conference was playing arcade games with Noël on the Brighton Pier.) Moreover, the conference sparked a movement, which would have regular anniversary commemorations (a thirtieth anniversary

celebration was offered in 2008 by the Giornate del Cinema Muto in Pordenone, Italy).⁴ Burch's essay, "Porter or Ambivalence," was quickly published in *Screen* and received wide recognition, though it was never anthologized.⁵ When my own essay finally appeared in print in late 1979, it received a more modest reception. "The Early Cinema of Edwin S. Porter," however, does something quite different than either Burch or Gaudreault's essay – which is why after 30 years I am delighted it has been anthologized.

Along with other work presented at the Brighton Conference, "The Early Cinema of Edwin S. Porter" was committed to a serious investigation of the history of film form in the pre-Griffith cinema and its mode of representation. That is, this essay looks closely at the work of Edwin S. Porter from the opening of Edison's New York studio in January 1901 to the release of *Life of an American Fireman* in early 1903, seeing it as an historical progression or development of fundamental importance. Others, in contrast, often looked at the period from 1895/1900 to 1906/1907 as a period where the commonalities were overriding. Tom Gunning had presented an essay on "The Non-Continuous Style of Early Film 1900–1906" at Brighton. Burch's essay focused on four Porter films from the 1903–1906 period – *Life of an American Fireman*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Great Train Robbery*, and *Life of a Cowboy*. Indeed, Porter's films from this (admittedly brief) period functioned within a fairly stable system of representation, for Porter (and other filmmakers of the same period) achieved a certain stability in their representational methods between 1902/1903 and 1907/1908. The differences of a few years may seem nitpicking, but the pivotal year of 1902/1903 seemed to divide the 1900–1906 period into at least two phases as Porter became interested in telling stories "in continuity form," even though he had a concept of continuity that was very different from the one that would be embraced by cinema's classical system.

"The Early Cinema of Edwin S. Porter" takes an approach that bears a strong resemblance to Tom Gunning's approach to Griffith's early work at Biograph. This is perhaps not surprising given our shared debt to Jay Leyda, but it does have further ironies and contradictions. Both my essay and Tom's book, *D. W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film* (1991), cover an approximately two-year period and are interested in the development of a new system of representation (which is to say the transformation of an old one). And yet for this very reason, while our approaches are very similar, they are out of sync from a historical viewpoint. To be sure we agree that the "pre-Griffith" period "possessed a different conception of space, time and narrative form from the way in which these issues were approached in the later classical cinema" (Gunning 1991, 6). But as Tom then elaborates,

I maintain that early cinema did not see its main task as the presentation of narratives. This does not mean that there were not early films that told stories, but that this task was secondary, at least until about 1904. The transformation that occurred in films around 1908 derives from reorienting film style to a clear focus on the task

of storytelling and characterization. In this work I will describe a move from what I call a “cinema of attractions,” which was more interested in the display of curiosities, to a cinema of narrative integration which subordinates film form to the development of stories and characters. It is this move to a cinema of narrative integration that Griffith’s first films exemplify. (1991, 6)

The application of Tom’s term “narrative integration” can be useful, but I would assert that Porter was one of the key innovators who assumed control of both production and postproduction in a way that made narrative integration possible: That is, the centralization of creative control and narrative integration were profoundly linked. Moreover, following Gunning, this integration or concentration of creative control in turn enabled Porter (like his contemporaries such as Georges Méliès) to develop a narrational system – one that was less powerful and flexible than the one that Griffith developed five years later, but also one that was well suited to the “pre-Griffith” mode of production and representation that had fallen in place.⁶ In short, some of what Tom sees happening in 1908, I see happening some five years earlier.

This essay pursued several additional issues as well. First, it understood film history in this period as driven by the interplay between the rapidly changing modes of representation and of production. It had this in common with David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson’s *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (1985), which these scholars were then presenting in article form. Like Staiger’s sections of that book, my scholarship was deeply informed by Harry Braverman’s study *Labor and Monopoly Capital*. Despite an initial excitement about this shared theoretical perspective, Staiger and I became increasingly at odds as to its application. Perhaps because I was working professionally as an editor and remained fascinated by the compelling continuities of what I called “screen practice” as showmen moved from the magic lantern to cinema, I was sensitive to the shift in editorial responsibility from the exhibitor to the production company and to a fundamentally new concentration of creative control, which made possible the existence of “the filmmaker” on one hand and the increasingly limited creative responsibilities of the exhibitor and projectionist on the other (or as Braverman would have it, the degradation of work). For me, this meant that we had to think not just about modes of film production but about the broader production of cinema (which includes the exhibition of films in a theater) – thus my use of the term “early cinema” as opposed to “early film,” which was then sometimes used by scholars such as John Fell in his edited volume *Film Before Griffith* (1983).

This new mode of cinema production made possible a new system of representation, while the emerging system of representation dialectically reinforced the transformation of “the cameraman” into “the filmmaker.” This approach again has put me at odds with Tom Gunning in a serious though always friendly disagreement over the nature of what he calls “the cinema of attractions.”

In subsequent articles I would elaborate on the active role of the exhibitor in building programs and generating meanings. Thus, while the emergence of the story film in the period between 1899 and 1903 is a crucial aspect of cinema's history in this period, it is evident that not only were there "story films," but that exhibitors also took short films that might seem to be "nonnarrative" in and of themselves – considered as isolated actions or images – and used them as building blocks for larger programs, sometimes involving sustained narratives. Exhibitors did more than feature "attractions" at the expense of "narrative": More generally, they explored a wide range of methods for juxtaposing two or more shots in ways that created meanings that did not reside in the individual shots themselves.

Even before there was the filmmaker (Porter, Méliès, Smith), exhibitors often asserted their authorship and possessed a narrational voice. They told stories in a way that was radically different from both post-1903 (Porter) and post-1908 (Griffith) cinematic practices. This essay is thus a (hi)story about both the transformation and the emergence of storytelling in cinematic form. One of its virtues, I think, is that it does not tell its story in a simple, linear way but includes digressions as well as question marks. Nor was it written in overt dialogue with the work being written by my colleagues. Such debates, which perhaps had something to do with the intellectual excitement then surrounding the study of early cinema, came slightly later even though their origins can be traced to these formative efforts.

My essay was intent on applying rigorous historical analysis in making its arguments. While Noël Burch accurately asserted that the paper print version of *Life of an American Fireman* was a "historically correct" version (or one of them) while the MoMA print was modernized, he did not pursue the kind of textual exegesis that might have convinced skeptics. In the 1970s, many were still convinced that the MoMA version – which loosely conformed to a description of the film appearing in Terry Ramsaye's *A Million and One Nights* (1926) – was the version that was released in 1903, while the paper print version was just an "assembly" of the material. In fact, André Gaudreault in his essay "Detours in Film Narrative: The Development of Cross-Cutting," which was published in the same issue of *Cinema Journal* as my own essay, speculated on the possibility of a third version that conformed to a literal reading of the catalog description and differed from both the paper print and MoMA versions. The status of the film text has proven to be a crucial one in film studies. Certainly the issue of textual integrity, which has been a crucial and ongoing one in my own scholarship, had its beginning with this essay.⁷

It should be worth noting that this essay formed a treatment of sorts for the documentary I eventually made: *Before the Nickelodeon: The Early Cinema of Edwin S. Porter* (1982), which premiered at the New York Film Festival and is currently available commercially as a DVD. The essay opened doors at the Museum of Modern Art and the Thomas A. Edison Papers. It became the starting point for my dissertation and subsequent book, *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* (1991).

Because I am eager to reprint this essay without significant revisions, I should also point out two of its more glaring shortcomings. First, I was fundamentally mistaken in my depiction of Porter as the “complete filmmaker” – the producer, director, cameraman, editor, and so forth. This was, to be sure, an understanding that I inherited from my predecessors. Soon (but not soon enough) I realized that Porter, like most filmmakers in the pre-Griffith era, worked as part of a collaborative partnership. Porter was a cameraman who worked with George S. Fleming, an actor and scenic designer. They were a creative team, a duo modeled after standard business partnerships. Porter continued to work in collaborative pairs throughout his career: with G. M. Anderson, Wallace McCutcheon, J. Searle Dawley, and Hugh Ford among others (see Musser 1996). This was a key aspect of the mode of production that flourished in the “pre-Griffith” era, which I had not yet grasped.

The second shortcoming has to do with my employment of the term “early cinema,” which I used in the essay’s title quite self-consciously. Unfortunately, however, I did not adequately explicate the way I was employing the phrase. It was designed as a kind of substitute for the often-used term “pre-Griffith cinema.” It seemed to me that we needed to get away from using an individual, even one as important as Griffith, as landmark. Griffith had begun to produce and direct at the very moment that American cinema was undergoing a profound transformation, emerging for the first time as a form of mass communication as it is conventionally defined. Griffith was in many respects its most radical practitioner in the period between 1908 and 1913. As I would argue, Porter resisted the new system of production and representation that Griffith epitomized in its most extreme form. So early cinema was a term designed to refer to a period before cinema became a system of mass communication and mass entertainment. All this would be subsequently laid out in my book that grew out of this article, but by then it was too late.

One should note that the term “early cinema” was also being used by Anthony Slide to refer to cinema before the classical Hollywood cinema was fully constituted – before roughly 1918 or 1920. Like me, he was not particularly explicit about his application of the term. Eventually, as the phrase “early cinema” became a popular turn of phrase (used by some even to include films made before the Production Code was rigorously enforced in 1935), I decided to embrace its usage as equivalent to the “pre-classical Hollywood cinema.” But not without some buyer’s remorse. We still lack (and need) a neutral term to designate cinema before it became a form of mass communication in 1908; and I think “early cinema” – as opposed to “primitive cinema” (Burch) or “cinema of attractions” (Gunning) – was a good one, even though its broader application means it no longer fits.

“The Early Cinema of Edwin S. Porter” (Fall 1979)

We recently celebrated the 75th anniversary of Edwin Porter’s *Life of an American Fireman*, which was completed and copyrighted in January 1903, and *The Great Train Robbery*, which was copyrighted in December of the same year. Porter’s

reputation has come to rest primarily on these two films, with the first seen as a cinematic breakthrough and the second as its commercially successful confirmation. Film historians' interest in the earlier film can be traced directly to Porter, who emphasized its innovative qualities in later reminiscences. It was Terry Ramsaye, seconded by Lewis Jacobs, who subsequently emphasized the essential importance of *Life of an American Fireman* to the development of American and even world cinema. Since then, the film has become a center of historical controversy, a controversy further complicated by two conflicting versions of the film – one version at the Museum of Modern Art, which contains 15 shots, and another at the Library of Congress, with nine. A French school of film historians, led by Georges Sadoul (1947, 1948), has generally discounted the significance of *Life of an American Fireman* while an American school, with even greater consistency, has made extravagant assertions that have been repeated until accepted as fact. For example, Terry Ramsaye (1926):

There had been tiny, trivial efforts to use the screen to tell a story, exemplified by Cecil Hepworth's *Rescued by Rover*, the adventures of a little girl and a dog, photographed in London, and *The Burglar on the Roof* made by Blackton and Smith of Vitagraph. They were mere episodes. Now in the Edison studios, where the art of the film was born, and also where it was best bulwarked against the distractions of the fight for existence, came the emergence of the narrative idea.

James H. White was in charge of Edison's "Kinetograph Department" and Edwin S. Porter, becoming a cameraman, was the chief fabricator of picture material. Between them evolved a five hundred foot subject entitled *The Life of an American Fireman*. (414–415)

Lewis Jacobs (1939):

If Georges Méliès was the first to "push the cinema toward the theatrical way," as he claimed, then Edwin S. Porter was the first to push the cinema toward the cinematic way. Generally acknowledged today as the father of the story film, he made more than fictional contributions to movie tradition. It was Porter who discovered that the art of motion pictures depends on the continuity of shots, not on the shots alone. Not content with Méliès' artificially arranged scenes, Porter distinguished the movies from other theatrical forms and gave them the invention of editing. Almost all motion picture developments since Porter's discovery spring from the principle of editing, which is the basis of motion picture artistry.

By 1902 Porter had a long list of films to his credit. But neither he nor other American producers had yet learned to tell a story. They were still busy with elementary, one-shot news events ... with humorous bits ... with vaudeville skits ... scenic views ... and local topics. None of these productions stood out from the general ...

Porter therefore concocted a scheme that was as startling as it was different: a mother and child were to be caught in a burning building and rescued at the last moment by the fire department.

Tame though such a plot sounds to us today, it was then revolutionary. (35–37)

Nicholas Vardac (1949):

The photoplay, a series of situations pictorially developed not only to tell a story but so interlaced that this story became cinematically dramatic, had not found significant expression prior to 1902. It came in that year with E. S. Porter's *The Life of an American Fireman*. (180)

Jack Spears (1970):

Edwin Porter was the father of "the story film." ...

Life of an American Fireman ... is the motion picture in which the principles of modern film editing were first applied – i.e. by combining and arranging shots in a unified sequence Porter built suspense, increased dramatic intensity and made transitions fluid. (321, 333)

These film historians share a number of methodological weaknesses, many of which can be found in the work of their French colleagues. It is these assumptions, which have determined the parameters of the debate and allowed the controversy to develop in the first place. Like many "landmark" films, *Life of an American Fireman* has been extracted from its historical/cultural context. Ramsaye and Jacobs presented us with a romantic concept of a "primitive artist" whose revolutionary insights (strokes of genius) led to the story film (the beginnings of narrative cinema) and the invention of editing. They not only ignored the context of world cinema and of popular entertainment, but Porter's prior development as a filmmaker. Georges Sadoul, by placing *Life of an American Fireman* in the context of international cinema while continuing to ignore the dynamic of Porter's own development, could dismiss Porter as an imitator of G. A. Smith and James Williamson (1947, 45–46). Accusing Porter of imitating Williamson's *Fire!* (1901), Sadoul passed over the context of popular entertainment and presented a mechanistic or genetic analysis of the development of cinema.

