Introduction

This book, the first in a multivolume history of American film, looks at the initial twelve years of cinema, from 1895 to the fall of 1907. Here, *cinema* refers to projected motion pictures and their sound accompaniment, but two closely related developments must also be considered. First, there is the history of *screen practice*—projected images and their audio complement—which dates back to the seventeenth century and includes the magic lantern, a precursor of the modern slide projector. As the title of this book suggests, cinema was neither "born" nor a "new art form": it emerged out of, even as it soon dominated, screen practice. For this reason, the first chapter briefly traces the history of earlier projected images as they originated in Europe and subsequently developed within the United States. Second, this volume is concerned with the history of *motion pictures*, which includes not only cinema but forms of exhibition that did not involve projection. Of these exhibition formats, individualized or peephole viewing was the most important. The history of commercial motion pictures in fact began in 1894 with Edison's peephole kinetoscope, while the mutoscope, a peephole flip-card device, was an important presence during the late 1890s and early 1900s. The cinema, the screen, motion pictures—these involve distinct though overlapping practices.

Although the cinema was to become known affectionately as "the movies" or "the flicks," in the 1890s and early 1900s it was called "animated photographs," "moving pictures," and sometimes even "life-model motion pictures." Today, some turn-of-the-century terminology may seem foreign or quaint, while other expressions retain the seeming freshness of contemporary idiom. Correspondingly, as Judith Mayne has pointed out, turn-of-the-century images appear to combine similar qualities of strangeness and familiarity.[1] Whatever the case, these films and the corresponding practices do not readily open themselves to our understanding: they are frequently strange and familiar in unexpected ways. The methods of production and representation were so different from today's mainstream cinema that apparent parallels can readily deceive rather than illuminate. But, properly understood, the foreignness of the earlier period gives us a remarkable perspective on present-day moving images, whether those of Hollywood and its blockbusters, television and the evening news, or American independents and avant-garde explorations. The purpose of this study is not to revel in the seeming eccentricities of early cinema (the label historians often

apply to this period and the one used here as well) but to make its methods understandable within the context of its own norms and practices.

Any multivolume history must justify its periodization. While starting with the "beginnings" is logical enough, it remains to explain why this volume ends around September 1907. Here a combination of factors must be cited. The brief economic recession that started in October 1907 encouraged important changes in the organization of the industry, including the formation of various patent-based alliances that culminated in the Motion Picture Patents Company. Moreover, the modes of representation and production began to change in new and far-ranging ways late in 1907. Finally, although American cinema experienced many transformations between 1895 and 1907, there were also fundamental continuities that make it appropriate to see the period as a coherent one.

Elements of Stability in Early Cinema

Early cinema enjoyed a distinctive "mode of reception." The ways in which spectators understood and appreciated motion pictures regularly took one of three basic forms, none of which was privileged or preferred. First of all, the film's subject or narrative was often already known by the spectators. Especially with the aid of a brief cue (such as a main title) to identify the well-known story or event, viewers brought this special knowledge to bear on the film. When the Biograph Company showed filmed excerpts of Joseph Jefferson performing his famous stage role in *Rip Van Winkle*, for example, the audience's familiarity with the play was assumed. Early cinema thus evidenced a profound dependence on other cultural forms, including the theater, newspapers, popular songs, and fairy tales.

Alternatively, the spectator might rely on the exhibitor to clarify the film's narrative or meaning through a live narration and other sounds (music, effects, even dialogue added by actors from behind the screen). PARSIFAL (Edison, 1904) and William Selig's films of Armour & Company (the meat-packing concern) were intended to be presented with a lecture. The exhibitor's spiel usually did more than simply clarify, however: it conveyed the showman's own interpretation of these images or rendered them subordinate to his authorial vision.[2]

Finally, spectators might easily find themselves in a position where they had to understand the film story without recourse to either special knowledge or the exhibitors' aid. Here, the representational system sharply limited the filmmakers' ability to present a self-sufficient narrative. Certain genres, such as Méliès' trick films, did not require the spectator to discern a coherent plot, since their narratives were not based on a logical progression of events. Some pictures—for example, chase films such as MEET ME AT THE FOUNTAIN (Lubin, 1904)—told simple stories that could be readily understood. Others, such as A KENTUCKY FEUD (Biograph, 1905), relied heavily on intertitles to explain the story line.

