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EDISON

THE INVENTION
OF THE MOVIES

Film Notes by
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DISC TWO:

1904-1906:

Between 1904 and 1906, the Edison Manufacturing Company continued to produce both actualities and staged/fiction subjects. Even though there often were many more nonfiction titles in release than fiction—for example, during the February 1906-February 1907 business year, Edison offered 49 original nonfiction versus 12 fiction films—when these subjects are analyzed in terms of length, the actual amount of footage in each category is almost identical. Even more importantly, when it comes to sales figures, 85% of the prints made from original Edison negatives were acted films. And this ratio (15% nonfiction, 85% staged/fiction) was remarkably stable throughout the period 1904-06. Many of the actualities sold poorly, if at all, news films of the San Francisco Earthquake being among the few exceptions.

Edwin S. Porter, in his role as studio head and production chief, worked with a number of different collaborators in 1904, including G. M. Anderson and Will S. Rising. In May 1905, Edison hired Wallace McCutcheon away from the Biograph Company. McCutcheon had been a key figure in that's studio's successful output of ribald comedies and engaging melodramas. Undoubtedly, such headhunting was designed not only to strengthen Edison's production capabilities, but to hurt its chief domestic rival, as well.

Porter and McCutcheon worked together for the next two years, but indications are that it may not have been an entirely happy collaboration. In fact, compared to 1905, the pace of filmmaking slackened at Edison in 1906, despite the tremendous demand for new films that resulted from the nickelodeon boom (the proliferation of generally small, specialized motion picture theaters) beginning in late 1905-early 1906. The number of Edison fiction films declined by almost 50% (from 22 to 12) and the amount of negative footage by almost one-third. Even so, print sales, which increased 25% from 1904 to 1905, doubled from 1905 to 1906.

The fiction films made by Edison between 1904 and 1906 offered a complex view of American life. They often criticized the social consequences of the emerging large-scale industrial economy, with its huge gaps between rich and poor. Films such as *The Ex-Convict* (1904), *The Kleptomaniac* (1905) and *The Miller's Daughter* (1905) thus articulated a Progressive view of the American condition. Others offered a certain nostalgia or romanticizing of small town communities. At the same time, many of these films participated exuberantly in the nation's urban commercial popular culture (*The Strenuous Life* of 1904, or *Whole Dam Family and the Dam Dog* of 1905). Many revealed the racial and ethnic stereotypes that

pervaded most aspects of cultural activity. Rather than give a sanitized version of Edison's output, our selections offer the full range and complexity of these representations.

European Rest Cure

Filmmaker: Edwin S. Porter. Shot: July-August 1904; © 1 September 1904.
Print: MoMA.

This spoof on the popular travelogue genre follows an American tourist across Europe and the Middle East on a "rest cure," in which one physically or emotionally wrenching disaster follows another. Foreign locales were actually pasteboard sets of pyramids, Roman ruins, and a French cafe, while additional scenes were shot on location at Hudson River docks as the tourist leaves and returns. Porter combined this original material with footage of *S.S. Coptic Running Against the Storm*, taken by James White on his Pacific voyage in 1898, and *Pilot Leaving Prinzessen Victoria Luise at Sandy Hook*, taken by White in late 1902. Another shot was excerpted from *Sky Scrapers of New York* from the North River, which James Smith had filmed in May 1903.

How a French Nobleman Got a Wife Through the New York Herald Personal Columns

Filmmaker: Edwin S. Porter. Shot August 1904; © 26 August 1904. Print: MoMA.

Edison's principle domestic rival in 1904 was once again the American Mutoscope & Biograph Company. Biograph was then producing a series of popular story films, which it used as exclusives for its exhibition circuits. Edison affiliated renters and exhibitors were deeply frustrated that they could not acquire these films. Taking advantage of this demand and eager to harm its competitor, the Edison Company had Edwin S. Porter remake several of Biograph's hits. This one was a remake of *Personal*. Ultimately, Biograph had to sell its story films as soon as they were shown in theaters, undermining its exhibition service. Biograph sued Edison for copyright infringement on this film, but lost.

Nervy Nat Kisses the Bride

Filmmaker: Edwin S. Porter. Shot: 17-21 September 1904; © 30 September 1904. Print: MoMA.