Ramsaye, Sadoul, Jacobs, and other earlier historians share two key assumptions. The first is that a biological model of development is an appropriate one to use in discussing the emergence of cinema. Thus, either implicitly or explicitly, the history of pre-cinema is likened to the development of the fetus in the womb. Edison, to continue the metaphor, initiated the process of labor; and with Lumière's Cinématographe the babe uttered its first cry and the history of cinema began. As the cinema grew, it learned to "talk" (Porter briefly, then Griffith), to develop a natural language (the language of classic narrative cinema). William K. Everson (1978) thus sees Porter as making hesitant and misguided attempts to realize this natural language, ultimately concluding that his films lack what might be called linguistic competence.⁸ In contrast, I would like to propose that early cinema be examined within the context of a history of the screen, of the projected image and its sound accompaniment. In doing this, I am following the lead of Porter's

contemporaries who saw cinema as an extension of the stereopticon, a magic lantern used to project photographic slides. From this viewpoint Henry V. Hopwood's statement that "a film for projecting a living picture is nothing more, after all, than a multiple lantern slide" is typical, with major implications for film history (1899, 188). Early cinema can be seen as a transitional mode of representation and of presentation involving both a continuity of earlier magic lantern and stereopticon traditions and their transformation as filmmakers made use of the new medium's possibilities. In Porter's films, one can clearly see the tension between these two conflicting impulses.

Secondly, Jacobs, Sadoul et al., largely because of their reliance on a biological model that is medium specific, assume that editing – defined as a concept of continuity – was discovered by one or more of the "film pioneers."⁹ Placing cinema within a history of the screen, it is apparent that important editorial procedures (interpolated close-ups, point-of-view shots, the convention of exterior/interior relationships between shots, etc.) were around long before cinema. What was being adopted by cinema between 1899 and 1903 were very specific strategies with extremely limited applications. Although G. A. Smith's *Grandma's Looking Glass* (1900), for instance, contains many of the basic procedures found in later classic narrative cinema including a point-of-view shot, the interpolated close-up, etc., the Warwick catalog describes Smith's intentions more modestly: "to produce on the screen the various objects as they appear to Willie 'while looking through the glass'" (1900, 164). Such point-of-view shots were common in early cinema yet required the use of mattes, cuts to close-ups, and the mediation of some device like a telescope, keyhole, or magnifying glass. To suggest that the development of such limited strategies can be equated with the invention of editing misrepresents the historical process that was taking place. No inventor of film editing existed. Directors like Porter and Smith developed or adopted certain specific editorial strategies, often to abandon or modify them sometime later. It was an inventive period with each director using a range of strategies which, taken as a whole, were less than the sum total of those then being used. Rather, to understand the development of early cinema, the historian must be less concerned with the appearance of certain procedures and should look more closely at the accumulation of specific strategies. The purpose of this article, then, is to outline the nature of Porter's development as a filmmaker through *Life of an American Fireman* and then to focus on that film itself: to reconsider the two different versions, to analyze the film's structure, and to suggest a few ways in which the film might be seen in the context of popular culture and the history of the screen.

Porter's Early Career as a Projectionist and Exhibitor

Porter began his career in cinema as a "motion picture operator" (i.e., projectionist) in June 1896, only two months after the successful premiere of Edison's Vitascope at Koster & Bial's Music Hall in New York. As he later testified, "I worked for

a man by the name of J. R. Balsley and R. S. Paine who bought the state rights of the Vitascope from Raff and Gammon for California and Indiana; and afterwards ran the projectoscope for Daniels and Dowe of Hamilton, Ontario. Also gave several exhibitions with the Vitascope for Raff and Gammon” (1907a). The Vitascope projected a loop, a 50-foot film spliced end to end and threaded on a bank of rollers – very much like a peephole Kinetoscope. The film could be shown several times without a clear beginning or end. Jump cuts existed not only at the splice but also often internally where the cameraman had stopped and then restarted his camera. This was the “novelty” era of cinema in which film was appreciated for its true-to-life movement. As a novelty, it was a short-term phenomenon, lasting less than two years.

That Porter with his background as an electrician and telegraph operator would become a projectionist and enter the industry at this point is not surprising. The Vitascope, unlike traditional magic lanterns or Lumière projectors, was run on electricity, often creating problems like the one that marred the first exhibition of the Vitascope in Worcester, Massachusetts. According to a contemporary account, “Cissy Fitzgerald’s wink was invisible owing to insufficient speed and light, and the boxers struck with a dreamy sluggishness. With better electrical service the electrician expects to secure results surpassing those of Boston and New York vitascope exhibitions.”¹⁰ Porter’s experience as an electrician gave him the necessary qualifications as a projectionist, putting him on the road not only to California but to South America and the Caribbean as well.

Early in 1898, Porter settled in New York and began to work at the Eden Musée, an early center of motion picture exhibition and production, which had just become a licensee of the Edison Manufacturing Company (Porter 1898).¹¹ William Paley, sponsored by the Musée, for which he had shot the Salmi Morse / fake *Passion Play of Oberammergau*, came to a licensing agreement with the Edison company and went to Cuba to film scenes of what soon became the Spanish–American War. In a short time, films like *Wreck of the Battleship “Maine”* and *U.S. Cavalry Supplies Unloading at Tampa, Florida* were stirring patriotic fervor back in New York. Porter was involved in putting the shows together with Eugene Elmore, who was in charge of film exhibitions at the Eden Musée. The Vitascope loops had been abandoned. While the precise composition and character of these shows is uncertain, it seems extremely likely that films were combined with lantern slides and that these visuals were then narrated by a lecturer.¹² The result was often a full evening’s entertainment in the lantern-slide tradition. In these shows and other film exhibitions of the 1890s and early 1900s, the exhibitor often had a major creative role. He not only provided narration and incidental music but essentially controlled the editorial function as well. Earlier in the century, the exhibitor would make his own selection of lantern slides, determine their order, and project them onto the screen, either dissolving from one to the next or cutting directly. This mode of presentation was continued, often using both slides and films, subsequent to the arrival of cinema. Creative contributions were thus shared by the cameraman

and exhibitor. While Paley's films from the war zone made the cameraman a vaudeville hero, the narration and editorial arrangement of scenes were made at the Musée by Elmore and Porter.

Although Porter's occupation in these years was primarily as a projectionist and exhibitor, he also worked as a designer and machinist. As he later reported, "I returned to New York in 1898 and went to work at the Eden Musée and I operated a projecting machine there until 1900. While there I built projecting machines, and also built cameras of my own design. I built the cameras, the printing machines and projecting machines for the Palmer-McGovern prize fight" (1907b). In referring to this period of his career, Porter never mentions working as a cameraman. It is possible, perhaps probable, that he was involved in the filming of such major events as Admiral Dewey's triumphal arrival in New York City, for which the Edison Manufacturing Company, with the aid of its licensees, put six crews in the field. But if Porter worked as a cameraman, it was sporadic and of tertiary importance. Any attribution of films to Porter during the 1898–1900 period is, I feel, highly suspect.¹³ Porter left the Eden Musée in 1900: "In the summer of 1900 I went on the road with a show of my own, and in the fall of 1900 I went to work for the Edison Manufacturing Company and have been with them ever since, as a moving picture photographer" (1907b).

Taking a moving picture show on the road culminated the first part of Porter's career as an exhibitor. His subsequent decision to join the Edison Manufacturing Company and move more seriously into production was a common move among his contemporaries, including Georges Méliès, Cecil Hepworth, and Walter Haggart in Europe as well as J. Stuart Blackton and Albert E. Smith in the United States. It reflected a fundamental change in the methods of production and exhibition: the shift of editorial control from exhibitor to cameraman, the principles of which were gradually established between 1899 and 1903, although not universally applied until much later.

Porter at Edison¹⁴

The Edison Manufacturing Company's decision to hire Porter was part of a change in business strategy. James White and his boss William Gilmore, respectively head of the Kinetograph Department and general manager of the Edison Manufacturing Company, were moving away from a policy of reliance on their licensees. J. Stuart Blackton and Albert Smith at Vitagraph, William Paley with his Kalatechnoscope, William Wright, and Thomas Crahan of the Crahan Manufacturing Company often produced good films that the Edison company was happy to offer for sale and felt free to copyright in Thomas A. Edison's name. These licensees refused to act as Edison employees, however, taking too large a percentage of the profits and acting too independently for the arrangement to be satisfactory. In January 1900, Gilmore canceled the company's contract with Vitagraph after Blackton, Smith,



2.1 Publicity still for *Kansas City Saloon Smashers* (1901), one of Edwin S. Porter's first films for the Edison company. (From Edison National Historic Site.)

and their co-partner William Rock threatened to sue for an accounting.¹⁵ Although an uneasy agreement was worked out by mid-October of the same year, the Edison company, which was based in West Orange, New Jersey, undoubtedly saw it as a short-term arrangement.

On October 12, 1900, the Edison Manufacturing Company signed an agreement with the Hinkle Iron Company for \$2,800 “to furnish, deliver and erect complete and in a good substantial and workmanlike manner a Photographic Studio on roof of building 41 East 21st Street, New York City. . . . Said work to be commenced immediately and completed within six (6) weeks, or earlier if possible...”¹⁶ The coincidence of Porter's new job at Edison and the building of a studio at 41 East 21st Street suggests that Porter was hired not simply as a cameraman but, perhaps because of his experience as an electrician and machinist, also to put the studio in working order and to manage it once it was operating. Porter, unlike White and the other Edison cameramen, would be based in New York, where there was greater access to vaudeville and the skills and materials necessary for film production. The studio went into operation early in 1901; on January 10, 1901, James White terminated the Edison company's agreement with Vitagraph.¹⁷ Edison's new employee began to turn out short films; one of the first, *Kansas City Saloon Smashers* (© February 23, 1901), was the occasion for a rare publicity still.

Terrible Teddy, the Grizzly King (also © February 23, 1901) was a burlesque on then vice president-elect Teddy Roosevelt, who was out in Colorado shooting mountain lions.¹⁸ The first scene, based on a political cartoon in Hearst's *New York Journal and Advertiser* (February 4, 1901), shows Teddy accompanied by two men wearing large cards that read “My Press Agent” and “My Photographer.” The vice president-elect approaches a tree and shoots up into the air. A very dead cat falls to the ground. Then, as the Edison catalog (July 1901) puts it, “Teddy whips out his bowie knife, leaps on the cat and stabs it several times then poses while his



2.2 The cartoon, which appeared in the *New York Journal and Advertiser*, provided the idea and title for an Edwin S. Porter topical film of 1901.

photographer makes a picture and the press agent writes up the thrilling adventure” (1901, 72). In the second shot, the hunter and his retinue are coming down a path. Visual continuity and narrative coherence between the first and second shots are disrupted by the sudden appearance of a new pro-filmic element – a horse.

This second shot, which was based on a subsequent cartoon panel in the *New York Journal and Advertiser* (February 16), has little narrative content and was not mentioned in the Edison catalog.

The Finish of Bridget McKeen (© March 1, 1901) is filmed against a painted backdrop of a kitchen, with a stove, table, and chair the only real objects on the set. It is described in the Edison catalog as follows:

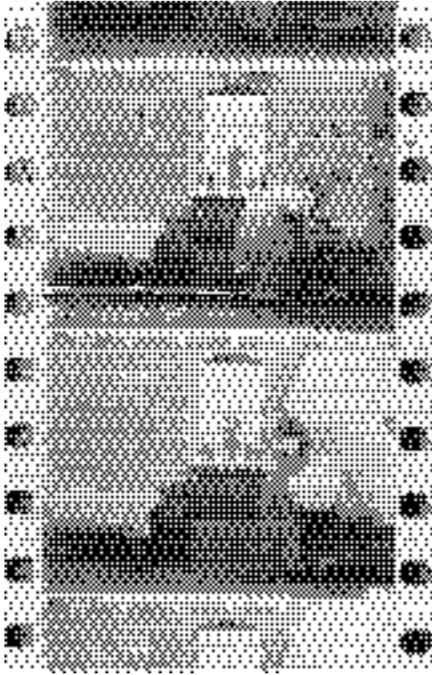
THE FINISH OF BRIDGET McKEEN

Early morning in the kitchen, Bridget McKeen with a very chipper smile enters to light the fire. She piles the wood and coal in the stove and applies the match. The fire does not burn. Bridget becomes annoyed, and kneeling down blows through the grate, as you have often seen her do. Still the fire does not burn. Bridget's patience becomes exhausted, and seizing the kerosene oil can, pours a generous quantity into the stove, when occurs a terrific explosion and up goes Bridget through the ceiling to join the angels. In a few seconds down comes Bridget's dissected body. First an arm, then a leg, then her head, then another arm and then the trunk. The scene then dissolves into a very picturesque graveyard and Bridget's tombstone forms the immediate foreground with the following epitaph: "Here lies the body of Bridget McKeen, who lighted the fire with kerosene." This picture is a winner.

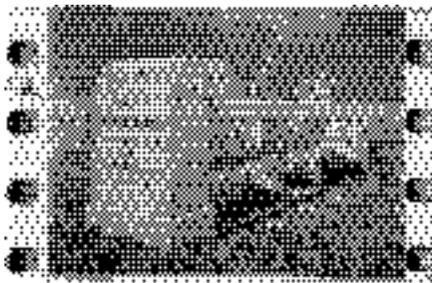
Length 75 feet. \$ 11.25. (1901, 72)

In this film, the relationship between shot 1 and shot 2 is easily understood, particularly by English-speaking audiences. Not only is the first shot the cause of the second (the gravestone and the ditty), but the latter shot also works effectively as a punchline.