Since the mechanisms for audience comprehension were so diverse, one might wonder what they shared. Here, if only for a moment, early cinema is worth defining negatively: its representational system could *not* present a complex, unfamiliar narrative capable of being readily understood irrespective of exhibition circumstances or the spectators' specific cultural knowledge. In practice, a significant number of films left their viewers somewhat mystified and confused. Often, the key to following the

narrative was not widely known or exhibitors failed to perform their job, but it was also not unusual for filmmakers to exceed the capacities of their representational system. This does not mean that cinema lacked an array of conventions that facilitated audience comprehension of projected images, for spectators were generally familiar with various strategies for conveying meaning (certain genres, certain gestures by actors or relations between shots). Rather, these conventions only operated effectively within strict limits.

The early cinema's system of representation became more elaborate over time but did not fundamentally change. Once again, it was not until 1907 that the system began to break down. This mode of representation was predominantly *presentational* in its acting style, set design, and visual composition as well as in its depiction of time, space, and narrative. Rooted in theatrical discourse, the concept of a presentational style was originally used to describe a method of acting that dominated the American and English stage during most of the nineteenth century. Actors not only played to the audience but used highly conventionalized gestures to convey forceful emotions. The style was frontal and relied on indication. Among many late-nineteenth-century practitioners of high theatrical art, the presentational style was superseded by one that emphasized greater verisimilitude and restraint. The older representational techniques continued, however, in diverse cultural forms, including not only such popular theatrical genres as melodrama and burlesque but the magic lantern, cartoon strips, and early cinema.

The presentationalism of early cinema is most obvious in the pro-filmic elements (the mise-en-scène) and the manner in which they were organized vis-à-vis the camera and the audience. Lacking words, actors often resorted to extensive pantomime to convey their thoughts or actions, pushing the use of conventionalized gestures to an extreme. Within scenes, time and space were likewise indicated rather than rendered in a verisimilar manner. In LOST IN THE ALPS (Edison, 1907), the time it takes for actions to occur offscreen (*i.e.*, "offstage") is radically condensed. The mother, looking for her children, leaves but quickly returns. Yet the audience knows that this search took much longer than was actually depicted. The passage of time is thus signaled and dealt with in terms that satisfied old-style theatrical conventions (in the naturalistic theater that was replacing this system, meanwhile, such indicating was much less acceptable).

The same type of indicating also characterized the production design for many of these films. Schematic sets eschewed all illusionism. For HOW THEY ROB MEN IN CHICAGO (Biograph, 1902), a simple flat identifies the type of location without actually trying to simulate it. The fact that the same backdrop was shot with the same frontal camera framings for many other Biograph films amply demonstrates its iconic nature. Elaborately painted theatrical drops were also commonly integrated into these films, but again, they only suggest depth and perspective. Their effect was quite different from that of full three-dimensional sets or real locations for exterior scenes. Studio sets were routinely used for exteriors as well as interiors, reflecting not only a theatrical tradition but a continuing practice of indication.

Early cinema's presentational approach was also, as Tom Gunning has pointed out, concerned with display, exhibitionism, and the offering of spectacular, realistic, or novel effects.[3] As in DR. DIPPY'S SANITARIUM (Biograph, 1906), set designs often sacrificed realistic perspectives for an opening up of the space and mise-en-scène. In a film such as GRANDPA'S READING GLASS (Biograph, 1902), objects are shown in

close-up "as if" viewed through a magnifying glass. But this "as if" is based not on verisimilitude but on display, for the objects were photographed against plain backgrounds that removed them from the mise-en-scène, further isolating them for the spectator. This style often involved an acknowledgment of the camera and the spectator. The genre of facial-expression films, for example, usually entailed a single close-up of a performer confronting the camera. In FACIAL EXPRESSION BY LONEY HASKELL (Biograph, 1897), the performer grimaces into the camera and shares the humorous results with his audience. The viewer is a voyeur but not, as in later cinema, apparently effaced. The compositional dynamics of many chase films, such as the immensely popular PERSONAL (Biograph, 1904), in which pursuer and pursued run toward and past the camera, offer another form of this display.

