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The title of this book sprang from an interview with Monte Brice. Brice, who had been a writer and director of silent comedies, told me of the time he watched the shooting of *The Buster Keaton Story*, a 1957 Paramount film loosely based on Keaton's life.

"They had it all wrong," said Brice. "I tried to tell them that things weren't like that in the twenties, but they wouldn't listen. I remember the assistant, a young guy. He said to me, 'Look, why don't you go away? Times have changed. You're an old man. The parade's gone by . . .'"

The silent era is regarded as prehistoric, even by those who work in motion pictures. Crude, fumbling, naïve, the films exist only to be chuckled at—quaint reminders of a simple-minded past, like Victorian samplers.

This book attempts to correct these distortions, for the silent era was the richest in the cinema's history. I have tried to recapture the spirit of the era through the words of those who created it. Linking chapters provide a context for the interviews, in the way that establishing shots precede closeups. But the use of direct material has led to gaps, and I cannot claim that this book is definitive. I regret omitting a chapter on Erich von Stroheim, for example, but I never met him and could throw no more light on his work than the many other writers whose books and articles have already been published. I regret still more the exclusion of other personalities whom I *did* meet, and who gave me so much fascinating material. The silent era is far too rich and complex a period to be covered in one book; I hope eventually to publish all these interviews.

I have tried to see the films I write about, rather than depending on secondhand reports. Certainly, many have disappeared, but I had access to private collections, company vaults, and national archives, and can claim to have seen a representative cross section of the films of the time. I have also built up my own collection of silent features. William K. Everson, the film historian who has done more than anyone to rescue and to document the silent era, also did more than anyone to help me, by making available both his knowledge and his collection.

Throughout the book I have quoted frequently from *Photoplay* magazine. Fan magazines are not noted for their accuracy or wit, but *Photoplay* had nothing in common with its present-day counterparts. It was a forthright, hard-hitting, well-balanced, and highly entertaining publication, and it was a gold mine of information about the making of pictures. *Photoplay's* success was engineered by James Quirk, former editor of *Popular Mechanics*. He gave it a sort of clinical accuracy which none of the other magazines shared. Quirk knew the film business and seldom fell for press-agent stories. Occasionally, he would brighten an issue by publishing the more outrageous publicity stunts; he printed a picture of Dorothy Mackaill, having her lips tattooed, and captioned it "pure bunk." *Photoplay* set the standard for film journalism, publishing work by Robert E. Sherwood, H. L. Mencken, George Jean Nathan, and Donald Ogden Stewart.

As a film technician in the modern industry, I have a deep admiration for my counterparts of forty years ago. Carried away by the novelty of the new medium by the lack of conventions and rules, by their newly acquired wealth and by the glamour, excitement, and risk of motion-picture production, the film makers of silent-era Hollywood created something valuable enough to be called art.

The beginnings of this newest art are so recent that many of those who developed it are still alive. Commercial interests, however, have destroyed their work.

When the money-making life of a film is over, prints are generally incinerated. The average existence of a motion picture is five years. Thanks to archives, and the enlightened carelessness of certain members of the film business, many silent films still survive. But not enough to satisfy those who saw silents originally, and who remember the great ones which have now completely vanished.

The secret of the silent film lay in its unique ability to conjure up a situation that closely involved an audience, because demands were made on its imagination. The audience responded to suggestion, supplied the missing sounds and voices, and became a creative contributor to the process of projection. A high degree of technical skill was required to make such demands effective; what the audience saw it had to believe in.

When sound arrived, it not only brought the silent era to a close. It wrecked the careers of many stars and of many directors, who, while expert with silent pictures, were lost when it came to dialogue. Like sculptors forced suddenly to take up painting, they found themselves working in the same studios, in the same business, but in a completely different medium.

The golden era was the period from 1916 to 1928. It is a neglected period, forgotten often by the very men who enriched it. They have seen their films reissued on television; bad prints shown at the wrong speed have distorted their memory. Perhaps the ballyhoo meant nothing. Perhaps their much-praised pictures *were* as jerky and as primitive as they appear today.

They were not. Even at their worst, American silent pictures were technically competent. At their best, the photography glistened and gleamed, lights and gauzes fused with magical effect until the art of lighting reached its zenith. It was not merely the stories or the stars that gave magic to the silent screen. It was the patience, hard work, tenacity, and skill of the silent-film technician—the man who, in less than ten years, had developed a craft and perfected an art.