Sold as "*Weary Willie*" *Kisses the Bride*, this three-shot comedy is built around the popular stereotype of the tramp, a character that exists outside of proper society and is comically under socialized. Here, he takes advantage of a spat between a bride and groom to sneak a kiss, only to be thrown off the train for his efforts. This film is set in a train station, inside the train itself, and on the tracks. As in the case of *What Happened in the Tunnel*, it could either be integrated by the exhibitor into a program of railway scenes or used to fill out a reel of miscellaneous motion pictures for a variety bill. As was often the case, Porter created a film by combining elements from two popular motion picture genres.

Scarecrow Pump

Filmmaker: Edwin S. Porter. Shot: 22 November 1904; © 9 December 1904. Print: MoMA.

A single-shot comedy staged against a painted backdrop, in which a boy plans to play a trick on a drunken rube, only to be outwitted by his intended victim.

The Strenuous Life; or, Anti-Race Suicide

Filmmaker: Edwin S. Porter. Shot December 1904; © 19 December 1904. Print: MoMA.

A lighthearted spoof of family life and fatherhood. President Roosevelt, who had just won reelection, believed Americans had to lead "the strenuous life" (it was the title of one of his books) if the United States was to retain its position of world leadership. He also declared that married women of northern European stock had a responsibility to produce at least four children to prevent "race suicide." Porter combined these two elements into a burlesque: the father returns home as his wife gives birth and soon finds himself caring for quadruplets. Using a close up, Porter shows the father's initial expression of pride as he weighs the first baby, but this expression quickly changes to distress as the nurse brings in one infant after another.

The Ex-Convict

Filmmaker: Edwin S. Porter. Shot: November 1904; © 19 November 1904. Print: MoMA.

An uncredited but quite obvious adaptation of a well-known vaudeville piece, *Number 973*, by Robert Hilliard and Edwin Holland. Starting from the Hilliard-

Holland one-act playlet, Porter visualized the storyline into a total of eight scenes. Unlike *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Ex-Convict* was not filmed theater but an adaptation that took advantage of the filmmaker's ability to place a scene in an appropriate location (outside a store, home, or factory, and on the street) and to move quickly from one setting to the next. The naturalistic locales and the accelerated pace heightened the emotional intensity of the viewer's reaction to the pathetic story, achieving a level of realism impossible on the stage. In the process of adaptation, Porter also added important new elements, notably the ex-convict's family.

The Kleptomaniac

Filmmaker: Edwin S. Porter. Cast: Aline Boyd (The Kleptomaniac, Mrs. Banker), Phineas Nairs (Store Detective), Jane Stewart (Female Detective), George Voijere (Superintendent, Department Store), Ann Egleston (The Thief), Will S. Rising (Police Court Judge), Helen Courtney (Justice). Shot late January 1905; © 4 February 1905. Print: MoMA.

This condemnation of the class bias found in the American justice system works within a Progressive political framework. Porter juxtaposes the situations of two women. The impoverished woman is shown at home, in the context of her family. The barren room, the absence of a husband/provider, and the weighty responsibility of children who need care and are still too young to work elicit the viewer's understanding and sympathy. Mrs. Banker is denied the sympathetic context of family life, although the brownstone from which she emerges clearly indicates her social status. She, as the title indicates, has no motivation for shoplifting other than the thrill. Mrs. Banker goes inside a high-class emporium (Macy's) and steals some nonessential baubles under the noses of sales personnel. Her actions are clearly premeditated. In contrast, the poor woman, overwhelmed by temptation, steals food left outside and unattended. Her actions are spontaneous. Once arrested, the wealthy kleptomaniac is treated with a courtesy and leniency denied the more deserving mother. The details given in the Edison catalog are not always evident on screen; for instance, there is no reason to suppose the kleptomaniac is a banker's wife.

The Seven Ages

Filmmaker: Edwin S. Porter. Shot February 1905; © 4 February 1905. Print: LoC.

Here, Porter photographed a series of short vignettes reminiscent of kiss films such as *The John C. Rice-May Irwin Kiss* (1896), structuring them around a

premise provided by Shakespeare's "seven ages of man"—a theme often illustrated in nineteenth-century lantern shows. Beginning with toddlers and concluding with old people, the film shows couples kissing. Each of the first seven scenes contains two shots, the first an establishing shot and the second a medium close-up that gives a better view of each kissing couple. The eighth and final scene is a tableau that shows an old maid alone, introduced with the title "What Age?" To emphasize her solitude, Porter broke with the structure of earlier scenes and refrained from cutting in. The repetition and diversity of age groups undermines the kiss's exclusively sexual dimension. Sexuality is expressed within the context of the recurring life cycle made possible by the family.