This is the first film in which Porter dissolved from one scene to the next. The dissolve was a common screen technique developed in the mid-nineteenth century and executed by exhibitors during the actual projection of slides. It was considered to be a particularly elegant transition from one image to the next, preventing sudden jumps when scenes changed. In the late 1890s exhibitors occasionally dissolved from film to film or film to slides but with mixed success.¹⁹ The technique was tricky, required good timing, considerable equipment, and an extra assistant. In transitions between film images, it was both possible and much more practical for dissolves to be made in the motion picture camera or during the printing process. Méliès's *Cinderella* (1899) was perhaps the first film to contain dissolves; in the United States his example was quickly followed by Blackton and Smith, whose *Congress of Nations* was copyrighted by Edison on November 16, 1900. Porter used dissolves frequently during 1901–1902, beginning with *The Finish of Bridget McKeen* and ending with *Life of an American Fireman*. As a technique, it gave the cameraman an opportunity to assume control of the editorial process under certain circumstances. *Another Job for the Undertaker*, made two months after *The Finish of Bridget McKeen*, is very similar in subject matter and imitates its narrative structure. The first shot is a typical trick film; the second actuality material. Here the



2.3a Shot 1, *The Finish of Bridget McKeen* (1901).



2.3b Shot 2, *The Finish of Bridget McKeen* (1901).

combining of disparate mimetic materials to form a larger whole is the kind of editorial technique that Porter learned well as an exhibitor.

All three of these early Porter/Edison films share many of the same characteristics. The first shots are self-contained and constructed like one-shot films of the period; the only significant difference is the addition of a tag, a short fragment which could not stand alone as an independent entity. The films lack phenomenological continuity from one shot to the next: Their space and time relationships are indeterminate, involving indefinite abridgments. Porter had not begun to develop or utilize the spatial and temporal articulations fundamental to most narrative cinema. Continuity is restricted to a narrative level consistent with a kind of theatrical representation yet often dependent on a showman's narration.

On May 6, 1901, Thomas A. Edison copyrighted a number of Porter films that had been shot in the new studio. One of these, *Miss Laura Comstock's Bag Punching Dog*, starred the bulldog Mannie in a vaudeville-style routine. At the same time Porter made a number of films that featured Mannie in the role of the tramp's nemesis. One of these was *Pie, Tramp and the Bulldog*. The film consists of three shots (or sub-shots): (1) the tramp indicates to us that he is hungry

but that the bulldog prevents him from getting to the pie set to cool on a nearby window sill; (2) the tramp immediately returns on stilts to outsmart the dog and eat the pie on the ledge; (3) the dog gets the tramp by jumping out the house window, and the two exit with the dog holding onto the tramp's pants. Here Porter used the techniques of the trick film: a succession of takes filmed from a single camera position in a way that gives the illusion of a single, uninterrupted temporal continuity – for narrative purposes. Rather than combining takes in a single shot to create a “trick,” Porter used the procedure for purposes of pacing and to

construct a narrative that would have been difficult or impossible to construct in a single continuous take. (Porter would return to the same strategy, the same dog, and the same, although more elaborate, narrative four years later in *Burglar's Slide for Life* [© April 28, 1905].) *Pie, Tramp and the Bulldog* was a popular success, praised in the July 1901 Edison catalog: "we believe [this] to be one of the funniest pictures ever put on exhibition. It has had a run of five weeks at Proctor's New York vaudeville Theatres and the audience never seemed to tire of it" (1901, 76). With the studio in operation only a few months, Porter was producing films that pleased the home office with their financial success.

The Tramp's Dream, another film in this series, is the first film in which Porter employed a clear temporal continuity and what one might call a metaphorical spatial relationship between shots. It is described in the Edison catalog as follows:

THE TRAMP'S DREAM

This scene was made in a beautiful park, a convenient bench setting in the background against a granite wall. The moon is just rising above the trees when Weary Willy approaches the bench, yawns, stretches and lies down for a peaceful sleep. Then the dream begins. The scene changes to the back door of a farm house. Weary Willy enters the gate and knocking upon the kitchen door, asks the lady of the house for something to eat, promising to saw and split a quantity of wood which is piled up near by, in payment for the food. The food is furnished, and after our hobo friend devours same he starts to walk away without fulfilling his promise. The lady remonstrates with him, but to no avail. The house dog is then turned loose and Weary Willy is grabbed by the slack of his trousers. He becomes panic stricken and makes many heroic attempts to break the bulldog's grip, but finds that he can't. Dog and tramp roll over and over upon the ground in a terrible struggle. The lady then appears with a broom and pounds Weary Willy vigorously upon the back. Now the scene instantly changes to the bench in the park and shows Weary Willy awakening. A big policeman is standing over him pounding his feet with his club and thus putting an end to his nightmare. Weary Willy wakes up and is roughly handled by the officer and run to the station house. This picture is absolutely a side splitter.

Length 100 feet. \$ 15.00. (1901, 63-64)

The last shot explains why the dream ends and also reinforces a simultaneity of action between the tramp being attacked by the dog and the patrolman: He gets no rest either in his dream world or his "real" world. Not only is there temporal continuity, but a "spatial" movement into and out of the tramp's mind. The film employs the same strategy used by G. A. Smith in his film *Let Me Dream Again* (completed by August 1900) in which "an elderly beau flirting with maiden at masquerade ball wakes, and finds himself in bed bestowing unexpected caresses upon his old missus" (Charles Urban 1903, 104). Siegmund Lubin made a similar film with the same title, 170 feet in length.²⁰ *The Tramp's Dream* is testimony to Porter's readiness to borrow and adapt; in this he was typical of most filmmakers of the early 1900s.

Many of the films produced at Edison during the first part of 1901 were not copyrighted and therefore do not exist in the Paper Print Collection – the major source of existing Edison films for this period. Potentially interesting films are, for the moment at least, lost. *Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show Parade*, which “shows Buffalo Bill and his family of Rough Riders on their triumphal entry in New York, April 1, 1901,” was probably taken by Porter.²¹ Performances of Buffalo Bill's Wild West at Madison Square Garden included the holdup of the Deadwood Stage, which may have inspired another film made by the Edison company between April and June 1901: *Stage Coach Hold-Up in the Days of '49*.

This scene will give you a good idea of the desperate “hold-ups” that occurred on the plains when the rush was made to the new gold fields in '49. It shows the desperadoes coming from the ambush, covering the driver of the stage with Winchester rifles and ordering him to halt. The occupants of the coach are compelled to dismount from their places, and are lined up in a very realistic manner with their hands thrown up. The outlaws get all the booty they can, and are just departing when an armed Sheriff's posse arrives. They pursue the bandits and after a desperate chase and a brutal conflict, capture them and return to the scene of the robbery. The bandits are then forced at the points of revolvers to ride in front of the coaching party to Dad's Gulch, a mining town, where they are safely landed in the lock-up. This picture will joyously intoxicate any audience, and deafening applause for an encore will be certain. Length 150 ft. (Edison 1901, 80)

Stage Coach Hold-Up raises many questions for which there are few clear answers. How widely was it seen? Could it have been a model for the English film *Robbery of a Mail Coach* (September–November 1903) as well as for Porter's own *The Great Train Robbery*? While the description suggests an elaborate use of narrative involving several shots, it provides no information about the spatial/temporal relationships between them. The historian must look elsewhere to trace Porter's development as a filmmaker.

Based on the success of films taken at the Paris Exposition (August 1900), the Edison Manufacturing Company had secured an exclusive concession to film the attractions of the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York. A film crew, probably featuring James White as producer and Edwin Porter as cameraman, filmed *Opening of the Pan-American Exposition May 20th 1901* (© May 28, 1901), *A Trip Around the Pan-American Exposition* (© June 8, 1901), and a number of other scenes (*African Village*, *Johnstown Flood*, *Aerio-Cycle*, *Trip to the Moon*, etc.), a few of which were later copyrighted (*Japanese Village* on July 31, 1901; *Esquimaux Village* on August, 9, 1901) or reshot.²² These films were sold as individual scenes to exhibitors who could then combine them with other films (Siegmond Lubin eventually managed to take films of the Exposition as well) and slides. A long film, like *A Trip Around the Pan-American Exposition*, was sold in 200, 300, 400, 500, or 625-foot strips, depending upon the desires of the exhibitor. A Pan-American Supplement, which contained full descriptions of each scene, provided material for the showman's narration.

Edison Attains a Virtual Monopoly

Near the end of July 1901 Thomas Edison won an important victory in the courts, which upheld his patents. The Edison Manufacturing Company announced in the trades:

WE HAVE WON. Decision handed down by Judge Wheeler of the United States Circuit Court Sustains Thomas A. Edison's Patent on the Art of Producing Animated Pictures and grants Mr. Edison the only right to Manufacturing Motion Pictures and Films.²³

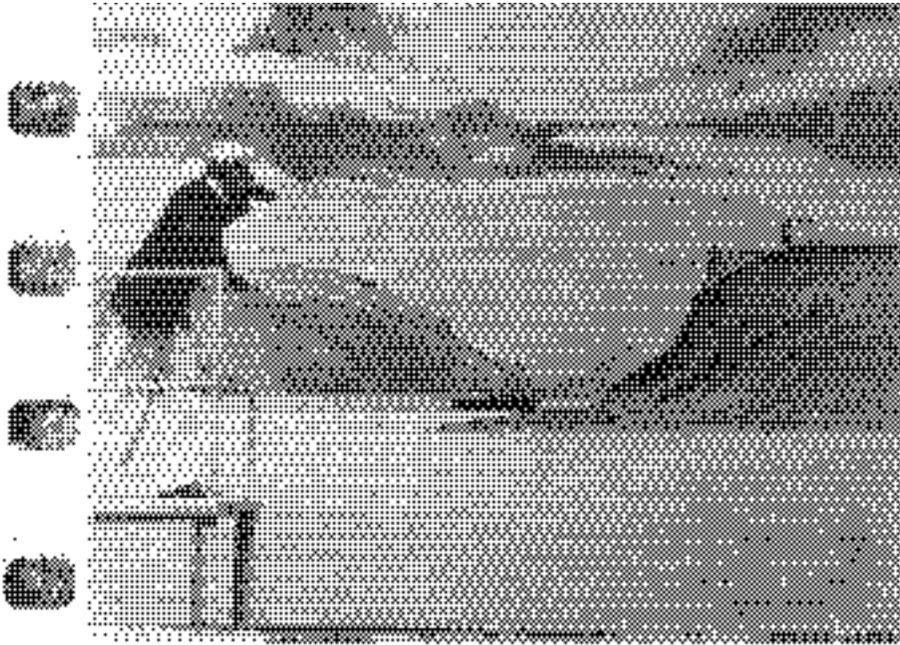
Siegmund Lubin, following the advice of his lawyer, relocated in Germany and his chief photographer, James (Jacob) B. Smith, whose camerawork demonstrates substantial ability, joined the Edison company (Smith 1902). Smith would often work with Porter and White covering noteworthy events with two cameras. With Lubin knocked out of competition, Vitagraph reduced to the role of exhibitor, and Biograph in financial decline and allowed to continue producing and exhibiting films only because it was making financial reports to the courts for later attachment, the Edison Manufacturing Company was on the verge of controlling the US motion picture industry. Beginning on July 31, the Edison organization copyrighted many more of its films.

During the late summer and early fall of 1901, the Sampson-Schley Controversy was the major news event, receiving daily front-page coverage and headlines. The controversy revolved around a naval battle off Santiago during the Spanish-American War and the actions of the two principal American officers. Porter's *The Sampson-Schley Controversy* (© August 15, 1901) was a two-shot film given a more descriptive title by the Kleine Optical Company: *Schley on the Bridge During Battle and Man Behind the Gun* (1902, 108). An Edison trade description read:

Admiral Schley is depicted on the bridge of the "Brooklyn" commanding the American fleet which is engaged with the Spanish fleet. A portion of Schley's crew appears in the immediate foreground of the picture furiously working a 13-inch gun and giving a dramatic demonstration of the famous picture "The Man Behind the Gun."²⁴

The narrative is evenly divided between the two shots, which show Schley on the bridge directing the fire against a model boat and the gunner firing on and finally sinking it.

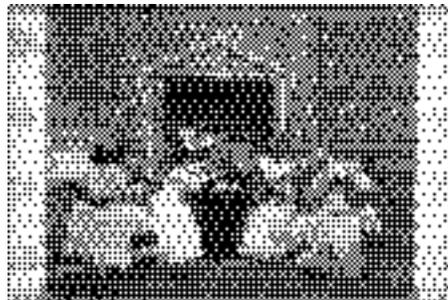
In this film Porter had moved beyond the limitations of his earlier films, with their self-contained one-shot type constructions. The set, basically the same for both shots, was built using extreme theatrical foreshortening, a technique frequently used by Méliès and in life-model lantern slides. A slight shift in camera position in relation to the set encourages the illusion of being on different parts of the same ship. The temporal relationship between the two shots is vague though potentially significant in light of Porter's later films: The relative position of the



2.4a Shot 1, *The Sampson-Schley Controversy* (1901).



2.4b Shot 2, *The Sampson-Schley Controversy* (1901).



2.4c Shot 3, *The Sampson-Schley Controversy* (1901).

model ship in each shot suggests a temporal repetition. One could say that two aspects of the same battle that occur simultaneously are shown successively. Yet this is at best implicit. Temporality in this film remains amorphous, unclear, undefined.