Cinema's pervasive presentational style was not limited to fiction films with their recognizable theatrical antecedents or parallels. The train (EMPIRE STATE EXPRESS [Biograph, 1896]) or cavalry (CHARGE OF THE SEVENTH FRENCH CUIRASSIERS [Lumière, 1896]) rushing toward the camera and visually assaulting the spectator was equally characteristic. Since speeches, parades, and inaugurations were subjects that involved conscious uses of display and spectacle, this approach was readily applied to the making of actualities (*i.e.*, films of actual events). These events replicated and reinforced a tendency toward frontal compositions. Nonetheless, it was with actualities that the presentational style was most vulnerable. FEEDING THE BABY (Lumière, 1895) or HERALD SQUARE (Edison, 1896) captured the phenomenal world as it unfolded in resolutely real time. Camera movement, which became increasingly common after 1897 but was initially used only for actualities, further emphasized the existence of offscreen space and a real world beyond the edges of the frame. Here the cinema offered a verisimilar approach that was compatible with naturalistic theater.

What Georges Sadoul describes as the snapshot quality of these films[4] and their application to fiction filmmaking in the early 1900s might have undermined the strong presentational tendencies of early cinema much sooner except for the fact that the system of representation was resolutely syncretic in its combination and juxtaposition of different mimetic means. In many films, such as FRANCESCA DI RIMINI (Vitagraph, 1907), exteriors were taken both in specially constructed studio sets and on location. Even within many sets, some props and design elements were rendered with paint, while others were three-dimensional or real objects. In THE BOLD BANK ROBBERY (Lubin, 1904), a real lamp is used, but the light rays are painted on the wall. Filmmakers thus routinely shifted between different levels of representing reality. This syncreticism can be contrasted with later cinema's predominant emphasis on mimetic consistency. To be sure, artifice such as backdrops would continue to be used, but the goal was increasingly to meld the juncture of different mimetic means until they became seamless. Early cinema was predominantly syncretic, presentational, and nonlinear, while later classical Hollywood cinema favored consistency, verisimilitude, and a linear narrative structure, particularly in its dramas and light comedies.

The presentational approach was also apparent in the way narratives were depicted. Many narratives were highly conventionalized and operated within genres far narrower than those found in later cinema. The bad-boy and fire-rescue genres are only two examples.[5] The spectator knows that the bad boys will engage in a series of humorous, mischievous acts; only the specific form of their mischief is in doubt. In other instances, as Noël Burch points out, stories were not told "as if for the first

time" insofar as they were assumed to be a part of the viewers' previous knowledge.[6] Since the films did not usually create or convey a complex original story in themselves, the producers' energies could be directed elsewhere. The filmmakers assembled spectacular images that evoked the story rather than telling the story in and of itself; indeed, images jumped from high point to high point with crucial causal connections left unarticulated. This was also true for magic-lantern images, while a similar presentationalism was enjoying its greatest success in the theater. The repertoire of plays, Janet Staiger indicates, was limited and well known to the audience: "Sets, props and costume were conventional and spare; the drama was less the plot and more the actor and the individual interpretation of the plot."[7]

With melodrama continuing the presentational approach on the turn-of-the-century stage, it is not surprising that cinema quickly appropriated many of its characteristics. As Roberta Pearson reports, character motivation was notably absent in both melodrama and early film.[8] In both cases, characters "do not carry the full weight of real life" and "are devoid of any individuality."[9] In THE PAYMASTER (Biograph, 1906), the factory manager embodies evil as he tests the good paymaster and the mill girl. Moreover, chance rather than a realistic or "organic" development of events propels the plot, which is therefore subject to dramatic, striking reversals: a chance discovery of the stolen money exposes the factory manager's scheme at the crucial moment. Film companies also adopted the common melodramatic technique of double titles, as with Vitagraph's ADVENTURES OF SHERLOCK HOLMES; OR, HELD FOR A RANSOM (1905) or Selig's TRACKED BY BLOODHOUNDS; OR, A LYNCHING AT CRIPPLE CREEK (1904). Both play and film titles played a key naming function, and the titles of play acts and film scenes within the respective productions also had a common orienting or identifying role.[10]