The Whole Dam Family and the Dam Dog

Filmmakers: Edwin S. Porter, possibly with Wallace McCutcheon. Shot: May 1905; © 31 May 1905. Print: LoC.

One of several Edison films from this period that used animated intertitles. It continued "a popular fad which has been widely advertised by lithographs and souvenir mailing cards." These postcards showed portraits of various members of the Dam family, with their names—I. B. Dam, U. B. Dam—and so forth. This comedy plays with cinematic form, offering numerous introductory portraits followed by only a short vignette of action.

Coney Island at Night

Filmmaker: Edwin S. Porter. Shot: June 1905; © 29 June 1905. Print: LoC.

The camera caresses the lit-up amusement center with long sweeping movements, producing an eerie beauty. The smooth pans and tilts are a remarkable technical accomplishment, given the fact that night scenes required longer exposures.

The Little Train Robbery

Filmmaker: Edwin S. Porter. Shot: August 1905; © 1 September 1905. Print: MoMA.

In this parody of *The Great Train Robbery*, Edwin S. Porter burlesqued his own landmark film by substituting children for adults and using a miniature railroad and playhouse as sets. The young robbers don't take money but candy and

dolls. Perhaps unintentionally, this film supported the argument made by many reformers, who worried that children had become juvenile delinquents by modeling themselves on the bandits in a film "universally admitted to be the greatest production in MOTION PICTURES." Filmed at Olympia Park while Porter was visiting his hometown of Connellsville, Pennsylvania.

The White Caps

Filmmakers: Edwin S. Porter and Wallace McCutcheon. Shot: August 1905; © 14 September 1905. Print: MoMA.

In 1905 White Cap vigilante groups were particularly active in rural areas of the Border States and the Midwest. Members, generally faced with declining income and political power, acted as agents of social control, punishing offenses that the state and local governments failed to address adequately. The film offers a view of small-town America in which a wayward member is taught a lesson without the formalities of the legal system, the rural community acting as an extension of the family. Owen Davis's play *The White Caps* appeared in various cities a few months before the Porter film was made, while Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman* was in much publicized rehearsals.

The Watermelon Patch

Filmmakers: Edwin S. Porter and Wallace McCutcheon. Shot: October 1905; © 20 October 1905. Print: MoMA.

This picture integrates elements found in earlier Edison films depicting blacks, such as *The Chicken Thieves* (1896), in which "darkies" raid a chicken coop; *Watermelon Eating Contest* (1896), a one-shot facial expression film of happy blacks eating watermelon; and *The Pickaninnies* (1894), showing three Negro youths doing a jig and breakdown. The isolated images of blacks presented in these earlier films are here unified and elaborated upon, using a wide range of editorial techniques. Blacks are shown to be superstitious, petty thieves, good dancers, and watermelon lovers. They like to have a good time, but their inherent laziness must be subsidized by pilfering. *Watermelon Patch* also owes much to Biograph's *The Chicken Thief* (1904), in which darkies steal chickens and bring them home for a party of eating and dancing. On their next outing, the two thieves are chased and caught by angry rednecks. The many parallels between the two films are partially explained by McCutcheon's involvement in both projects. This Edison film reveals an absurdist playfulness that is lacking in its more vicious and cruder Biograph predecessor.

The Miller's Daughter

Filmmakers: Edwin S. Porter and Wallace McCutcheon. Shot: September-October 1905; © 25 October 1905. MoMA

The sinful, decadent city is contrasted to the simple, honest countryside in this fascinating reworking of Steele MacKaye's ever-popular melodrama *Hazel Kirke* (1880). Events occurring off-stage are shown in the Porter film, including Hazel's suicidal jump and her rescue. And yet, while Porter and McCutcheon retained the character's names, they reworked crucial narrative elements. Class differences are banished from rural life (Rodney is just an average farmer) and re-located to the city. It is Carrington, the debonair artist from the city, who acts duplicitously and seduces the miller's daughter, Hazel.

The Train Wreckers

Filmmakers: Edwin S. Porter and Wallace C. McCutcheon. Shot: October-November 1905; © 25 November 1905. Print: MoMA.