Three weeks after its initial release, Porter added a third and final scene to the film: “The conclusion of the picture shows Admiral Sampson at an afternoon Tea Party, the center of an admiring group of old maids. Length 200 ft.”²⁵ A dissolve between the last two shots was achieved in the printing. Porter, using his experience

as an exhibitor, expanded upon the earlier film to produce a simple contrast: “The Man Behind the Gun/The Man Behind the Tea Cup.” This, as much as any other single example, demonstrates the open-ended nature of early films. Short films were units to be used by the exhibitor to form larger and often more complex programs. Porter simply used his position as cameraman to add another unit to the short film. In *The Sampson-Schley Controversy* the tension between cameraman/producer and showman/exhibitor *vis-à-vis* editorial responsibility emerges as an important issue. This short film could, of course, still be used by an exhibitor within a larger film and slide program on the Spanish–American War at his own discretion. Nonetheless, Porter was appropriating editorial techniques that had traditionally been in the domain of the exhibitor in order to make a political comment.

Life Rescue at Long Branch (© September 16, 1901) was retitled *Life Rescue at Atlantic City* out of commercial considerations. The subject, a staged rescue by lifeboat, was a popular one. Siegmund Lubin had filmed *Life Rescue in Atlantic City* during the summer of 1899. The Lubin film was described as “the most wonderful picture ever taken. Two people went out too far in the ocean to bathe; the gentleman was drowned, the lady saved by the life guards, who can be seen swimming out to her” (ca. 1899, F. M. Prescott, *Catalogue of New Films*, 4).²⁶ The Edison film shows what Porter felt to be the two most important parts of the rescue, and connects the two shots with a dissolve. The biggest distinction between *Life Rescue at Long Branch* and earlier rescue films such as *Ambulance Call* and *Ambulance at the Accident* (both © October 25, 1897), which were sold individually by Edison but frequently shown together, is the dissolve that ties the shots together and the corresponding assertion of editorial control on the part of the cameraman/producer.

The McKinley Pictures

When President McKinley visited the Pan-American Exposition early in September 1901, Edison cameras were present to take advantage of their photographic concession. On the second day of his visit, McKinley was shot by Leon Czolgosz at the Temple of Music, giving the Edison Manufacturing Company a moving picture exclusive on the biggest news event of the new century. The Edison catalog proclaimed: “Our cameras were the only ones at work at the Pan-American Exposition on the day of President McKinley’s speech, Thursday, September 5th, and on Friday, September 6th, the day of the shooting. We secured the only animated pictures incidental to these events” (1902, 12). Three films, fewer than first announced, were offered for sale: *The President’s Speech at the Pan-American Exposition*, *President McKinley Reviewing Troops at the Pan-American Exposition*, and *The Mob Outside the Temple of Music at the Pan-American Exposition*. Frame enlargements were subsequently published in the *New York World* of September 10, along with a brief article:

KINETOSCOPE SCENES IN BUFFALO TRAGEDY

The most successful kinetoscope pictures ever taken of President and Mrs. McKinley are those The World to-day reproduces. These are the only pictures secured of the surging crowd that surrounded the Music building immediately after the attempt on the President's life.

James H. White of the Edison Manufacturing Company, who superintended the taking of the pictures, said yesterday that the crowd around the building was frantic over the shooting. The people rushed in masses against the approaches to the building and were with difficulty beaten back by the guards and soldiers ...

The Edison people had a camera focussed [sic] on the entrance to the building waiting the exit of the Presidential Party. As soon as news came to them of the attempt on the President's life one of the employees of the company, camera in hand, climbed a ladder and began to reel off pictures of the excited mob which are herein reproduced. (1902, 3)

Edwin S. Porter and James B. Smith were almost certainly two of the anonymous employees.

When President McKinley died a week later, the Edison company filmed the funeral ceremonies as they moved from Buffalo to Washington to McKinley's hometown of Canton, Ohio. Eleven films were offered for sale. Exhibitors could either select and buy them individually for their programs or purchase a group of several films joined together by dissolving effects. *The Complete Funeral Cortège at Canton, Ohio* is one example of this second option. The Edison catalog stated:

Our staff of photographers was at hand at Canton, Ohio, on September 18th and 19th to secure the pictures of the funeral ceremonies at that city. We list below seven films, all of which are absolutely perfect photographically and of a highly interesting nature. Each film is described and listed separately, but the negative is so arranged that when the entire series is purchased the dissolving effects are secured; that is to say, the first scene in the series dissolves into the second and so on until the entire series of Canton pictures is shown. 675 ft. (1902, 15)

Dissolves had become an essential technique in the hands of the production company since they could only be offered to exhibitors in exchange for a standardized program. Perhaps most exhibitors did not abdicate their editorial function; a program from the Searchlight Theatre in Tacoma, Washington, shows that a different selection of films was made when it screened McKinley funeral films.²⁷

The combination of being in the right place at the right time, Edison's near-monopoly in motion pictures, and the interest of the American people in McKinley/Exposition films resulted in a financial windfall for the Edison company. October to December 1901, when these films were in greatest demand, set a sales record for the Kinetograph Department that was not matched during any other three-month period between 1900 and 1904.²⁸ Porter and his associates continued to exploit this trend. In *Martyred Presidents* (© October 7, 1901) – a film indebted to

nineteenth-century magic lantern subjects like *Our Departed Heroes* (Marcy ca. 1878, 32) – photographs of Lincoln, Garfield, and McKinley fade in and out, framed by a static image of a tombstone. The second shot, a brief tag, shows the assassin kneeling before the throne of justice. Dissolving on and off of the photographs, once done by the exhibitor in lantern shows, was now done by the cameraman. While the catalog considered the film “most valuable as an ending to the series of McKinley pictures,” it left the final editorial decision to the exhibitor.

Shortly after making *Martyred Presidents*, Porter returned to the Pan-American Exposition and made *Pan-American Exposition by Night* (© October 14, 1901). While the film is often referred to for its early use of time-lapse photography, its two-shot construction is particularly interesting:

PAN-AMERICAN EXPOSITION BY NIGHT

A great feature of the Pan-American Exposition, as unanimously conceded by all visitors, was the electric illumination of the Exposition grounds at night. After a great deal of experimenting and patience, we succeeded in securing an excellent picture of the buildings at the Pan-American as they appeared when lighted up at night. All the buildings from the Temple of Music to the Electric Tower are shown, including the Electric Tower itself. The emotional and sensational effects were also secured by starting the panoramic view by daylight and revolving the camera until the Electric Tower forms the center of the field of the lens. Our camera was then stopped and the position held until night, when we photographed the coming up of the lights, an event which was deemed by all to be a great emotional climax at the Pan-American Exposition. Immediately the lights are burning to their fullest brilliancy, the camera is again set in motion and revolved until the Temple of Music is reached. The motion is then reversed and the camera goes back until it rests on the Electric Tower, thus supplying the climax to the picture. The great searchlights of the Tower are being worked during the entire time the picture is being exposed, and the effect is startling. This picture is pronounced by the photographic profession to be a marvel in photography, and by the theatrical people to be the greatest winner in panoramic views ever placed before the public. Class A, 75 ft. \$11.25. (Edison 1902, 22)

Here Porter combined two common stereopticon (i.e., magic lantern) procedures. The temporal relationship between the two shots is characteristic of day/night dissolving views, a popular genre of lantern show entertainments. The image of a building during the day was customarily succeeded by the identical view of the building at night (usually achieved photographically by a day-for-night technique). The panorama as a genre predated the cinema by more than a hundred years and found its way into many forms of popular culture, not least of all the magic lantern. In the late 1890s it was adapted to moving pictures. The combination was a visual *tour de force* and Porter was sent back to film *Panoramic View of the Esplanade by Night* (© November 11, 1901).

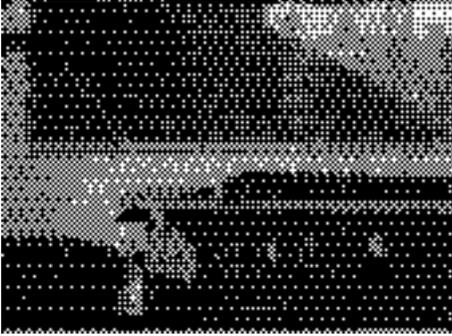
Executions, still considered a form of entertainment in turn-of-the-century America, were particularly popular film subjects during the novelty phase of cinema.²⁹ Audiences were impressed that the image of someone who was demonstrably dead could appear so lifelike. With the *New York Times* noting that “many want the few tickets” to watch Czolgosz’s death, it is not surprising that the Edison company chose to film “a realistic imitation of the last scene in the electric chair.”³⁰ (Meanwhile, Czolgosz’s wax lookalike was also being placed in the Chamber of Horrors’ electric chair at the Eden Musée.) Porter went up to the Auburn State Prison in Auburn, NY, and filmed two panoramas of the prison exterior on the morning of the execution, October 29.³¹ Two additional scenes were subsequently filmed in the studio, “faithfully carried out from the description of an eye witness” – probably taken from a newspaper report. (Reenacting news events was a widely practiced phenomenon of early cinema. According to Iris Barry, the Edison company also tried to recreate Czolgosz’s assassination of McKinley.³² In Europe, Pathé did not have the same hesitations or problems; they recreated the assassination and offered it for sale.)

Although the resulting film, *The Execution of Czolgosz* (© November 9, 1901), contains only four shots and three scenes, it has a surprisingly sophisticated structure.

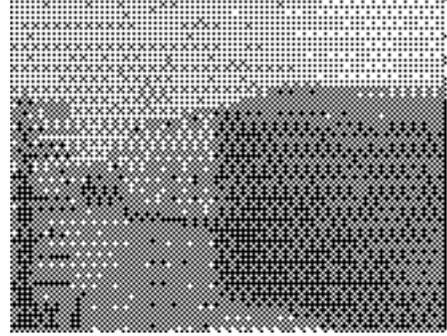
EXECUTION OF CZOLGOSZ

A detailed reproduction of the execution of the assassin of President McKinley faithfully carried out from the description of an eye witness. The picture is in three scenes. First: Panoramic view of Auburn Prison taken the morning of the electrocution. The picture then dissolves into the corridor of murderer’s row. The keepers are seen taking Czolgosz from his cell to the death chamber. The scene next dissolves into the death chamber, and shows State Electrician, Wardens and Doctors making final test of the chair. Czolgosz is then brought in by the guard and is quickly strapped into the chair. The current is turned on at a signal from the Warden, and the assassin heaves heavily as though the straps would break. He drops prone after the current is turned off. The doctors examine the body and report to the Warden that he is dead, and he in turn officially announces the death to the witnesses. Class B 200 ft. \$24. (Edison 1902, 91)

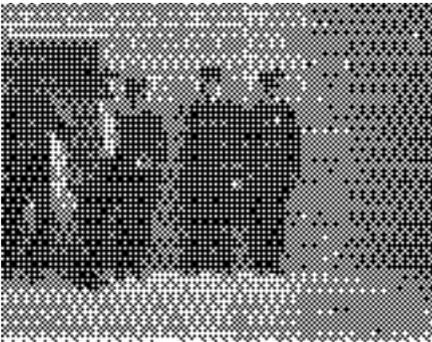
The film was also called *The Execution of Czolgosz and Panorama of Auburn State Prison*, the title acknowledging that it is a hybrid that combined two genres: the panorama and the dramatic reenactment. An exhibitor could originally buy the narrative portion without the panoramas. Thus the editorial decision of the producer/cameraman could be disregarded if the exhibitor so desired. It would, however, be inaccurate to simply look upon the film as two genres held together by a dissolve and a common theme: *The Execution of Czolgosz* makes use of a spatial, exterior/interior relationship between shots that was beginning to be employed by other filmmakers at this time as well.³³ The dissolve between the first



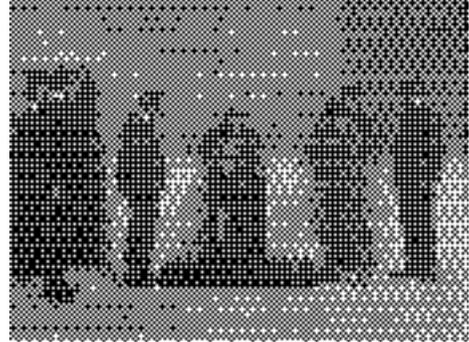
2.5a Scene 1, shot 1, *The Execution of Czolgosz* (1901).



2.5b Scene 1, shot 2, *The Execution of Czolgosz* (1901).



2.5c Scene 2, *The Execution of Czolgosz* (1901).



2.5d Scene 3, *The Execution of Czolgosz* (1901).

and second scenes links not only outside and inside, but actuality and reenactment, description and narrative, a moving and a static camera. Porter's use of panoramas at the beginning of the film gives the narrative a context, a well-constructed world in which the action can unfold. This opening scene contains two shots: the first panning with a train as it approaches the prison; the second of a more foreboding facade. These shots distinguished this film from most reenactment films of the period by (consciously) heightening the reality of the recreation. At the same time, they are part of a drama that leads the audience step by step to a confrontation with the electric chair and a man's death.

The temporal/spatial relationship between the second and third scenes is more complex than a casual viewing would suggest. The *New York Times* noted that "Czolgosz was confined in the cell nearest the death chamber, so that when he entered the execution room this morning he had only to step a few feet through the stone arch" (October 31, 1901, 5). Like Porter, most members of the audience would already have been familiar with the details of the execution. Clearly they

would not have concurred with my initial feeling that the pause before Czolgosz's entrance (in scene 3) facilitates the illusion of linear temporal continuity (even something like a match cut). The known spatial relationship between the second and third scenes suggests a kind of temporal overlap that could be found occasionally in theater. The narrative event was not structured as described in the *New York Times*, which started out with (1) a description of activities in the death chamber prior to Warden Mead's signal to have the prisoner brought in, including the testing of the chair, then (2) moved to Czolgosz's cell and his march down the corridor, and (3) back into the death chamber with a description of the execution. The *Times* maintained a rigorous chronological account of events, moving freely from a description of activities in one space to activities in another and back again. Porter, in contrast, maintained individual scenes intact by manipulating the "underdeveloped" temporality, which characterizes much of early cinema.