The story, so beloved of film historians, in which audiences scream, faint or stampede at the first glimpse of Lumière's train may arouse suspicions of fantasy. For the public was not completely unprepared for the motion picture. Attempts to represent movement are as old as cave paintings. Shadowplays, images thrown in silhouette upon a white screen, preceded the theater itself. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, various optical toys created an astonishingly convincing illusion of movement, depicting birds flying, figures leaping, and horses galloping. The magic-lantern show was generally a static display, but some elaborate slides were fitted with the mechanism of motion. When a small handle was turned, wheels revolved, trees waved, and chimneys smoked.

But these movements were lateral. They usually occurred on one plane. The Zoetrope bird flapped energetically, and appeared to be traveling from right to left. The smoke in the lantern slide drifted upward. When Lumière's train arrived at La Ciotat station in 1895, it made history. For it was photographed as it came toward, and past, the camera. The motion picture had at last made it possible to show an object *approaching* an audience.

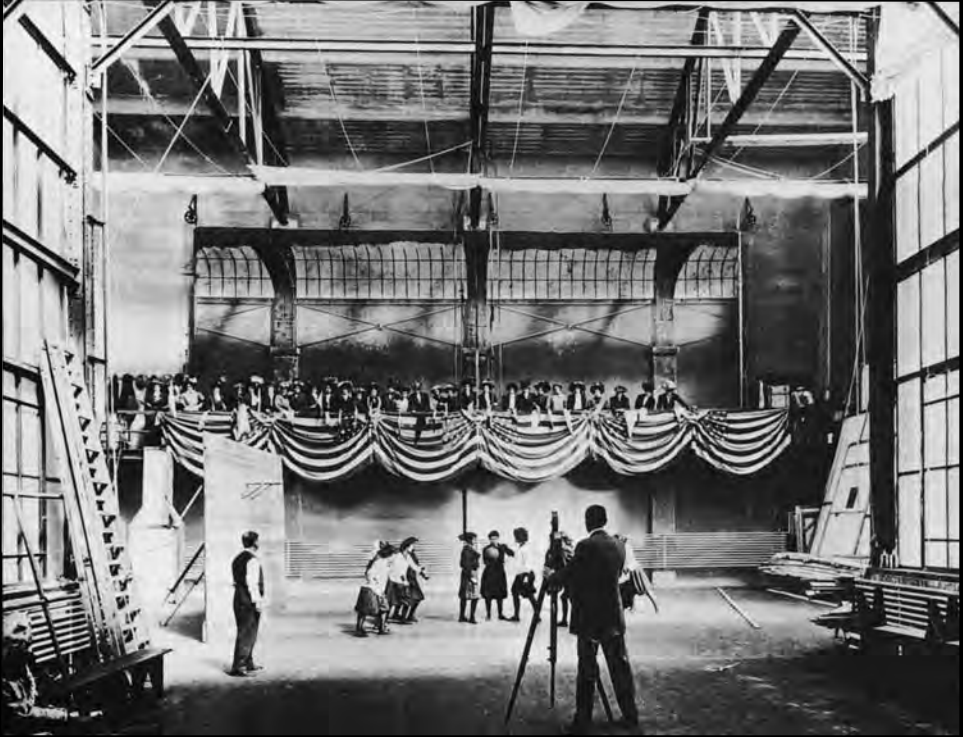
Lumière selected this head-on view in order to get the whole train into the picture; a side angle would have been inadequate. By doing this, he unconsciously added the one element missing from other attempts at simulating movement: dynamism.

Although it was peacefully steaming to a halt, a sight familiar to every member of the audience, Lumière's train appeared to be hurtling out of the screen. Had they had time to think, the spectators' common sense would have preserved their dignity. As it was, they scarcely had time to duck. According to original reports, some women screamed, others fainted. And Lumière's train was not the only film to arouse alarm.

In America, in April 1896, at Koster and Bial's Music Hall, Edison's Vitascope was presented. Operating the projection equipment on this historic occasion was pioneer Thomas Armat. Interviewed by *The New York Times* on the fiftieth anniversary of this event, Armat recalled that one of the items, *Sea Waves*, "started a panicky commotion among those up front" as the sea came rushing toward them. And he remembered how the audience went wild and cheered when the dancer Annabelle appeared life-size on the screen.