Porter's most violent expression of the conflict between constituted society and its outsiders. The outlaw band, with its apparently irrational desire to destroy all social order, is finally eliminated by a combined force of railroad personnel and select passengers. With order finally restored, a romance between the engineer and the switchman's daughter, introduced at the beginning of the film, resumes. Society is able to return to its proper preoccupations. *The Train Wreckers* effectively demonstrates the need for social cohesion in a way that could serve as a prototype for future good-guy-versus-bad-guy conflicts. The film was extremely successful, selling 157 prints during 1905–6, and its narrative would be reworked six years later in one of D. W. Griffith's most successful Biograph films, *The Girl and Her Trust* (released March 28, 1912).

Life of an American Policeman

Filmmakers: Edwin S. Porter and Wallace C. McCutcheon. Shot: November 1905; © 6 December 1905. Print: MoMA.

Photographed with the cooperation of the New York City Police Department, this film was first shown at two vaudeville benefits for the Police Relief Fund in early December 1905. The opening scene, which presents a officer at home with his wife and child, identifies the police with the institution of the family. The policeman's role in maintaining community values in the impersonal city is shown

when patrolmen help a lost child and rescue a would-be suicide from the river. Their courage is demonstrated as one policeman controls a runaway horse and others risk their lives capturing a desperate burglar. The latter scene reenacts a robbery and the killing of a policeman that took place on Manhattan's Upper East Side on the morning of March 20, 1904.

Police Chasing Scorching Auto

Filmmakers: Edwin S. Porter and Wallace C. McCutcheon. Shot: November 1905; © no reg. Print: MoMA.

Because the incidents included in *Life of an American Policeman* filled a 1,000-foot reel, there was no room for this scene and so it was sold separately.

The Dream of a Rarebit Fiend

Filmmakers: Edwin S. Porter and Wallace McCutcheon. Cast: John P. Brown. Shot: late December to mid-February 1906; © 24 February 1906. Print: MoMA.

This film was primarily inspired by Winsor McCay's identically titled comic strip, which had appeared in the *New York Telegram* since 1904. Porter not only borrowed McCay's title, but his dream-based narrative structure. Likewise, McCay's surreal imagery is convincingly realized on the screen using a variety of photographic tricks. Although such visuals had many antecedents, McCay's strip "Little Nemo in Slumberland" may have provided another useful point of departure. The basic story line and some of the film's visuals, however, can also be found in an earlier Pathé film made by Gaston Velle, *Rêve à la lune* (1905). It took Porter eight weeks to execute the array of special effects in this 470-foot, eight-minute film.

Three American Beauties

Filmmakers: Edwin S. Porter and Wallace McCutcheon. Shot: April 1906; © 1 May 1906. Print: MoMA.

Often hand-tinted, this short film was typically used by exhibitors to conclude their programs. It elaborated on a popular practice among exhibitors of the 1890s. They ended their programs with a film of the American flag waving in the breeze. The flag is the last of the "American Beauties" to appear; the first is the picture of a popular rose named "American Beauty."

Films of The San Francisco Earthquake

Camera: Robert K. Bonine. Shot: April-May 1906; Print: MoMA.

Edison cameraman Bonine traveled to San Francisco to take more than thirteen short films of San Francisco in the aftermath of its devastating earthquake on 18 April 1906, among them *Dynamiting Ruins and Rescuing Soldiers Caught in the Fallen Walls* and *Panorama Russian and Nob Hill from an Automobile*. These films were widely seen and often used to raise money for charitable purposes to help those affected. Surviving prints of this material were subsequently recycled, compromising their integrity. This is a selection of highlights.

The Terrible Kids

Filmmakers: Edwin S. Porter and Wallace McCutcheon. Shot: May 1906; © 1 May 1906. Print: MoMA.

Part of the popular bad boy genre that would soon come under heavy criticism for providing young viewers with undesirable role models. Porter's comedy shows two boys disrupting a neighborhood's routine with the help of their dog, played by Mannie. Every scene is a variation on a mischievous prank, as they upset the daily lives of adults. Eventually their victims pursue the two pranksters, capture them and place them in police custody. But with Mannie's help, the kids escape as the film ends. According to an Edison catalog description, their antics "are sure to arouse a strong sympathy for the kids and their dog."