The Courts and Changing Business Strategies

The Edison Manufacturing Company made few dramatic films at the end of 1901 or early in 1902. With their American competitors out of business or, as in the case of Biograph, struggling with a large-format film that was driving them into the red, Edison apparently found it more profitable to dupe foreign productions and concentrate on filming fight films, topical news events, or promotional materials for railway companies that could then be used for travel lectures. Williamson's *The Big Swallow* appeared in the Edison catalog as *Photographic Contortions*. Many others appeared with their original titles intact: G. A. Smith's *Grandma Threading Her Needle*, Méliès's *Little Red Ridinghood* and *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, the Lumières' *Santos Dumont's Airship*, Pathé's *The History of a Crime*, etc. Porter did produce a few trick films, but *Twentieth-Century Tramp; or Happy Hooligan and His Airship* (© January 27, 1902) was a remake of Ferdinand Zecca's *La Conquête de l'air* (1901). *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (© January 27, 1902) was a remake of R. W. Paul's *The Countryman's First Sight of the Animated Pictures* (1901). One reason Porter remade the Paul film rather than simply duping it was to incorporate clips from earlier Edison films and the appropriate titles (i.e., "Projecting Kinetoscope") – why sell a film that advertised a competitor's product? Remaking the Paul film also presented Porter with a technical challenge which, judging from his total oeuvre, he was predisposed to take.

From the end of July to the end of March 1902, a period of eight months, the Edison company had a virtual monopoly in film production and distribution within the United States. Taking advantage of its position, the company pursued an extremely conservative business policy as it made films only within well-established genres, relied primarily on news films and topicals (which were comparatively inexpensive to produce), and duped European dramatic spectacles, thereby avoiding their high negative costs. Rather than taking advantage of its

short-term legal advantage to develop a long-term business advantage, Gilmore and White used the period for short-term economic gain. Thomas Edison needed money for his other business schemes, and was clearly unwilling to divert money or attention to the Kinetograph Department. As he explained in a letter dated December 14, 1901, "I am putting all my ducats in the storage battery."³⁴ By pursuing its business strategies in the courts, the Edison Manufacturing Company incurred heavy legal costs. Money derived from Kinetograph operations tended to go to lawyers rather than back into production. Histories of early cinema often refer to a decline in the popularity of moving pictures around the turn of the century. The decline has customarily been attributed to a jaded audience tiring of actuality scenes and news footage, only to be reversed by the appearance of the story film. Unsubstantiated, it always seemed to be one of those vague myths that pass for history of those "early years." An Eastman Kodak report of motion picture film sales, however, indicates that a decline in sales did take place in 1901 and 1902, coinciding with Edison's control of the industry.³⁵ Edison's monopoly was a significant blow to American film culture, not only to Edison's competitors but to exhibitors and audiences as well. Motion picture exhibitions presented at New York vaudeville theaters were consistently applauded in the first part of 1901. Typical comments were: "American Vitagraph exhibited a number of views that proved up-to-date and consequently of particular interest"; "the American biograph pictures were vigorously applauded"; and "The Kalatechnoscope still maintained its popular hold upon the patrons of the palace and is a strong applause winner."³⁶ By 1902, a more typical comment was "the vitagraph continues." One casualty of the period was the Searchlight Theatre in Tacoma, Washington. The account books of the theater show a gradually declining gate after the McKinley films finished their first run in December 1901. By April and May, as the same headliners (*Cinderella*, *Little Red Ridinghood*, Boer War films, etc.) were shown for the second and third time, receipts had fallen by at least half. The theater closed during the beginning of June, done in by the lack of new, interesting product.

The July 1901 decision upholding Edison's motion picture patents was reversed by the higher courts in March 1902. Biograph announced its victory in the trades and began to sell 35mm reduction prints of its large-format 68 mm/70 mm films. Lubin quickly returned from Europe and reactivated his business as well. Having failed to uphold his patents in the courts, Edison was forced to pursue a different business policy. With Lubin consistently undercutting his company's pricing policies – selling film at 12¢ a foot versus Edison's 15¢ a foot, the Edison Manufacturing Company took the position, as had the inventor's phonograph business, that it was the standard against which competitors must be judged:

SPECIAL NOTICE TO EXHIBITORS

We have no cheap films to offer, but we will give you the finest subjects procurable at a fair price; films that are worth owning and that will cultivate the public's taste for motion picture shows instead of disgusting them ...³⁷

To counter the new competition Edison increased its photographic staff and the number of picture-taking operators, probably hiring the cameraman A. C. Abadie. Its business strategy, however, not only required more new films protected by copyright laws, but “headliners” – longer, more elaborate, and frequently dramatic films that could attract and hold a demanding audience. At least four films made during 1902 subsequent to Edison’s defeat in the courts reflect this shift in emphasis to a more elaborate dramatic format: *Appointment by Telephone* (© May 2, 1902), *Jack and the Beanstalk* (© June 20, 1902), *How They Do Things on the Bowery* (© October 31, 1902), and *Life of an American Fireman* (© January 21, 1903).

Appointment by Telephone is a simple three-shot comedy in which Porter achieved a smooth narrative progression from one scene to the next:

APPOINTMENT BY TELEPHONE

Two young men are seated in a broker’s office. A young lady calls one of them on the telephone and makes an appointment to meet him at a certain restaurant. The scene dissolves to the outside of a restaurant, and the young man appears waiting for the young lady, who soon comes along and they go inside. The scene dissolves again and shows the interior of the restaurant and the young couple coming in and taking their seats at a table next the window. The young man’s wife happens to pass the window just as they get seated, and looking in recognizes him. She confronts the pair in the restaurant in a state of great anger just as the waiter is serving champagne; then the trouble begins. The table and chairs are wrecked, and the husband and young lady are severely horsewhipped by the enraged wife. A very fine photograph, full of action from start to finish, and a subject that will appeal to everyone. Class A 100 ft. \$15.00. (Edison 1902, 122)

Not only did Porter make use of an exterior/interior spatial relationship between shots, but also he used a reverse angle to show overlapping space: The sidewalk established in the second shot is featured prominently in the third. This construction of a fictional world is not only established by the exit/entrance of the young man and his female companion, but also reinforced by the movement of the wife from the sidewalk to the interior of the restaurant in the last shot. A kind of temporal continuity is strongly suggested between these two shots, although it remains somewhat vague and undefined: The set is constructed and filmed in such a way that any attempt to match action was avoided. Unlike Porter’s earlier films, the sets were more than simple flats erected parallel to the camera. The elaboration of space both in terms of editorial strategies and set construction occurred simultaneously.

Jack and the Beanstalk

Immediately after the completion of *Appointment by Telephone*, Porter began work on *Jack and the Beanstalk*, a 10-shot narrative, which took six weeks to make. Sets of lantern slides illustrating *Cinderella*, *Swiss Family Robinson*, *Bluebeard*, *Gulliver’s*

Travels, Jack and the Beanstalk, and many other tales had been popular with children and their parents throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and were then available through George Kleine, the largest distributor of Edison films. (Most dramatic or story films from this period had their lantern-slide equivalents, whether it was *Ten Nights in the Bar Room* or *The Execution of Czolgosz*.) Georges Méliès and G. A. Smith, adapting and revitalizing this staple of the screen, had made fairy tales an important genre of cinema. Porter now followed their lead. The theatrical tradition of pantomimes, which generally used fairy tales for subject matter, also played an important role in films of this genre for all three filmmakers, particularly in providing an acting style.³⁸ Dreams and visions, such as Jack's dream of the giant's gold, were popular devices that could be found both on the stage and in lantern shows. The extremely close relationship between the theater and the screen is particularly apparent in *Jack and the Beanstalk*.

Jack and the Beanstalk was ignored by Ramsaye and Jacobs, no doubt because its subject matter obviously imitated Méliès. Their quiet dismissal of the film does it a disservice, for *Jack and the Beanstalk* contains all the cinematic and narrative elements historians such as Vardac saw in *Life of an American Fireman*:

The success of *An American Fireman* obviously depended upon the pictorial development of two lines of action, which, proceeding simultaneously, culminated to form the climax. Within this structural form were included such spectacular devices as the vision which introduced the second line of action, the dissolve linkage blending the scenes, and a change in camera position showing first the interior of the burning room and then its exterior as the action moves out the window with the rescue. (1949, 181–182)

The cinematic innovations cited by Vardac had become common techniques and strategies for filmmakers by 1901 and can be found much earlier in lantern shows. Porter's use of an increasingly elaborate and integrated narrative, however, can be located in May and June of 1902. In contrast to earlier films like *The Sampson-Schley Controversy* or *The Execution of Czolgosz*, *Jack and the Beanstalk* (like *Appointment by Telephone*) has a fundamental narrative unity. If the dissolve had given the producer/cameraman a degree of editorial control which nonetheless remained optional, the elaboration of a narrative and the simple progression of a story from shot to shot helped to place editorial control more firmly in the hands of the producer/cameraman.

This does not mean that *Jack and the Beanstalk* and *Appointment by Telephone* were among the first story films: Travel lectures, Passion plays, and fight films all had recognizable story lines. These earlier films were constructed, however, in such a way that individual scenes, functioning as self-contained units, could be selected and organized at the discretion of the exhibitor. The exhibitor thus maintained a fundamental relationship to the narrative as it was constructed and projected on

the screen. In films like *Jack and the Beanstalk* the exhibitor's role was reduced to one of secondary elaboration. What is under consideration, then, is a shift in the character of and responsibility for the "story," not its first application to cinema. Under such circumstances the exhibitor was reduced to the role of programmer and lecturer/narrator. While "every scene [was] posed with a view to following as closely as possible the accepted version of Jack and the Beanstalk" (Edison 1902, 117), a brief lecture would have clarified the story line and added characterization and a psychological dimension to the film.

The detailed description of *Jack and the Beanstalk* in the Edison catalog had a dual purpose: to sell the film, and to provide material for the narrator. The last tableau, as a journey to the castle, takes on a narrative significance, which is not at all apparent with a silent viewing of the film. In scene 5, Jack's psychological conflict between obeying his mother and following the dictates of his dream is played up in the description. Likewise the Fairy's story to Jack – that the giant killed and robbed Jack's father – must either be conveyed as part of a narration or assumed to be part of the audience's previous knowledge. Since the film was designed so "the audience finds itself following with ease the thread of this most wonderful of all fairy tales" (Edison 1902, 116–117), the lecture was perhaps optional.³⁹ Nonetheless, if the exhibitor so chose, he could add an important dimension to the film and retain a degree of creative input.

Intimately tied to the development of a more elaborate narrative was the creation of a fictional world with spatial and temporal relationships between scenes. In scenes 3, 4, and 5, Porter cuts freely from the cottage exterior to the interior of Jack's room and back to the exterior. In scenes 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9, Porter presents the audience with a series of carefully constructed scenes in which entrances and exits, glances, set cues, and narrative continuities give the audience information with which to intuit the approximate spatial relationship between the various shots. Temporality remains more problematic, still undeclared and at moments perhaps even confused: The cut between scenes 4 and 5, which is open to different interpretations, may serve as an example. In scene 4, after Jack ends his dreams, he wakes up and walks to the window in his nightgown. Scene 5 begins with Jack at the window, but fully clothed; a few moments later he disappears from view and comes out the front door. The catalog confuses the issue by inaccurately describing this portion of the film, but at least two interpretations seem possible. Porter could have intended a temporal match cut on action while simply ignoring an element of continuity (clothing); or, he may have intended something which can be called a temporal abridgment, although the term suggests a precision and awareness of linear temporal continuity that the filmmaker and his audience did not share. A similar cut occurs between the last two shots of Williamson's *Fire!*, in which the camera "follows the rescue out the window." Here the fireman is never actually seen climbing out the window as he carries the victim from the burning bedroom to safety outside. This could be seen as a match cut that is awkwardly

executed or again as a kind of temporal abridgment (excluding roughly the time it took the fireman to climb through the window).

The problem highlighted in these two cuts is one that faced all filmmakers of this period: temporality. While spatial relationships employed in lantern shows could readily be adopted by cinema, the temporal dimension was much less developed and could only be implied by static slides, primarily via a narration. Film, which presents itself unfolding in time, added this new dimension, demonstrating a tendency to make temporal relationships explicit. Continuity of action, embryonic at best in lantern shows, likewise became a central problem for early cinema. The mechanistic prejudice of film historians in the past has been to assume that early filmmakers were attempting to match action, just doing it badly. The problem is then seen as one of execution and manipulation of pro-filmic elements. The reverse is more likely: Early filmmakers had adequate control over pro-filmic elements, but their major problem was conceptual. With both cuts there is a strong narrative continuity that translates into something that approaches, to our more modern eyes, a match cut; but neither Porter nor Williamson was attempting seamless, linear match cuts on action across contiguous spaces during this period. Simply put, they had a different concept of continuity.

