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presents

EDISON

THE INVENTION
OF THE MOVIES

Film Notes by
Charles Musser

DISC THREE:

Cohen's Fire Sale

Filmmakers: Edwin S. Porter and Wallace McCutcheon. Shot: June 1907; © 14 June 1907; released: 29 June 1907. Print: MoMA.

Based on the stereotypical Jewish businessman for whom fire was “our friend” and the fire company was “our enemy”—a view rendered in iconographic form on a comic postcard of the period. The story itself is quite simple and clearly depicted; but character motivation, narrative logic, and audience comprehension of a few key pieces of information—for instance that a piece of paper is an insurance policy—relies on highly specific anti-Semitic stereotyping. Present day critics should not jump to simple conclusions here. Porter had many Jewish collaborators, from G. M. Anderson (Max Aronson) to Adolph Zukor. On the other hand, McCutcheon’s films, both at Biograph and Edison, often display racial and ethnic stereotyping that is disconcertingly vicious (e.g. *The Chicken Thief*, Biograph, 1904).

The Rivals

Filmmakers: Edwin S. Porter and J. Searle Dawley. Cast: Madge West (Tootsie), Richard Thompson, Mr. Shelley, Mrs. William West, Jinnie Frazer (baby), William West (bit). Shot: 5-25 August 1907; © 7 September 1907. Print: MoMA.

This film was based on a comic strip by T. E. Powers that ran in the *New York American*, in which showed two male rivals continually fight for the attentions of a desirable woman. In one scene Charlie escorts Tootsie, only to have her stolen away by George. In the next scene George escorts the girl, only to have her stolen away by Charlie. This alternation continues until Porter had the desired number of scenes. In the final scene, the woman leaves both rivals for a third.

The Trainer's Daughter; or, A Race for Love

Filmmakers: Edwin S. Porter and J. Searle Dawley. Cast: Miss DeVarney, Edward Boulden, William Sorelle, Mr. Sullivan. Shot: 30 October-3 November 1907; © 15 November 1907; released: 23 November 1907. Print: MoMA.

Has a plot similar to Theodore Kremer's *A Race for a Wife*, in which the victor of a race between the hero and the unscrupulous villain wins the bride. Unless

spectators were familiar with *A Race for a Wife* or the exhibitor provided them with a plot synopsis in some way, the unlikely story line could easily seem opaque.

College Chums

Filmmakers: Edwin S. Porter and J. Searle Dawley. Cast: Edward Boulden, Miss Acton, Mrs. Kate Griffith, Mr. Kennedy, Miss Antoinette, Mr. Kurtis. Shot: 22 September-18 October 1907; © 25 November 1907. Print: MoMA.

Loosely based on a well-known play, Brandon Thomas's farce-comedy *Charley's Aunt*. The last two thirds of the film shows one scene in establishing shot. In fact, the film was often screened with live actors behind the screen providing synchronous dialogue for the on-screen characters—a popular movie fad of the period. Porter's filmmaking talent is most evident in "a mechanical trick scene." As a reviewer for *Variety* remarked, "A young man and his sweet heart are shown in an altercation over the telephone. Both are seen in small circles at the upper corners of the field of vision, the rest of the sheet being occupied by housetops. As each speaks the words marshal themselves letter by letter in the air and travel across the intervening space. When the quarrel waxes hot the words meet in the middle of the scene and fall to the ground in a shower of letters."

Laughing Gas

Filmmakers: Edwin S. Porter and J. Searle Dawley. Cast: Bertha Regustus (Mandy Brown), Edward Boulden, Mr. Sullivan, Mr. La Montte. Shot: 13-19 November 1907; © 6 December 1907. Print: MoMA.

With African-American Bertha Regustus in the principle role, this comedy seems to depart from conventional black stereotypes. Indebted to other comedies of the period (Vitagraph made a film with an identical title less than a year earlier), the film is based on the premise that laughter is contagious.

A Little Girl Who Did Not Believe in Santa Claus

Filmmakers: Edwin S. Porter and J. Searle Dawley. Cast: Mr. Lehapman, William Sorrelle, Besie Shrednecky, Gitchner Hartman, Miss Sullivan. Shot: 29 November-9 December 1907; © 16 December 1907. Print: MoMA.