Kathleen Mavourneen

Filmmakers: Edwin S. Porter and Wallace McCutcheon. Cast: Kitty O'Neal (Kathleen), Walter Griswold (Terence O'More, Kathleen's lover), H. L. Bascom (Captain Clearfield, an Irish Landlord), W. R. Floyd (Dugan, Clearfield's willing tool), E. M. Leslie (David O'Connor, Kathleen's father), N. B. Clarke (Father O'Cassidy, the parish priest), J. McDovall (Danny O'Lavey, friend of Terence), Jeannie Clifford (Kitty O'Lavey, an odd Irish character), C. F. Seabert (Black Rody, The Robber Chief), D. R. Allen (Red Barney), D. J. McGinnis (Darby Doyle), W. F. Borroughs (Dennis O'Gaff). Shot: May and June 1906; © 2 August 1906. Print: MoMA.

An adaptation of Dion Boucicault's popular stage play *Kathleen Mavourneen; or St. Patrick's Eve*, though with significant modifications. Much of Porter and McCutcheon's Irish melodrama was shot as if the audience could understand the

absent dialogue. Likewise the collaborators used conventional theatrical blocking in most of their scenes, notably in the opening, for which the expansive landscape was treated as a stage. With nine major characters in the film, audiences would have had difficulty sorting out the narrative unless they already knew the play and/or received assistance from missing intertitles, or a lecture. The Edison Company nonetheless sold more than 70 copies of this film during the first year of release. (The status of the cast list, published in an advertisement in the *New York Clipper*, is uncertain.)

Getting Evidence

Filmmakers: Edwin S. Porter and Wallace McCutcheon. Cast: Paul Panzer (Detective). Shot: September 1906; © 8 October 1906. Print: MoMA.

A jealous husband visits the Hawkshaw Detective Agency (a redundant naming device in its own right) and asks the detective to obtain evidence of his wife's supposed infidelities. Only a photograph is deemed acceptable evidence and the private eye's attempts to secure it provide a series of comic incidents, in which he is beaten and his cameras destroyed. When the black-eyed, limping detective finally presents his evidence to the husband, his photograph is of the daughter rather than the wife. Rather than providing evidence against the wife, the photograph exposes the detective's incompetence and the husband's unfounded suspicions.

1907-1908:

Edwin S. Porter typically worked with a filmmaking partner. Wallace McCutcheon was his collaborator until May 1907, when he was replaced by stage manager and playwright J. Searle Dawley. Dawley and Porter continued to work together until June 1908 when the Edison Manufacturing Company, in an effort to increase its output of film subjects, created two different production units, with Porter heading one and Dawley heading the other. Porter also continued to act as studio manager.

The rapidly increasing number of specialized motion picture theaters, commonly known as nickelodeons for their 5¢ admission policy, meant that the motion picture industry had become immensely profitable by 1907. Demand for new films was such that a successful picture could easily sell more than 100 copies. The biggest problem from 1906 into early 1908 was simply that there were not enough films to fill demand. Almost anything that was made could sell and make a good profit. Although films such as *The "Teddy" Bears* (1907), *College Chums* (1907) and *Cupid's Pranks* (1908) were generally popular and sold well, their elaborate production values with their special effects were ill-

suited for rapid film production. Meanwhile, other film companies were not only increasing their output, they were introducing important changes in their methods of storytelling. Most studios were telling stories in a much more linear fashion; not so at Edison. The system of representation and methods of editing that Porter had employed since *Life of an American Fireman* (1902-03) continued. This is evidenced by *Rescued from an Eagle's Nest* (1908), wherein actions are still shown twice across the cut, a practice that was being eliminated elsewhere and becoming old-fashioned. By spring 1908, the trade press was severely criticizing Edison films as unclear and poorly executed. It is at this very moment that a huge hole in surviving Edison film productions appears. Practically no films from the spring of 1908 through the fall of 1909 survive. Perhaps they were not considered worth keeping.

The "Teddy" Bears

Filmmakers: Edwin S. Porter and Wallace McCutcheon. Shot: February 1907; © 23 February 1907; released 2 March 1907. Print: MoMA.

Starting out as an adaptation of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears," the picture moves outside the confines of the studio, suddenly changing moods and referents. The bears chase Goldilocks across a snowy landscape until "Teddy" Roosevelt intervenes, kills the two full-grown pursuers, and captures the baby bear. The sudden appearance of T. R. was based on a well-known incident when President Roosevelt was on a hunting expedition in November 1902 and refused to shoot a bear cub. Shortly thereafter a New York toy store owner began to make and sell "Teddy's bear"—a stuffed version of the spared cub. The novelty had become a craze by 1906–7, when thousands of toy bears were being sold each week. The combining of these two referents was key to the film's humor.