Jack and the Beanstalk was an immediate success, so successful that Edison lawyers had to scramble to prevent their competitors from selling duped copies. Lubin, after his victory in March, had further challenged Edison's company by openly selling duplicates of copyrighted films. *Jack and the Beanstalk*, which was advertised as completed and ready for sale in the *New York Clipper* of May 24, 1902, was not at first released:

We have purposefully delayed the delivery of our great production, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, until the production could be adequately protected by law, in as much as pirates have been copying our films and have been waiting until the production could be put on sail [*sic*] so that they could duplicate and offer it to the public. We have taken steps to protect our film both as a theatrical production and as a picture, and the film will be ready for delivery July 15. (1902, 444)

The Edison Manufacturing Company also announced a new pricing system that could compete more effectively with Lubin and Biograph. Class A films, usually recently copyrighted Edison productions, were offered at 15¢ a foot; Class B films, older Edison films, and most dupes, at 12¢ a foot. As the same ad explained:

To counter the effect of cheap films, duplicates, worthless subjects and short length films that are being offered in the market, we are listing our genuine Edison films in two classes. Some of our subjects cost us large sums of money to obtain while others are procured at a nominal cost. Therefore the films of inexpensive subjects, we shall list as Class B at the net price of \$6.00 per 50 feet. (1902, 444)



2.6a Shot 1, *How They Do Things on the Bowery* (1902).



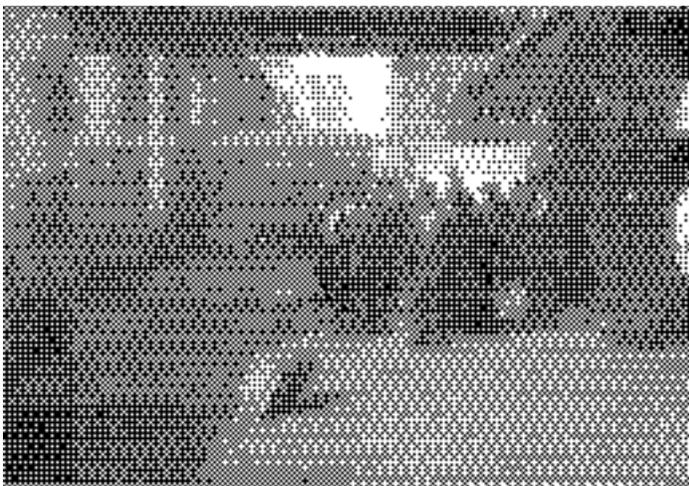
2.6b Shot 2A, *How They Do Things on the Bowery* (1902).



2.6c Shot 2B, *How They Do Things on the Bowery* (1902).



2.6d Shot 3A, *How They Do Things on the Bowery* (1902).



2.6e Shot 3B, *How They Do Things on the Bowery* (1902).

“Telling a Story in Continuity Form”

In the beginning of October, Edison began to sell copies of Méliès’s *A Trip to the Moon* as a Class A subject. Years later, Porter recalled that:

From laboratory examination of some of the popular films of the French pioneer director, George Méliès – trick films like “A Trip to the Moon” – I came to the conclusion that a picture telling a story in continuity form might draw the customers back to the theatres and set to work in this direction.⁴⁰

For Porter, one key moment in *A Trip to the Moon* (August 1902) must have been the rocket landing on the moon. One shot ends after the rocket has hit the Man-in-the-Moon in the eye, making him wince. In the succeeding shot, the rocket lands on the surface of the moon and the voyagers disembark. While Méliès’s desire to show the landing from two different perspectives has legitimate storytelling reasons, the overlap both emphasizes the continuity of action and narrative from one shot to the next and helps the audience understand unfamiliar spatial and temporal constructions. It is this kind of continuity that Porter considered, conceptualized, and applied in many of his subsequent films.

How They Do Things on the Bowery (© October 31, 1902) can be considered an experiment in editorial principles that would then be applied more effectively in *Life of an American Fireman*. The film, part of the Rube series that included *Another Job for the Undertaker*, concerns the mishaps of Uncle Josh, who is tricked and robbed by a young woman exemplifying the evil ways of the city. In the first shot, taken on a city street, the woman drops her handkerchief, which Uncle Josh picks up and hands back to her (a standard ploy for prostitutes to pick up customers); they then go inside. In the second shot, the woman and Uncle Josh sit at a table in a bar and have a drink; she slips him a Mickey Finn, steals his wallet, and leaves. When Uncle Josh is unable to pay, the bartender kicks him out and throws his suitcase after him. In the third shot, a paddy wagon comes down the street; as it backs up and parks outside a building the camera pans. The bartender comes out and throws Uncle Josh in the gutter by the paddy wagon and throws his suitcase after him. The narrative and spatial/temporal relationships between shots 2 and 3 are determined by the continuity of action as the bartender throws Uncle Josh out of the bar. These actions, coming as they do at the end of both shots, reveal the relationship between the two shots only in the final moments. Shots 2 and 3 are thus shown to take place in the contiguous spaces inside and outside the bar. Shot 3 repeats the same time period shown in shot 2, employing a temporal repetition from a different camera position. This temporal construction, perhaps implicit in *The Sampson-Schley Controversy* and *The Execution of Czolgosz*, is now declared, made explicit by the repetition of not one but two distinct actions. The strategy Porter perceived in *A Trip to the Moon* was conceptualized and reapplied in a way that became his own.

Life of an American Fireman

Life of an American Fireman represents a consolidation of Porter's development as a filmmaker rather than the qualitative leap suggested by Ramsaye and Jacobs. As with *Jack and the Beanstalk* and many of his earlier films, Porter chose a subject that was already in the mainstream of popular entertainment and had already proved its popularity on the screen. *Bob the Fireman*, a 12-slide lantern show made in England before the advent of cinema, was sold in the United States through George Kleine in 1902–1903. Well-established narrative progressions and highly conventionalized imagery were transferred to the cinema largely intact. For the Edison Manufacturing Company, the fire rescue had shown its commercial potential as early as November 1896, when James H. White produced four films: *Starting for the Fire*, *Going to the Fire*, *A Morning Alarm*, and *Fighting a Fire*. In the Edison catalog of September 1902, 10 fire films were grouped under a single heading while others on the same subject were scattered throughout its 120 pages. James Williamson's *Fire!*, as Georges Sadoul first pointed out, probably provided Porter with another direct source of inspiration. Sadoul's case, however, can be easily overstated. While the last two scenes of both films share many similarities, Porter's likely borrowings tended toward the pro-filmic elements of set construction and gesture (which were themselves highly conventionalized and obviously did not originate with Williamson) rather than specifically cinematic strategies of decoupage.⁴¹

Although *Life of an American Fireman* was copyrighted in January 1903, it was in production much earlier. On November 15, 1902, the following notice appeared in the *Newark Evening News*:

TO SAVE WOMAN AND PUT OUT FIRE.
And While East Orange Firemen Perform Kinetoscope
Machine Will Record Scene.

There will be a fire on Rhode Island Avenue, East Orange, this afternoon, or at least the East Orange firemen will be called out and go through the motions of extinguishing a fire and rescuing a woman from the upper story of a house for the benefit of the Edison Kinetoscope Company, which will have one of its chain-lightning cameras there to reproduce the scene.⁴²

Life of an American Fireman took more than two months to make. According to Ramsaye, one reason for the delay in its release was that James White, head of the Kinetograph Department, had "cast himself for the lead. . . . When W. E. Gilmore, general manager for Edison, screened the picture he ordered retakes to eliminate White, on the ground that it was subversive of corporation policy for an executive to be an actor" (1926, 415). The retakes may have been filmed while White was away, for he married Pauline Dede on November 30, 1902,⁴³ and went

on a month-long honeymoon to the West Indies (where he apparently did some filming!). Shortly after his return, on February 5, 1903, White left for Europe to take charge of the Antwerp office as Edison's new European sales manager, and W. H. Mark-Graf, Gilmore's brother-in-law, became the new head of the Kinetograph Department.⁴⁴ *Life of an American Fireman* represents, among other things, the end of the Porter-White collaboration.

The film was finally offered for sale in the January 31 issue of the *New York Clipper*.

LIFE OF AN AMERICAN FIREMAN

Is the Greatest Motion Picture Attraction ever offered to the Exhibitor! It is thrilling and dramatic, replete with exciting situations, and so crowded with action, interest and spectacular effects, that an audience witnessing it is simply SPELLBOUND. It shows:

First – The Fireman's Vision of an Imperiled Woman and Child.

Second – The Turning in of the Alarm.

Third – The Firemen Leaping from their Beds, Dressing and Sliding Down the Poles.

Fourth – Interior of the Engine House, Horses Dashing from their Stalls, and Being Hitched to the Apparatus.

Fifth – Men Descending on Poles, and Rushing to their Places on the Fire Apparatus.

Sixth – The Apparatus Leaving the Engine House.

Seventh – Off to the Fire (a Great Fire Run)

Eighth – The Arrival at the Fire, Showing an Actual Burning Building, the Firemen Coupling the Hose, Raising the Ladders, the Rescue Scene from the Interior and Exterior. Great Smoke and Flames Effects. 425 feet. Class A. \$63.75

This film is sold in one length only. Send in your complete order quick, *Get* the film and *Get* the money. This is the only complete fire scene ever attempted where the men are shown leaving their beds, and A *Genuine* hitch taken inside the engine house. A Money Getter is what this film has been pronounced. You need it in your business *because* it will be the strongest card on your bill. Catalogue & 168 Describes this and Over One hundred other New Subjects.⁴⁵

The description in Catalogue no. 168 is familiar but worth quoting and comparing to the text in the *New York Clipper*.

LIFE OF AN AMERICAN FIREMAN

In giving this description to the public, we unhesitatingly claim for it the strongest motion picture attraction ever attempted in this length of film. It will be difficult for the exhibitor to conceive the amount of work involved and the number of rehearsals necessary to turn out a film of this kind. We were compelled to enlist the services of the fire departments of four different cities, New York, Newark, Orange, and East Orange, N.J., and about 300 firemen appear in the various scenes of this film.

From the first conception of this wonderful series of pictures it has been our aim to portray "Life of an American Fireman" without exaggeration, at the same time embodying the dramatic situations and spectacular effects which so greatly enhance a motion picture performance.

The record work of the modern American fire department is known throughout the universe, and the fame of the American fireman is echoed around the entire world. He is known to be the most expert, as well as the bravest, of all fire fighters. This film faithfully and accurately depicts his thrilling and dangerous life, emphasizing the perils he subjects himself to when human life is at stake. We show the world in this film the every movement of the brave firemen and their perfectly trained horses from the moment the men leap from their beds in response to an alarm until the fire is extinguished and a woman and child are rescued after many fierce battles with flame and smoke.

Below we give a description of each of the seven scenes which make up this most wonderful of all fire scenes, "Life of an American Fireman."

Scene 1. – The Fireman's Vision of an Imperilled Woman and Child. The fire chief is seated at his office desk. He has just finished reading his evening paper and has fallen asleep. The rays of an incandescent light rest upon his features with a subdued light, yet leaving his figure strongly silhouetted against the wall of his office. The fire chief is dreaming, and the vision of his dream appears in a circular portrait upon the wall. It is a mother putting her baby to bed, and the inference is that he dreams of his own wife and child. He suddenly awakes and paces the floor in a nervous state of mind, doubtless thinking of the various people who may be in danger from fire at the moment. Here we dissolve the picture to the second scene.

Scene 2. – A Close View of a New York Fire Alarm Box. Shows lettering and every detail in the door and apparatus for turning in an alarm. A figure then steps in front of the box, hastily opens the door and pulls the hook, thus sending the electric current which alarms hundreds of firemen and brings to the scene of the fire the wonderful apparatus of a great city's fire department. Again dissolving the picture, we show the third scene.

Scene 3. – The Interior of the Sleeping Quarters in the Fire House. A long row of beds, each containing a fireman peacefully sleeping, is shown. Instantly upon the ringing of the alarm the firemen leap from their beds and, putting on their clothes in the record time of five seconds, a grand rush is made for a large circular opening in the floor, through the center of which runs a brass pole. The first fireman to reach the pole seizes it and, like a flash, disappears through the opening. He is instantly followed by the remainder of the force. This in itself makes a most stirring scene. We again dissolve the scene, to the interior of the apparatus house.

Scene 4. – Interior of the Engine House. Shows horses dashing from their stalls and being hitched to the apparatus. This is perhaps the most thrilling and in all the most wonderful of the seven scenes of the series, it being absolutely the first motion picture ever made of a genuine interior hitch. As the men come down the pole described in the above scene, and land upon the floor in lightning-like rapidity, six

doors in the rear of the engine house, each heading a horse-stall, burst open simultaneously and a huge fire horse, with head erect and eager for the dash to the scene of the conflagration, rushes from each opening. Going immediately to their respective harness, they are hitched in the almost unbelievable time of five seconds and are ready for their dash to the fire. The men hastily scamper upon the trucks and horse carts and one by one the fire machines leave the house, drawn by eager, prancing steeds. Here we dissolve again to the fifth scene.

Scene 5. – The Apparatus Leaving the Engine House. We show a fine exterior view of engine house, the great doors swinging open, and the apparatus coming out. This is a most imposing scene. The great horses leap to their work, the men adjust their fire hats and coats, and smoke begins pouring from the engines as they pass our camera. Here we dissolve and show the sixth scene.

Scene 6. – Off to the Fire. In this scene we present the best fire run ever shown. Almost the entire fire department of the large city of Newark, N.J., was placed at our disposal and we show countless pieces of apparatus, engines, hook-and-ladders, horse towers, horse carriages, etc., rushing down a broad street at top speed, the horses straining every nerve and evidently eager to make a record run. Great clouds of smoke pour from the stacks of the engines as they pass our camera, thus giving an impression of genuineness to the entire series. Dissolving again we show the seventh scene.