Christmas-themed films had appeared since the 1890s. For Christmas 1906, Edison produced *The Night Before Christmas*. The following year they reprised

this success with *A Little Girl Who Did Not Believe in Santa Claus*. It was loosely inspired by a well-known incident in 1897 when a little girl wrote the *New York Sun* and asked if there was a Santa Claus, since some of her friends had asserted he did not exist. The editor famously responded, "Yes Virginia, there is a Santa Claus. He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist." This film offers a sentimental, politically charged, though still charming reworking of that response. The girl has no coat and no Christmas until a wealthy young boy (who is generous and devoted) kidnaps Santa and brings him to her house on Christmas Eve. This film contrasts rich and poor in ways that recall both *The Ex-Convict* (1904) and *The Kleptomaniac* (1907).

The Suburbanite's Ingenious Alarm

Filmmakers: Edwin S. Porter and J. Searle Dawley. Shot: 13-29 December 1907; © 4 January 1908. Print: MoMA.

Critics lauded this film as "another well constructed comedy," which "has a good, up-to-date application and is very well-presented." Its slapstick humor centers on a commuter's attempts to find a foolproof way to wake up in the morning. He "tries the old dodge of tying a rope to his foot to be awakened by." Again Porter tells a simple story using a widely recognized situation. Overlapping time and action are employed as the scene moves between the interior and exterior of the commuter's home.

Rescued From an Eagle's Nest

Filmmakers: Edwin S. Porter and J. Searle Dawley. Cast: D. W. Griffith, Miss Earle, Jinnie Frazer (baby). Shot: 2-11 January 1908; © 16 January 1908. Print: MoMA.

This film features D. W. Griffith in his first major screen role, that of a father who battles an eagle while attempting to rescue his child from the bird's nest. The story for this family-centered drama was taken from a famous incident that had been enshrined in waxworks. The film displays all the characteristic qualities of Porter's work. Rather than cut between parallel lines of action, Porter used temporal overlaps. Studio sets for exterior scenes were interwoven with outdoor locations. Despite the obvious abilities of newly hired scenic artist Richard Murphy, a precocious critic found the film "a feeble attempt to secure a trick film of a fine subject." The reviewer demanded a consistently rendered visual world, with an emphasis on credibility that was not always valorized within Porter's representational system.

Fireside Reminiscences

Filmmaker: Edwin S. Porter and J. Searle Dawley. Cast: Edward Boulden, Miss Acton, Mr. Sullivan, Miss Abbott. Shot 14-17 January 1908; © 23 January 1908. Print: MoMA.

Evokes the story line of the well-known song, "After the Ball," in which a man explains why he is single and has no children. One night when he and his sweetheart were at a ball, he found her in the arms of another man. He abandoned her without waiting for an explanation and, as a result, she died. After learning the man was her brother, he remained faithful to her forever. Porter altered this story by adding new family-centered elements. The husband sees his wife embracing a man (we must assume it is her brother) and he banishes her from their home. Three years later the husband stares into the fire and recalls his past life: his wife, he and his wife embracing, their wedding, his wife and child, the moment he threw her out of the house, and his wife on the cold streets at night. A larger narrative frames this reminiscing. In fact, his wife is outside the house as he conjures up these images. She is brought inside, and their child acts as a catalyst for reconciliation. The family triumphs over the stern, misguided father, who finally sees the error of his ways.

Cupid's Pranks

Filmmakers: Edwin S. Porter and J. Searle Dawley. Cast: Violette Hill, Miss Murray, Mr. Barry, Phineas Nairs (?), Laura Sawyer (bit), D.W. Griffith (bit). Shot 5-10 February 1908; © 19 February 1908. Print: MoMA.

Planned for, but not completed in time for a Valentine's Day 1908 release, this film makes use of the charming iconography of Valentine cards. D. W. Griffith appears as an extra.

Tale the Autumn Leaves Told

Filmmakers: Edwin S. Porter and J. Searle Dawley. Cast: Laura Sawyer, Mr. Barry, Phineas Nairs (?), Miss Sullivan, William Sorrelle. Shot: 26-30 March 1908; © 10 April 1908. Print: MoMA.

This short fragment demonstrates the ways that Porter continued to seek visual novelties favoring a stylistically audacious image over straightforward storytelling. Here he uses different camera mattes (each in the shape of a leaf) for every

scene. At a moment when the industry was seeking to increase the rate of production, Porter resisted and sought other outcomes.

1909--1910:

Although Thomas A. Edison was once again the dominant force in the American motion picture industry through the formation of the Edison-dominated Motion Picture Patents Company, his production company was in complete disarray, suffering from the twin problems of poor production values and insufficient quantity. From mid 1908 to at least mid 1910, the press consistently panned Edison films and exhibitors complained loudly about their inferior quality. To address these problems, Porter's job was made more limited: he stopped directing in January 1909 but retained his position as studio head; underneath him were created three production units, each headed by a single director. When the situation did not improve quickly enough, Horace G. Plimpton (who had no motion picture experience) replaced Porter, serving as studio head until May 1915. In the spring of 1909 Plimpton added two more production units to the Bronx studio. Although few films survive from this period, those that do suggest that the quality of the studio's releases gradually improved. Our collection includes two fiction films from 1909-1910; both were then considered at the high end of Edison output.