Some of the reports from this time were undoubtedly colored by journalistic excitement, but the basic truth remains: adults, with normal reactions and intelligence, reacted like children. The fact that this occurred in 1896 makes little difference. As late as 1931, when Georovesti, Rumania, was treated to its first motion-picture show, twelve peasants were hurt in the rush for the exit. In the mid-1950's, when the huge Cinerama screen was unveiled, the audience found itself enduring the sudden lurches and sickening plunges of a roller-coaster ride. Screams, gasps and groans filled the theater; years of moviegoing counted for nothing. The audience was caught off guard; the startling dynamism of the sequence shattered its barriers of defense. A roller coaster, a train—what is recorded is immaterial. For it is not the movement itself that is magical, but how that movement is used.

During the primitive years, the emphasis was on movement for movement's sake. Film manufacturers exploited only the most basic characteristic of the motion picture. The public's interest flagged as the novelty wore thin. The little one-shot



Edison Studios, 1908: Henry Cronjager filming A Country Girl's Seminary Life and Experiences.



G. W. Bitzer filming U.S. Artillery maneuvers, 1904.



The primitive motion picture: The Starving Artist (Vitagraph, 1907).

films like Lumière's *Demolition of a Wall* and *Launching of a Boat* continued to be shown for many years at fairgrounds and by traveling showmen, but their theatrical attraction was diminishing by the turn of the century. In America, the big vaudeville houses decided that the living-picture craze was over. They dispensed with their equipment. The cheaper theaters continued to use films—but only as chasers, clearing the houses, like the advertising intermissions of today.

Vaudeville, however, supplied entertainment mainly for the middle classes. America's working classes, its immigrant population, continued to find living pictures exciting, even if they had to peer into hand-cranked machines to see them. Owners of Kinetoscopes and Mutoscopes, aware of the money they were making from their penny arcades, quickly realized the money they *could* make. They acquired projection machines and converted their arcades into picture theaters. Before long, the penny arcades became nickelodeons. Vacant stores were bought up and converted by entrepreneurs, working feverishly against the time they feared the craze would cease.

The middle classes regarded such exhibitions as "penny claptrap." Homer Dunne, writing in *Motion Picture Magazine* in 1916, vividly recalled his disillusionment at a "moving photograph" show in Philadelphia in the late 1890s. Dunne was attracted to a store window, blazing with the light of two arc lamps, in which a young man cranked the handle of "an odd looking boxlike contrivance upon a tripod." A barker harangued a knot of curious bystanders. Dunne parted with five cents and went inside.

"At the far end of the store a small sheet, obviously dirty, was hung loosely from a wire. It was biliously yellow, and had a seam down the center. A rope was stretched from one wall to the other, about three feet in front of the sheet. There were no seats; the half-dozen spectators smoked vigorously and mopped their fevered foreheads. Presently there sounded a noisy sputtering and spitting in the window. Upon the sheet appeared the silhouette of the head of the perspiring young man who officiated at the clothes-wringer handle. The shadow moved here and there, as though he were dodging a crowd of angry hornets. If this were a "moving photograph" I decided I preferred the shadowgraphs of donkeys and rabbits I had learned to throw upon the wall in my youth.

"I was on the point of leaving when the voice of the barker took on a new thrill of urgency. The sputtering and the spitting became louder and sharper. The silhouette of the young man's head disappeared and the sheet suddenly glowed with an exaggerated phosphorescence. A noise like the grinding of a coffee-mill became audible. Clickety-clack! Click! Sputter! Spit and click! Then the sheet broke into a rash of magnified measles. Great blobs of pearl-colored light danced from one side to the other. These were interspersed with flashes of zigzag lightning and punctuated with soft and mellow glows like a summer sunset. As an exhibition of a "light fantasy" it was an unqualified success. But as yet nothing even remotely resembling a picture, moving or still, had appeared.

"After a few minutes of this luminous orgy, however, a man's face popped out from between two brilliant splotches of light. Soon, another face appeared in the northwest corner of the sheet. Later, a human torso flashed into view; then its arms popped into place, then its legs; its head arrived soon after, and it stood revealed in its entirety—a perfect man. Eventually, he was joined by his pal. For nearly a minute they gestured and gesticulated at each other. Finally Number One lost his temper. Without warning he launched a vicious blow at Number Two.

"Whether the blow was a knockout I shall never know. Before it landed, the sheet was plunged into pitchy darkness—and the show was over.