Scene 7. – The Arrival at the Fire. In this wonderful scene we show the entire fire department, as described above, arriving at the scene of action. An actual burning building is in the center foreground. On the right background the fire department is seen coming at great speed. Upon the arrival of the different apparatus, the engines are ordered to their places, hose is quickly run out from the carriages, ladders adjusted to the windows and streams of water poured into the burning structure. At this crucial moment comes the great climax of the series. We dissolve to the interior of the building and show a bed chamber with a woman and child enveloped in flame and suffocating smoke. The woman rushes back and forth in the room endeavoring to escape, and in her desperation throws open the window and appeals to the crowd below. She is finally overcome by the smoke and falls upon the bed. At this moment the door is smashed in by an axe in the hands of a powerful fire hero. Rushing into the room he tears the burning draperies from the window and smashing out the entire window frame, orders his comrades to run up a ladder. Immediately the ladder appears, he seizes the prostrate form of the woman and throws it over his shoulder as if it were an infant, and quickly descends to the ground. We now dissolve to the exterior of the burning building. The frantic mother having returned to consciousness, and clad only in her night clothes, is kneeling on the ground imploring the firemen to return for her child. Volunteers are called for and the same fireman who rescued the mother quickly steps out and offers to return for the babe. He is given permission to once more enter the doomed building and without hesitation rushes up the ladder, enters the window and after a breathless wait, in which it appears he must have been overcome by smoke, he appears with the child on his arm

and returns safely to the ground. The child, being released and upon seeing its mother, rushes to her and is clasped in her arms, thus making a most realistic and touching ending of the series. Length 425 feet. Class A. \$63.75. (Edison 1903, 2–3)

Certain discrepancies between the two descriptions are immediately apparent. The fourth scene in the catalog description is listed under the fourth and fifth headings in the *Clipper* description. The reasons for the expanded *Clipper* description were primarily commercial: The publicist believed that scene 4 “is perhaps the most thrilling and in all the most wonderful of the seven scenes of the series, it being absolutely the first moving pictures ever made of a genuine interior hitch.” The more elaborate catalog version suggests material that could be used by the exhibitor in his lecture. Thus the fireman’s vision of the imperiled mother and child could be the vision of his family if the exhibitor so chose. The showman had the option to dwell on certain details and provide information—the rapidity of the hitch, the name of the fire department, the fact that the fire alarm worked with electric current, etc. But before considering the descriptions and the film in greater detail, it is necessary to reconsider the well-known controversy that surrounds the two extant versions.

The Controversy over Two Versions of *Life of an American Fireman*⁴⁶

Life of an American Fireman was a lost film until the 1940s. Terry Ramsaye’s description of the film relied on memory (or even more likely a description provided by Porter) and has little relationship to the actual film. (Ramsaye’s description was recently resurrected by Budd Schulberg in *Variety* [May 9, 1979, 46]). Jacobs’s description, using the Edison catalog description and photographs taken for copyright purposes, suggested a decoupage not found in either of the two extant versions. The Jacobs description, however, was modified in detail rather than principle by the first of the two versions to be recovered, the one at the Museum of Modern Art. The second, conflicting version is in the Paper Print Collection at the Library of Congress; it became available more recently and has been less widely circulated. Both films are essentially identical except for scene 7 as described in the Edison catalog.

In the Library of Congress (DLC) version, scene 7 is three shots; in the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) version, it is nine. At some point someone took the last two shots of the LoC version and intercut them, following the action as it moves back and forth between the interior and exterior, matching action several times as the fireman goes through the window. Scene 7 in the MoMA print employs the strategies of parallel editing and matching action while the LoC version uses a temporal repetition from different camera positions, similar to the one in *How They Do Things on the Bowery*. A considerable amount has been written based on

the Jacobs description buttressed by the MoMA print. Jean Mitry, for instance, used the MoMA print in which seven scenes “decompose into 15,” and concluded:

One may say with more objectivity that if the English have discovered continuity and montage, Porter was the first to understand that the act of cinema depended on this continuity. In effect, the action is followed across several successive shots. This is a contribution which can't be overestimated. With Porter the continuity becomes genetically linked to the drama, at least to the dramatic emotion. (1967, 237)

Others, such as Jacques Deslandes and Jacques Richard (1968, 385), reject the MoMA version as reedited at a later date. The controversy is more than a fine point of film history for it affects the way we look at the whole of early cinema. The crucial cut between the last two shots of Williamson's *Fire!* can be read using the two versions of *Life of an American Fireman* as a guide. If one accepts the MoMA version, it could be argued very strongly that Porter saw this cut as a match cut. If one uses the LoC print, the possibility of a temporal abridgment becomes more convincing. The same holds true for the cut between shots 4 and 5 in *Jack and the Beanstalk*. As a result, certain kinds of cinematic strategies that can be termed progressive when using the LoC version as a frame of reference become retrogressive or deviant when using the MoMA version.

The preponderance of evidence indicates that the Library of Congress paper print is the original version. The Edison films from 1902–1903 in the Paper Print Collection seem to have been made from negatives ready for release. They include dissolves listed in the catalog and do not have gaps or numbers indicating the possible rearrangement of scenes, as do the later Griffith/Biograph films also in the Paper Print Collection. Criteria for historical accuracy support the LoC print, which was made and then forgotten. The negative or dupe from which the MoMA print was made was subject to 42 years of possible alteration before it reached the MoMA archives. The Museum of Modern Art has also gathered other Edison films from this period. While these films came from different sources, the record is not encouraging: Many films suffered considerable abbreviation and “modernization” when compared to the paper print versions, catalog descriptions, and footage counts of the same films. These include *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Great Train Robbery*, *Burglar's Slide for Life*, and *Boarding School Girls*. Using footage counts, the LoC version of *Life of an American Fireman* is 400 feet long, which allowed for 25 feet of head title and leaders. The LoC copy of *Jack and the Beanstalk* is 600 feet, which also allowed for 25 feet of title and leaders. Consistency argues in favor of the LoC print. The MoMA print is 22 feet shorter and so would have allowed for 47 feet of head title and leaders; buyers of Edison films would seem likely to have objected to the inflated cost if Edison had been selling the MoMA version.

The Edison catalog description does not coincide with either version of the film in all respects. While it indicates three shots in scene 7 and there are three shots in

the LoC version, it does not account for the repetition. Although one could make a hypothetical “catalog version” from the LoC version by eliminating the repetition, one could not then make the MoMA version from this catalog version. Lewis Jacobs has argued that scene 7 is important to film history because there is an awareness that one scene can contain more than one shot. This is not, however, the conceptual breakthrough Jacobs suggests,⁴⁷ but a descriptive problem that is logically if awkwardly explained by the LoC version. Shots 7 and 9 were filmed as one shot/one scene. Shot 8 is not only inserted into this scene but shows the same scene from a different viewpoint. The Edison publicist was thus faced with the unenviable task of describing something that was extremely difficult to describe using familiar literary techniques. Certainly he was not paid to detail cinematic strategies that might confuse prospective purchasers (he does not mention the dramatic pan in shot 7, for instance). On balance, the catalog description also supports the paper print version at the Library of Congress.

Film historians now have much more material available to them than did Sadoul or Jacobs in the 1930s and 1940s. Today it should be clear that the LoC paper print version is internally consistent, is consistent with Porter’s own development as a filmmaker, and consistent with the development of international cinema during the 1901–1903 period. The MoMA version is a reedited version, perhaps for re-release sometime after 1910. This consistency can be shown by way of a careful analysis of the film.

An Analysis of *Life of an American Fireman*

In shot 1, Porter uses a dream balloon to show the fire chief thinking of a mother and child (a composition with religious overtones), possibly his family; the dream balloon fades away and the fire chief exits. This shot is spatially and temporally independent from the rest of the film. In shot 2, a hand pulls down the arm of the fire alarm in close-up. Porter had used close-ups before, as in the one-shot film *Burlesque Suicide* (© April 7, 1902), but this is the first film in which he integrated the close-up into a more complex narrative structure. There is a temporal overlap at the end of shot 2/beginning of shot 3 as the firemen, at first asleep, jump out of bed in response to the alarm. The firemen, on the second floor of the firehouse, put on their clothes and jump down the fire pole until only one is left.

In shot 4 the inside of the engine house, with its vaulted interior hitch, is actually filmed in an elaborate outdoor set (the floor is mostly grass). The shot begins as the horses are quickly hitched to the engines. After a few brief moments, the firemen are shown coming down the fire pole. Here Porter employs a more substantial temporal overlap with a redundancy of action that clearly establishes a narrative, spatial and temporal relationship between shots 3 and 4. This is the first time that Porter has shown two contiguous spaces that do not have an interior/exterior relationship. The end of shot 4/beginning of shot 5 also employs a

temporal overlap. At the end of shot 4, the fire engine races off forward right. In the beginning of shot 5 the doors of the firehouse are opened and a fire engine comes out and goes off right. In shots 3, 4, and 5, Porter shows everything of dramatic interest that takes place within the frame. This results in a redundancy of dramatic action – the slide down the pole, the start to the fire – effectively heightening the dramatic impact of the narrative. At the same time the repetition of action clearly establishes the spatial, temporal, and narrative relationships between shots. It is, as Porter realized, a kind of continuity, but a kind that is radically different from the continuity associated with classic cinema.

Shot 6, “Off to the Fire,” is a conventional rendering of a familiar scene and relies on the quantity of fire engines to impress its audience, sacrificing narrative consistency to spectacle. This is facilitated by the use of sub-shots to avoid dead spaces between vehicles. In shot 7 a fire engine races by a park. The relationship between shots 6 and 7 involved ellipses and was already familiar to audiences in the 1890s when exhibitors assembled short sequences of films to show a fire rescue. As the fire engine approaches the camera in shot 7, a dramatic pan follows the action, framing a fireman who jumps off the fire engine in front of a burning building. Convention and narrative continuity rather than continuity of action establish the relationship between shots 7 and 8. In shot 8, showing the interior of a burning bedroom, a woman gets out of bed and staggers to the window, is overcome, and faints on her bed. The fireman enters by breaking in the door on the right side of the screen. He then breaks out the window. The top of the ladder appears at the window and the fireman carries out the woman, then immediately returns for the child hidden in the bed covers. The fireman leaves with the child but quickly returns again with a hose and douses the flame.

In shot 9 the same rescue is shown from the outside. The woman leans out the window (in shot 8 she does not lean out the window; however, the gesture is identical), then disappears back inside; the fireman brings her down the ladder; she informs him of her child; he goes back up the ladder and returns with the child. As the mother and child embrace in a tableau-type ending, the fireman goes up the ladder with the hose. Shots 8 and 9 show the same rescue from two different perspectives. The action in the two shots is very carefully laid out and continuity of action is more than acceptable as the MoMA version demonstrates. The action in shot 8 has its counterpoint in shot 9 as the people move back and forth from inside to outside: The succession of complementary actions tie the two shots together, something Porter had done twice in *How They Do Things on the Bowery*. While, on one level, these two shots create a temporal repetition, on another level each has its own distinct and complementary temporality which, taken together, forms the whole. When the interior is shown, everything that happens inside takes place in “real” time – while everything that takes place outside is extremely condensed. The reverse is true when the rescue is shown from the exterior. In keeping with theatrical conventions – whenever action takes place offscreen, time is severely condensed.

This complementary relationship between shots is a kind of proto-parallel editing involving manipulation of the *mise-en-scène* instead of manipulation of the film material through *decoupage* – and manipulation of time over space. While *Life of an American Fireman* employs familiar spatial constructions, its temporal construction differs radically from matching action and parallel cutting, which one can see six years later in such Griffith films as *The Lonely Villa* (1909). The hypotactic mode of representation in *The Lonely Villa* requires a linear flow of time but moves back and forth between locations by fragmentation of the *mise-en-scène* through *decoupage*.

Life of an American Fireman remains indebted to the magic lantern show and other sequences of still images with their well-developed spatial constructions and underdeveloped temporalities. By showing everything within the frame, Porter is in effect making moving magic lantern slides with essentially theatrical pro-filmic elements: Shots are self-contained units tied to each other by overlapping action. Ironically, *Life of an American Fireman* has frequently been praised for its fluidity and the way it condenses time through editorial strategies. The reverse is true: The action is retarded, repeated. Porter uses a narrative strategy that was popular among French poets of the Middle Ages, one whose repetitive, paratactic structures are examined in Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*:

In both [*La Chanson de Roland* and *Chanson d'Alexis*] we have the same repeated returning to fresh starts, the same spasmodic progression and retrogression, the same independence of the individual occurrences and their constituent parts. Stanza 13 recapitulates the situation at the beginning of stanza 12 but carries the action further and in a different direction. Stanza 14 repeats, concretely and in direct discourse, the statement made in stanza 13 (of which, however, the last line has already gone further). (1968, 114)

The congruency between *Life of an American Fireman* and epics of the Middle Ages can be pushed too far. Used cautiously, it helps to place Porter's work in a historical context. *Life of an American Fireman* culminally expressed a mode of representation that began to decay almost as soon as it was realized. The Edison Manufacturing Company bore little resemblance to a medieval court. Cinema, driven by the revolutionizing character of fierce competition, continued its rapid transformation, quickly developing cinematic strategies more consistent with modern narrative techniques. The hypotactic mode of representation used by Griffith only 10 or 15 years later would be compared to that of Charles Dickens (Eisenstein 1949, 195–255).⁴⁸

The mode of narrative and editorial construction that Porter explored in *Life of an American Fireman* may be found in many of his subsequent films: *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), *The Policeman Fools the Sergeant* (1904), *The White Caps* (1905), *The Watermelon Patch* (1905), *The "Teddy" Bears* (1907), and *Rescued from an Eagle's Nest* (1908). Other filmmakers, notably those working at Biograph, followed Méliès's and Porter's lead in films like *Next!* (1903), *The Burglar* (1903), *A Discordant Note*

(1903), *The Runaway Match* (1903), *Wanted: a Dog* (1905), and *The Fire Bug* (1905). Other films, like Hepworth's *Rescued by Rover* (1905), have a similar temporal construction, while Méliès continued to use overlapping action in films such as *Le Voyage à travers l'impossible* (1904).