The House of Cards

Filmmaker(s) unknown. Cast: Herbert Prior (Sheriff). © 10 December 1909; released 10 December 1909. Print: MoMA.

Variety was enthusiastic about this picture, finding that "In many particulars the film is better than Edison is in the habit of turning out." This reviewer felt that "The story holds interest, and the novelty of introducing a rattlesnake as an actor must be credited to this firm." The film is designed to culminate in the confrontation between the sheriff ("Rattlesnake Jim") and the man who has gambled away someone else's money. Both love the same woman, and they stage a duel where the victor will be determined by a rattlesnake. The movie critic for the *New York Dramatic Mirror* found the situation unbelievable and contrived, even though other aspects of the film impressed him. In fact, the duel is ended prematurely, and the girl ultimately changes her affection from the gambler to the lawman.

New York of Today

Filmmaker(s) and cast unknown. © 26 February 1910. Print: MoMA.

During the nickelodeon era, various film companies made short films showing tourist scenes of New York City. When a French company released “Seeing New York” in 1908, *Variety* found it “rather odd” that such pictures were not made by the “many native manufacturers eager for new subjects.” Such films, it felt, would be very popular, at least outside New York City. This print was made for the German market and shows Columbus Circle, Times Square, Coney Island, Wall Street, the Lower East Side, Fifth Avenue, the Plaza Hotel, the new Metropolitan Life Insurance Building, and the Flatiron Building. A happy couple, clearly tourists, is “Seeing New York” and they, or their sightseeing car appears in most (though not all) of these scenes. This film was not part of Edison’s regular U.S. release schedule but meant principally for sales overseas. Europe, particularly Great Britain and Germany, had become a crucial market for the Edison Manufacturing Company.

How Bumptious Papered the Parlor

Directed by Ashley Miller. Scenario by W. H. Kitchell. Cast: John R. Cumpson (Bumptious). © 15 July 1910; released 15 July 1910 as a split reel *with A Vacation in Havana*. Print: MoMA.

The Edison Company offered a cycle of comedies directed by Ashley Miller and featuring John R. Cumpson as Mr. Bumptious. This one was promoted as the best Bumptious comedy yet to appear. Convinced of his own abilities, Mr. Bumptious tries to save money by wallpapering the parlor himself. The humorous results might have been predicted. The movie critic for the *New York Dramatic Mirror* remarked, “Bumptious perhaps suffers from a desire to overact his part, otherwise the narrative is well told.” Certainly the film develops logically and is easy to follow—even though this print lacks its intertitles. The camera is more intimate, and the editing more fluid than previous efforts.

1912-1914:

In 1911, Thomas A. Edison, Inc. became the corporate umbrella used for most of Thomas Edison’s businesses, including motion pictures. By that time, as well, Edison filmmakers had regained their footing, and their work was enjoying renewed critical favor. The company’s filmmaking staff mastered the art of storytelling within the one-reel format (15-18 minutes in length). Edison films were generally safe: light comedies and moralistic dramas, along with a few science and public service films. Thomas A. Edison, Inc. was in many respects

the Walt Disney Company of its day. Edison was portrayed as a beloved father figure, and no Edison product could be allowed to offend middle-class Americans who were buying his cement houses, Edison batteries, and phonograph recordings. Although one-reelers reigned supreme at the Edison Company, there were changes in the film industry that are belied by this selection of films. The Edison Company did introduce the serial, with *What Happened to Jane*, the first chapter of which was released on 26 July 1912, and it did demonstrate the value of working closely with the magazine industry; *The Adventure of the Hasty Elopement* represents both trends. Yet the Edison Company never fully exploited these innovations. Rather, Edison focused his resources and energies in two new areas: the Home Projecting Kinetoscope, which was designed for showing movies (old commercial subjects, not home movies) in the home, and the Kinetophone, which was an effort to make synchronous sound films that would play in theaters. The Home PK was a financial failure from the beginning and the Kinetophone did little better.

American motion picture entrepreneurs were looking for the next big thing. Some were experimenting with longer films of two or more reels. Some were also exploring new methods of distribution. Edison neglected these areas of innovation to his, and his company's regret. The films selected here hint at how the studio system with its stock company of actors was working in the early 1910s. We can see how favorites such as Marc MacDermott, Mary Fuller, George Lessey and Yale Boss assumed new roles from film to film, creating their on-screen personas. The technical quality of Edison films was both high and consistent in these years.