One of the pre-1907 cinema's most distinctive features was its nonlinear temporality in the arrangement of scenes. The relationship between the outgoing and incoming shots could take several forms. As seen in the seminal LIFE OF AN AMERICAN FIREMAN (Edison, 1902–1903), filmmakers often relied on temporal repetitions, returning to earlier points in time to pick up their story. The same actions or event could thus be shown from multiple viewpoints, as in THE LAUNCHING OF THE U.S.S. BATTLESHIP "CONNECTICUT" (Biograph, 1904), wherein the launching was shown three times, each time for a different camera position. In other instances, different lines of action that occurred simultaneously were shown successively; in THE KLEPTOMANIAC (Edison, 1905), for example, the concurrent lives of two women are presented one after the other, rather than shifting back and forth between the two.

By 1908–1909, temporal repetition, early cinema's solution to the problem of simultaneity, was superseded by a linear progression and parallel editing. Linear continuities with matching action across the cuts did appear, however, in a few early films, such as THE ESCAPED LUNATIC (Biograph, 1903), which contains a cut to a different camera position just as the lunatic throws a guard off the bridge. Yet employment of this type of continuity was exceptional, and spectators could not assume that a film story would unfold in simple chronological order. This nonlinear organization of shots was consistent with the general framework of reception discussed above. While repeated actions or narrative cues sometimes provided sufficient information for the spectator to follow the flow of events and relationships between shots, in other cases, help had to come from external sources—either the exhibitor or the spectator's previous knowledge of the story.

In contrast to this temporality, the spatial relations constructed through editing are much more familiar to the modern viewer. Exterior/interior relations, the establishing shot and closer view, even the point-of-view shot, all appear with some frequency in early cinema. Indeed, all had well-established antecedents in screen history. Although extensive creation of a spatial world through successive close-ups within a scene, shot/counter-shots, and cuts on the glance was part of a later repertoire of cinematic techniques, none of the spatial constructions that appeared in early films were later excluded by Hollywood. Rather, pre-1907 methods of constructing a spatial world through editing became more frequent, subtle, and suggestive of mood in later years.

Although many aspects of film production changed between 1895 and 1907, the organization of work within the small studios remained relatively constant. Here again, early filmmaking activities were organized in many different ways. The most characteristic method of production, however—which might be called the collaborative system—usually involved two men, the stage manager and cameraman, who worked together in an informal and nonhierarchical manner. Throughout this period, America's film companies were often started or at least staffed with collaborative teams. J. Stuart Blackton and Albert E. Smith of Vitagraph, Edwin S. Porter and George Fleming at Edison, William Paley and William Steiner of Paley & Steiner, and Wallace McCutcheon and Frank Marion of Biograph are only some examples. Such collaborative methods of work were also evident in the invention of cinema's "basic apparatus"—the camera and projector.

Within this system, and unlike the dominant post-1907 production methods that organized staff along more hierarchical lines of authority and accountability, early filmmaking involved little specialization. The originator(s) of a story would often direct the actors, appear in the films, operate the camera, develop the exposed raw stock, cut the negative, and—if necessary—run the projector. This knowledge of all aspects of the craft was what distinguished these pre-1907 filmmakers from their more specialized successors.[11]

Finally, it must be recalled that film production occurred within a white, virtually all-male world. Even female roles were often played by men—either professional female impersonators like Gilbert Saroni in THE OLD MAID HAVING HER PICTURE TAKEN (Edison, 1901) or employees like the bookkeeper who played "the wife's choice" in THE SERVANT GIRL PROBLEM (Vitagraph, 1905). The selection of narrative elements and the application of presentational techniques consistently enhanced the element of male voyeurism. The display of normally concealed female anatomy was common, particularly in Biograph productions. Many short comedies were made by men, for men, and revealed a number of the preoccupations and assumptions of this "homosocial" world that was just beginning to break down.[12]

Changing Methods of Production and Representation

Despite many stable elements, the cinema underwent a staggering array of fundamental changes between 1895 and 1907. During the first months of widespread projection, short (one-shot) films were enjoyed primarily for their ability to reproduce lifelike motion and exploit isolated presentational elements. While such comparatively non-narrative uses of film continued and developed in what Tom Gunning

has called "the cinema of attractions," many exhibitors began to organize these short films into multishot narratives. Although arranging these scenes was the chief responsibility of exhibitors during the 1890s, production companies had largely assumed control over this process (i.e., editing) by 1903–1904. The era of storefront motion-picture theaters or "nickelodeons," which began in 1905–1906, involved a new organization of exhibition that had profound effects on all other aspects of film practice.