Porter's decision to work within the genre of fire films is of particular significance because exhibitors frequently acquired individual scenes of "a quick hitch," "a race to the fire," "fighting the flames," etc., and would then combine them to form a larger whole. With *Life of an American Fireman*, Porter systematically utilized one of the "weapons" that was prying editorial control away from the exhibitor: continuity. This decisive innovation, which Porter recognized in *A Trip to the Moon* and began to explore more radically in *How They Do Things on the Bowery*, involved the systematic repetition of key actions, which enable the viewer to more closely interconnect one scene with the next. This kind of filmic construction could be achieved only by the producer/cameraman. It thus signaled a decisive shift in editorial responsibility from exhibitor to cameraman and the resulting constitution of the filmmaker, on a fundamental level, as we think of him/her today. In the process, creative control became centralized primarily in the production companies.

Life of an American Fireman contains a series of fascinating contradictions.⁴⁹ Shots remain discreet units even as they are integrated into a film narrative on several different levels. Having developed strategies that would undermine the exhibitor's role as editor, Porter continued to draw upon his own background as an exhibitor. The combining of different mimetic styles – for instance, the artificial ("theatrical") opening with its painted backdrops and dream balloon – and the staged documentary – like "Apparatus Leaving the Engine House" – has a long history on the screen as exhibitors incorporated images from different sources. (It also had as its obvious counterpart the integration of slides and films into a single program.)

Life of an American Fireman was based on a familiar narrative; its narrative elements occurred and reoccurred across many forms of popular culture. Porter was hardly the father of the story film. This film deserves our attention for presenting a mode of representation that was transitory, a direction in narrative cinema that was briefly explored, soon discarded, and quickly forgotten.

Porter's development as a filmmaker through *Life of an American Fireman* reveals with particular clarity a series of interrelated transformations taking place within the institution of the screen. The introduction of a new medium made possible, and, within the existing cultural/socioeconomic system, necessitated, shifts and transformations within the interrelated modes of presentation (exhibition) and film production. These in turn both helped to produce and were generated by a changing mode of representation that has been traced through Porter's films. Obviously these shifts, and the subsequent transformations that made them permanent, keyed here to the movement in editorial control from exhibitor to producer/cameraman, did not happen on a national or international level overnight. Within the Edison company itself, A. C. Abadie and R. K. Bonine continued to shoot short travel scenes

that could be bought by lecturers and incorporated into their shows. As late as 1908, the Amusement Supply Company devoted many pages of its catalog to programs that integrated slides and dramatic films at the discretion of the exhibitor. The shift was gradual and centered around dramatic, acted films where the producer/cameraman could exercise sufficient control. There was, of course, a real economic incentive for rationalization of production and exhibition. Not only was it more efficient to manufacture standardized, multiple prints of a full reel, rather than a wide range of relatively brief films that were then bought by showmen on an individual basis, but it was at least as important to produce a standardized product that could be marketed like other commercial items and so exploited by exhibitors who were more interested in profits than in retaining or developing their skill as storytellers. By eschewing the twin “weapons” of narrative complexity and editorial continuity (of whatever kind), some exhibitors who wished to retain their skills were able to maintain editorial control for many years to come. Traveling lecturers like Burton Holmes, Dwight Elmendorf, and Professor Newman, who created their own shows, continued to be popular into the teens and dominated what we would now call the documentary market. Their travelogues or illustrated lectures lacked precisely those characteristics that made *Jack and the Beanstalk* and *Life of an American Fireman* important moments in Porter’s development as a filmmaker and, at least symbolically, in the history of the American screen.

Notes

An earlier version of this essay appeared as Charles Musser, “The Early Cinema of Edwin S. Porter,” *Cinema Journal*, 19.1 (Fall 1979), 1–38. The author’s introduction is new.

- 1 Tom Gunning had taken a somewhat earlier version of this seminar and was already embarked on the writing of his dissertation, which would become *D. W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991). Others who took the seminar include Stephen Higgins, former archivist for the Film Department, Museum of Modern Art; Cooper Graham at the Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recorded Sound Division at Library of Congress; Roberta Pearson, Professor of Film Studies at the University of Nottingham; João Luiz Vieira, Professor of Film at Universidade Federal Fluminense, Brazil.
- 2 It also included the slightly later trick film *Dream of a Rarebit Fiend* (1906) and *Rescued from an Eagle’s Nest* (1908). Interestingly, I later encountered an adumbrated version of *Dream of a Rarebit Fiend* at the British Film Institute. The condensation involved another instance of eliminating overlapping action, which made the film conform to more “classical” notions of continuity.
- 3 Among the many other scholars of early cinema who were present and contributed to the Brighton Conference: organizer David Francis, Eileen Bowser, Tom Gunning, Barry Salt, Martin Sopocy, Ben Brewster, Michael Chanan, Paul Spehr, John and William Barnes, and John Gartenberg.

- 4 *Pordenone Silent Film Festival 2008 Catalog* (Friuli: Cineteca del Friuli, 2008), 103–154.
- 5 Moreover, when Burch published his book on early cinema, *Life to Those Shadows* (1990), his essay “Porter or Ambivalence” was not included.
- 6 Nor would I argue that Porter was the first filmmaker to develop a narrational system. Méliès and G. A. Smith certainly preceded him. Porter was, however, arguably America’s first filmmaker—the first to assume control of production and postproduction and so the first to be able to develop a narrational system in the United States.
- 7 While the status of the text was often relevant when looking at early film, this issue has been crucial for a sustained examination of other films such as Charles Chaplin’s *The Pawnshop* (1916), Germaine Dulac’s *La Souriante Madame Beudet* (1923), and Oscar Micheaux’s *Body and Soul* (1925).
- 8 William K. Everson’s attitude is apparent from the following quote: “the evolution of film language can be told through the work of two men, Edwin S. Porter and David Wark Griffith ... Griffith representing an instinctive and experimental approach to filmmaking, Porter (though it is extremely unfair to categorize him so simply) the mistakes and the caution” (1978, 30).
- 9 Georges Sadoul 1948 shares Lewis Jacobs’s romantic notions of the filmmaker as source, substituting the Brighton school of G. A. Smith and James Williamson for Porter.
- 10 *Worcester* (Massachusetts) *Telegraph*, August 1896, Motion Picture Files, Edison Historic Site.
- 11 Porter was established in the employ of the Eden Musée by June 2, 1898.
- 12 The Eden Musée had followed this method of combining slides and films a few months before with its *Passion Play of Oberammergau* program. Programs on the Spanish–American War frequently, perhaps customarily, combined slides and films. At the very least, individual films were often introduced by title slides.
- 13 Unless there is specific evidence to the contrary, films such as *The Cavalier’s Dream* (1898), *Elopement on Horseback* (1898), *The Astor Tramp* (1899), and *Storm at Sea* (1900), which have been attributed to Porter by Kemp Niver (1967) and others, are not his.
- 14 Establishing a filmography of Porter–Edison films up until April 1903 is a difficult, often humbling task. As I have already discovered, it is easy to make mistakes. All evidence I have seen indicates that Porter was firmly in control of studio production from his beginning with Edison [Author’s note: though as a collaborator and partner with George S. Fleming]. Depositions on *Jack and the Beanstalk* by White and Porter indicate that he was totally responsible for that film. The Edison company kept a list of cameramen for films copyrighted after April 1903; all films shot in the studio from the start of the list through 1907 have Porter listed as the cameraman.

Outside the studio, Porter evidently shared the camerawork with a number of different photographers: James (Jacob) B. Smith after July 1901 and Arthur C. Abadie somewhat later. William L. Jamieson, William Heise, Robert K. Bonine, and James H. White were more or less active as cameramen. White took on the role of producer for many of the important topical and news events, arranging for the filming of the launching of Kaiser Wilhelm’s yacht *Meteor* and supervising filming at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo. On many of these occasions Porter and Smith worked together with two cameras.

- 15 See *Thomas A. Edison v. J. Stuart Blackton and Albert E. Smith, individually and as co-partners*, no. 6990, 6991, C.C.S.D.N.Y., NjBaFAR. I am currently preparing an article, "The American Vitagraph (1897–1901): Competition and Survival in an Emerging Industry," which details these relations more closely. [Author's note: This became Musser 1983.]
- 16 Edison Manufacturing Company and Hinkle Iron Company, contract, October 12, 1900, NjWEO.
- 17 James H. White to Dyer, Edmonds and Dyer, January 10, 1901, Legal Box 100, Folder 8, NjWEO.
- 18 Advertisement, *New York Clipper*, February 23, 1901, 1160.
- 19 See Hepworth 1951, 35–36, for a description of using dissolves in the process of projecting films.
- 20 Lubin's *A Tramp's Dream* is almost certainly the film cited in F. M. Prescott, *Catalogue of New Films*, dated November 20, 1899. Unfortunately the catalog does not provide a description, only a title. [Author's note: The Lubin film has been preserved by the George Eastman House and has the same three-shot structure.]
- 21 Advertisement, *New York Clipper*, April 13, 1901, 160.
- 22 Advertisement, *New York Clipper*, June 8, 1901, 336.
- 23 Advertisement, *New York Clipper*, July 27, 1901, 480.
- 24 Advertisement, *New York Clipper*, August 10, 1901, 522.
- 25 Advertisement, *New York Clipper*, August 31, 1901, 583.
- 26 A star in the catalog indicates which pictures were recently shot; Lubin was well known for his films of Atlantic City; Prescott carried many of his films.
- 27 Searchlight Theatre, program, October 13, 1901, DLC.
- 28 This claim is extrapolated from "List of Kleine Purchases from Motion Picture Manufacturers," George Kleine Collection, DLC.
- 29 Consider, in particular, *The Hanging of Wm. Carr* (December 1897) in F. Z. Maguire & Co., *Catalogue* (March 1898, 48).
- 30 Advertisement, *New York Clipper*, November 16, 1901, 832.
- 31 *Ibid.* Porter almost certainly filmed *Panoramic View of the Esplanade by Night* on the same trip. Priority was then given to the completion of *The Execution of Czolgosz*.
- 32 Note found in the Edison file at the Museum of Modern Art.
- 33 Other early films depicting exterior/interior relations between shots include Bamforth's *The Kiss in the Tunnel* (1899), Williamson's *Fire!*, and Méliès's *Bluebeard* (1901).
- 34 "Personal Letter Book of Thomas A. Edison Sept. 5, 1901 to March 13, 1902," 224 (see Microfilm: 196:761). Edison's letters indicate a comparative disinterest in moving pictures (relative to the phonograph, for instance) and a frequent shortage of funds to finance his various business schemes, including the refining of low-grade ore, the battery business, and Portland Cement. He never devoted the money or attention to the business that might have given the Edison company a position comparable to Pathé's.
- 35 Jenkins 1975, 279. Unfortunately, figures for Kodak film sales are lacking for the years 1903, 1904, and 1905. There was also a significant decline in sales during 1898. These declines can be correlated directly to Edison's success in the courts. The decline in 1898 followed the demise of the International Film Co. and other competitors. The difference between Eastman's effective use of patent litigation as detailed by Jenkins

- and Edison's is illuminating in terms of the formation of the motion picture industry. Joseph North uses secondary source material to review this decline, with obvious frustration since no one agrees on precise dates, etc. (1949, 184–200).
- 36 All three quotes are from *New York Clipper*, March 16, 1901, 44.
- 37 Advertisement, *New York Clipper*, April 5, 1902, 140.
- 38 Although pantomimes provided an acting style that filmmakers readily appropriated, they did not so readily provide a narrative model. Pantomimes traditionally sacrificed narrative for spectacle. With the exception of Méliès's *Cinderella*, films from this period seem consistent with the narrative elaboration and with the number of shots that are found in lantern shows.
- 39 Ads similar to the following one appear periodically in the *New York Clipper*: "LECTURER WANTED AT ONCE. A young man with pleasing stage presence and good voice, to make announcements and describe moving pictures. Can use only a man of good habits and sterling qualities; all others save stamps. Long season's engagement to right party. Salary low, but sure. State age and full particulars in first letter. Accept silence as polite negative. All photos returned. Lyman Howe, 395 South River St., Wilkesbarre, Pa." (September 14, 1901, 616). [Author's note: The Edison catalog description for *Jack and the Beanstalk* is reprinted in Musser 1991, 202–205. This description was used as the basis for the lecture in Musser's documentary *Before the Nickelodeon: The Early Cinema of Edwin S. Porter* (1982).]
- 40 Unidentified newspaper clipping, Porter file, NN-.
- 41 See Sopocy 1978 for a further comparison of these two films.
- 42 *Newark Evening News*, November 15, 1902, 1B.
- 43 "White-Dede," *New York Times*, December 1, 1902, 9.
- 44 *Phonograph Monthly*, March 1903, 5; Joseph McCoy, oral history, NjWoe, cites Mark-Graf as Gilmore's brother-in-law.
- 45 Advertisement, *New York Clipper*, January 31, 1903, 1100.
- 46 The recent discovery in northern Maine of a 35mm print of *Life of an American Fireman*, now at the Library of Congress, confirms the authenticity of the Paper Print version. There are some differences (most significantly the dissolves have been eliminated), but they are minor and easily explainable variations.
- 47 By 1900, G. A. Smith's films had more than one shot per scene.
- 48 This is offered in pointed contrast to Robert Gessner 1962. Gessner saw *Life of an American Fireman* as a precursor for *Last Year at Marienbad*.
- 49 See also Burch 1978/1979.

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