Thirty Days at Hard Labor

Directed by Oscar C. Apfel. Adapted from the story "The Halberdier of the Rheinschloss" by O. Henry (William Sydney Porter), which appeared in the May 1907 issue of *Everybody Magazine*. Cast: Robert Brower (Mr. Langdon), Mary Fuller (Beatrice, his daughter), Harold Shaw (Jack Deering), William Wadsworth (Proprietor of the restaurant). © 9 January 1912; released 9 January 1912. Print: MoMA.

A faithful adaptation of O. Henry's short story that was presented in "good comedy spirit" according to one enthusiastic reviewer. In order to gain the father's permission to marry his daughter, the spoiled son from a rich family must work to make his own living. By opening up the story, director Apfel lost O. Henry's surprise ending even as he retained its sweetness and mixed messages about hard work. This print was approval by British censors, underscoring the importance of the British market for Edison profitability in this period.

The Passer-by

Directed by Oscar C. Apfel. Scenario by Marion Brooks. Photographed by Henry Crongager and Otto Brautigan. Cast: George Lessey (Hamilton Crawford, the Bridegroom), Miriam Nesbitt (His Mother), Marc MacDermott (The First to Pass). Shot 23-27 April and 7 May 1912. © 21 June 1912; released 21 June 1912. Print: LoC (AFI Collection).

One critic declared this film “an impressive story of a blighted life.” Throughout his life, a man is periodically haunted by the woman who deserted him on the eve of their wedding. *Moving Picture World* applauded this picture for its script, the performance by Marc MacDermott, and its cinematography. “There is some clever camerawork in the dinner scene when the machine is gradually pushed toward the speaker at the head of the table, and then withdraws. The effect, of course, is that of the actor being drawn toward the spectator and then receding.” By this time, intertitles have begun to supply the names of the lead actors.

The Totville Eye

Directed by C. Jay Williams. Scenario by Bannister Merwin. Cast: Walter Edwin (Old Scotty), Yale Boss (Young Sammy), Robert Brower (Thomas Adams, the editor), Edward O’Conner (a printer), Bigelow Cooper (The minister), Harry Beaumont (Tom), Bessie Learn (Flossie), Charles Ogle (Squire Jenkins, a hard-hearted landlord), Bliss Milford (his tenant, widow Dugan). © 8 November 1912; released 27 November 1912. Print: MoMA.

A nostalgic comedy set in small town America. While the editor is away, his employees change the style of his newspaper (*The Totville Eye*) and actually report local news. The results are all to the good. Child star Yale Boss plays the bad boy turned cub reporter. Bigelow Cooper does a fine send up of a minister experiencing his first (unintended) drunk. The *New York Dramatic Mirror* claimed that the film possesses “just about all that could be desired except that of probability.” The film recalls D. W. Griffith’s earlier *Pippa Passes* (1909), but in comic mode.

The Public and Private Care of Infants

Directed by Carlton King & Charles M. Seay. Produced in co-operation with the Russell Sage Foundation, Department of Child-Helping. © 6 December 1912. Print: MoMA.

In a *Saturday Evening Post* article that appeared as this film was going into production, Thomas Edison called for motion pictures to replace text books in the schools. Meanwhile his company made films meant to educate adults about health-related issues. This one advocates strongly for private childcare and is unexpectedly critical of orphanages. This film also reveals some of the profoundly difficult choices facing working-class women. Underneath its apparently low-key informational message lurks a powerful condemnation of the socio-economic system. The Edison Company made similar kinds of films for other reform organizations. This film was apparently not given a regular release.

The Unsullied Shield

Directed and written by Charles J. Brabin. Cast: Wadsworth Harris (The Duke), Marc MacDermott (His son), Mrs. Wallace Erskine (The Duchess), Harry Eytinge (The money lender), Walter Edwin (The Warrior), Herbert Prior (The Admiral), Augustus Phillips (The Statesman). © 20 December 1912; released 7 January 1913. Print: MoMA.

Ignoring his father's deathbed pleas to improve himself, the Duke's wastrel son continues his dissolute ways, borrowing money that he cannot repay. When he is threatened with scandal and exposure, he forges his mother's signature on a check. In a hallucinatory state, the portraits of three of his illustrious ancestors come to life and lecture him on family honor. The movie screen becomes his mind-screen, which is to say a subjective home movie. This confrontation with his ancestors from the other side of the grave proves a transforming moment.