Change creates new necessities, new opportunities, and new practices even as it eliminates old ones. In many respects, the introduction of a single fundamental change—the adaptation of Edison's moving pictures to projection—precipitated a series of shifts and transformations within the field of screen entertainment that could be likened to a row of falling dominos. While nothing inherent in the medium necessitated this rapid succession of innovations, the economic and cultural dynamics of American society in general and screen practice in particular pressured the film industry to change along the general lines that it did. Perhaps a somewhat different kind of development would have taken place if William Kennedy Laurie Dickson had remained with Thomas Edison or if a patents company had been established in the 1890s. Yet even here the differences would have been limited. Motion-picture practices did not evolve as they did because of the extraordinary genius of a few individuals but because significant numbers of people recognized new commercial and artistic opportunities implicit in previous change and so, in turn, further altered the practice of cinema.

In seeking to explain the underlying dynamics of a rapidly changing film practice and to provide an account of the American screen before 1907, this volume does not dwell on the theoretical and methodological framework.[13] In some respects it remains rather "old-fashioned" in that it is very concerned with who did what, where, and when. The reasons why something was done and its significance or relation to the larger industry are carefully investigated. Nonetheless, this narrative treatment functions within a carefully worked-out historical model. A central aspect of this model explores the interaction between cinema's mode of production (how the cinema is made) and the mode of representation (how a story is told or a subject represented). The gradual shift in editorial responsibility from exhibitor to producer in the early 1900s, for example, allowed for new ways of articulating a narrative. As filmmakers explored the new representational possibilities resulting from this shift, the commercial success of these innovative pictures provided further impetus for centralizing the control of editing inside the production companies.

In examining the cinema's production methods, we must begin by looking at how films were made, shown, and appreciated: in other words, by looking at the production companies, the exhibitors, and the spectators. Although the spectators' relationship to the screen experience remained relatively constant through 1907, the interactions between image production and exhibition underwent multiple transformations. Each shift involved complex adjustments between the two areas. It is not coincidental that most of the leading filmmakers from the early 1900s had previous experience in exhibition: Edwin S. Porter, James White, J. Stuart Blackton, Wallace McCutcheon, and William Paley—to name only a few. Since distribution is at the interface of film production and exhibition, it is hardly surprising that it too underwent substantial changes. Although the industry had autonomous sales agents and a few exchanges from the outset, many distribution functions were performed by

either producers (who commonly sold their films directly to "the trade") or exhibitors (who rented films to theaters as one part of their service package). Only after key postproduction responsibilities were assumed by the film producers did the development of the rental system become possible and specialized distribution companies or "exchanges" emerge as important factors in the field.

The Industry

To address such dramatic changes, it is expedient to organize this volume chronologically. Chapters deal with the activities of the industry's principal production and exhibition companies during relatively short periods of time—a few months to a few years. While several important businesses blossomed only briefly as the film industry began, greater continuity is evident by the late 1890s. Since change was instituted on a company-by-company basis, commercial enterprises rather than individuals usually provide the most appropriate unit of inquiry and organization. The collaborative method of work, the eventual recognition of the production company as the author of a screen narrative, and the fact that the individuals responsible for many films were rarely publicized and even now frequently remain unknown: all these factors justify such an organizing principle.

The ten corporations that formed the Motion Picture Patents Company (discussed in the next volume) were all active by mid 1907. The two that became preeminent in this organization also played crucial roles throughout the earlier period. The Edison Manufacturing Company introduced commercial, modern motion pictures to the world. Its owner, Thomas A. Edison, achieved immense influence through both his company's activities and his use of patent litigation as a commercial weapon. The American Mutoscope & Biograph Company (originally named the American Mutoscope Company, and often referred to as the Biograph Company after its biograph projector) was the most commercially successful American film enterprise during the late 1890s and again in 1904–1905. A large and well-financed corporation, it mounted an effective challenge to Edison's patent claims and was perhaps the only entity in the United States that could have done so. The multifaceted rivalry between the two organizations colored the entire industry.