"I have often wondered what would have happened if I had predicted to those who witnessed with me that weird performance that the day would come when that same moving photograph would be developed and perfected . . . For no one took that exhibition seriously. How could we, when not one of us knew what it was all about?"¹

In Europe, several forces were transforming the watching of films from an optical assault into a magical experience. One of these was a genuine magician, Georges Méliès. Among the first to tell a story with film, Méliès invariably provided a full-scale pantomime—with trimmings no stage manager could achieve. He and his staff produced trick effects which at the time seemed stupendous, and which even today appear remarkable. Méliès, however, was not a true *cinéaste*. He was a dedicated showman; he regarded the camera as an invaluable prop which improved beyond measure many of his stage effects. With films he could reach a far wider audience. Although he employed new effects, such as a form of dissolve, Méliès's camera recorded the customary theatrical mid-long-shot—from the front seat of the stalls.

¹ Motion Picture Magazine, Aug. 1916, p. 81.

Whatever his methods, however, he told a story and was the most influential of the pioneers. Deeply impressed by his work was Edwin S. Porter, cameraman and director for the Edison Company in America. Porter once said that it was the Méliès pictures that led him to a significant conclusion: since the attraction of the one-shot films was beginning to pall, perhaps the straightforward telling of a story might draw the customers back to the theaters.

Porter took some of the Edison Company's one-shot films, fifty-foot lengths with the common subject of fire. He had them joined together; the result lasted four hundred and twenty-five feet and was titled *The Life of an American Fireman*. The scenes were purely informative, showing the firehouse and crew, and the fire engines racing to a call. To make these stock shots more exciting, Porter photographed extra scenes—the fireman thinking of his wife and baby, and the final rescue from the burning building. The Edison Company, in their publicity, glossed over the fact that the stock shots showed different fire departments by claiming: "We were compelled to enlist the services of the fire departments of four different cities. 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."²

Porter's epoch-making editing of this film and the more elaborate *Great Train Robbery* (1903) has been the subject of much analysis and supposition. Actually, like so many other important events in motion pictures, it was casual and intuitive.

Yet few other film makers followed this compelling style—not even Porter, whose later films were conservative and theatrical. For dramatic subjects of this period were invariably reproductions of stage plays. The players conducted themselves as though on the stage—from which most of them had come. The scenery was generally painted, and the camera was rigid. Titles announced the content of the scene. Little was left to the imagination.

But some of those crouched in the scented darkness of the nickelodeon had never seen a play, and these films were a revelation. Some, poorly paid workers, were illiterate. Others, penniless immigrants, did not speak English. But the titles were read from the screen aloud and translated into a dozen languages. It was Babel, but there were few who did not benefit. The commotion encouraged the stranger; here was one place where he was accepted and where he felt at ease. Gradually the little films taught him customs and ways of life which had previously baffled him; they began to extend his outlook and enlarge his interests. America's immigrant population learned from the movies in a way denied them by the spoken theater.

Others, for whom the theater had been the principal diversion, discovered new advantages in the movies. Accustomed to the cheapest seats, they found the camera giving them the view from the best seats in the house. The scenes, though lengthy, were much shorter than those of theatrical productions. The titles that separated them were swifter than a curtain. When two scenes were joined together without a title, the impact on audiences used to the tedious delays of scene shifting was understandably startling.

But for all these advantages, the middle-class patrons of vaudeville, and of the legitimate stage, had yet to be won over to the movies. The main deterrent

² George Pratt: *Spellbound in Darkness* (Rochester, N. Y.: University of Rochester; 1966). p. 27. This is the most important reference work on the silent era.

was the movie houses themselves. Owners protested that their houses were clean and free from vermin; they had sprayed the disinfectant themselves. Somehow, the middle classes remained unconvinced. Certain exhibitors opened luxurious new theaters and were gratified by the response. But the prosperous classes demanded more than colored lights and plush. Motion pictures remained the common language of the poor.

A vast number of short films were churned out during this period. Most of them were sold outright, and so many have survived—unlike the silent films of later years, which were returned to the distributor for destruction. When seen today these early films are interesting historically, academically, and sociologically—but seldom cinematically. Apart from the occasional breakthrough, such as the experiments of Méliès and Porter, films of this very early period were not films at all. Shots were joined together but not edited. Scenes were illuminated but not lit.

Yet the foundations for a new industry were being laid. And by laying the foundations for industry, these pioneers were providing the groundwork of an art.