Although substantial information from this period—paper documentation as well as a large number of films—survives for both companies, much more has been written about the Edison enterprise. Interest has focused on the invention of motion pictures at the Edison laboratory and its early commercial history. Additional work has been done on Edwin S. Porter, the earliest American filmmaker to enjoy a significant reputation, who was an Edison employee from late 1900 to 1909.[14] Although Biograph has been understandably associated with the D. W. Griffith years (1908–1913), the company's role in the earlier period was crucial.[15] This volume seeks to redress that imbalance with a careful examination of Biograph's activities.

Other Patents Company members played significant but ultimately less central roles in the pre-1907 period. Sigmund Lubin, who did business under his own name, and William Selig, who formed the Selig Polyscope Company, as well as American Vitagraph, which was owned by J. Stuart Blackton, Albert E. Smith, and William T. Rock, were all involved in both production and exhibition by 1898. Here again, more has been written about Vitagraph than about either Lubin or Selig, and so this

volume makes a particular effort to trace the activities of the latter two.[16] The Kleine Optical Company, run by George Kleine, entered the motion-picture field in 1896 and served as a leading sales agent for domestic and foreign producers throughout the period covered by this study.

Only two production companies allied with the Motion Picture Patents Company were not active by the 1890s. These late additions, however, were headed by men who had owned and/or managed important film businesses before the turn of the century and finally entered the production field in early 1907. The Kalem Company was owned by George Kleine and two former Biograph employees, Frank Marion and Samuel Long. The Essanay Film Manufacturing Company was formed by George Spoor, who ran a leading exhibition service, and Gilbert M. Anderson, an actor and director who had previously worked for four other American producers. These companies thus represented a consolidation of earlier achievements even though they did not enjoy prominence until the period covered by the next volume in this series, *The Transformation of Cinema*. The Patents Company also had two foreign members whose films already enjoyed wide popularity in the United States during the 1890s and early 1900s: Georges Méliès and Pathé Frères. To better exploit this popularity, both firms established sales offices in New York City during 1903–1904 and played influential roles in the American industry. Carefully examined, the activities of these recurring figures through 1907 offer fundamental insights into the rapidly changing industry.

These leading businesses did not, of course, begin to constitute the entire industry. Numerous individuals enjoyed noteworthy if more modest careers within the time frame considered here. Among those acquiring some production experience were William Paley, the Miles brothers, Burton Holmes, and Lyman H. Howe. Many other enterprises were influential but short-lived. This is particularly true of cinema's first two or three years, when the Lambda Company, Eidoloscope Company, Vitascope Company, Lumière Agency, and International Film Company played influential roles. Figures such as William Fox, Carl Laemmle, and the Warner brothers entered the field at the beginning of the nickelodeon era, but they were to achieve their greatest success in subsequent years. Many minor figures whose careers are interesting and illuminating cannot be considered—at least not systematically—within the limited framework of this study.

Exhibition poses a particular problem for the historian. No records survive for many, perhaps most, of the screenings that occurred in this early era. Tracing and assessing them is extremely difficult, and conclusions must be couched in tentative terms. Nonetheless, the research done for this volume suggests that motion pictures were a much more important part of American life during their first ten years than has been widely recognized. Moreover, the types of exhibition sites were more diverse than usually acknowledged, at least by those focusing on vaudeville exhibition. Films were often shown between acts of plays, in black tents at carnivals, as complete evenings of entertainment in the local church or opera house, as part of an illustrated lecture, and in storefront theaters. This study seeks to outline the scope of these diverse exhibition sites and practices, which were often subject to financial instability and frequent shifts in their relative importance.

As will be seen, there was considerable regional variation in exhibition. Since vaudeville was never popular in the South, people in that area usually had to rely on carnivals and a few traveling exhibitors to see films before the nickelodeon era. In

contrast, small-time vaudeville was so popular in the Pacific Northwest that it impeded the introduction of the more specialized motion-picture theaters. This volume, however, highlights those locales that best help to explain the overall development of the industry. Activities occurring in a relatively few large cities along the East Coast and in the Midwest influenced the course of film practice much more than activities outside of these centers. While much still needs to be learned and said about exhibition in many areas of the United States, such an undertaking is beyond the scope of this study.

Grappling with the diversity of exhibition is mild, however, compared to questions about spectatorship. The specialized motion-picture spectator, the regular filmgoer, was developing only at the end of this period. Moreover, there were no professional moviegoers—*i.e.*, film reviewers—whose biases and attitudes we might trace as cinema developed. Occasionally, cultural reporters or theatrical reviewers would comment on the films or note a strong reaction by fellow spectators (a scream or offhand remark by someone in a neighboring seat). More often, the likely response or interpretation of an image can only be established circumstantially. An image implies or constructs one or more hypothetical spectators, but these imaginary spectators were often contradicted by real ones. Films directed at male spectators were also watched by women, whose presence often challenged and reinterpreted the all-male discourse. Bad-boy films were directed at adult, middle-class males who were expected to recall the carefree days of childhood. Yet, when shown to children and working-class immigrants, they became potentially subversive.

Spectators must almost inevitably be treated in groups, their presence inferred from the exhibition site, ticket price, and other indirect evidence. Here the purpose is not only to explore the way spectators understood the films but to break down the assumption that cinema appealed almost exclusively to lovers of commercial popular culture and was ignored or opposed by other groups. In fact, the situation was far more complex, for motion pictures were also enjoyed by members of conservative religious groups and proponents of genteel culture; it was the rise of the story film and the nickelodeon that turned the cinema into a form overwhelmingly oriented toward amusement.

In the various relationships between the films and the key groups that make up film practice (spectators, exhibitors, and film producers), cinema's social and ideological role becomes apparent. Here a double movement can be defined. First, as this study shows, the ideological viewpoints of society in general, various socioeconomic groups more specifically, and the filmmakers in particular were articulated in the films themselves. Although these films generally expressed middle-class beliefs, the American middle class was then extremely heterogeneous. Thus the critical, yet often defensive, "old middle class" perspective of many Porter–Edison films can be contrasted with the exuberant, urban "new middle class" viewpoint found in many Biograph and Vitagraph subjects. Lubin films generally articulated a distinctive if sometimes eccentric laissez-faire anarchism that was undoubtedly shaped by the Jewish producer's experiences as part of an ethnic minority in the United States. This ideological vantage differs again from the cinema of reassurance practiced by Lyman Howe or the elitist social, cultural, and economic assumptions of Burton Holmes.

Motion pictures also helped to reshape the culture and society that produced them. Responses are often difficult to gauge, particularly because the system of representation and the subsequent forms of presentation allowed spectators diverse

and particularly active roles in constructing a film's meaning. Yet the cinema's impact on American life cannot be attributed merely to the films. As Robert Sklar has pointed out, the moviegoing experience itself fostered new modes of behavior, leisure, desire and consciousness.[17] By the end of this period, cultural observers were beginning to recognize that the cinema was threatening if not transforming many of American society's most cherished and long-standing values.

Because there has been no previous book-length overview of American early cinema, many central developments and countless facts either are not well established or are coming to light now for the first time. Extensive new research has often revised previous assessments, thus requiring careful documentation of sources. These materials are diverse and clearly not all are equally reliable. Historian Terry Ramsaye, who had access to people and documents no longer in existence, thrived on lively tales that have sometimes proved fanciful. Yet, he often recounts momentous events that are reconcilable with the known facts even though they cannot be absolutely verified. Such sources should not be ignored, but they must be used cautiously, for as Robert C. Allen suggests, many assertions about the cinema have been passed from one historian to another without ever being verified or challenged.[18] Whenever possible, this study has sought to rely on primary source material.

To avoid excessive or unnecessary footnoting, certain rules have been applied. Primary source references are grouped by paragraph where possible. Information about exhibitions in individual cities or at particular theaters was generally established by systematic searches of local newspapers (usually the theater page of Sunday editions). These papers are listed in the bibliography and are cited only if a quotation or elusive piece of information is being provided. Titles of newspaper articles have been retained only where they serve a descriptive function. When documenting the activities of the Edison Manufacturing Company, Lyman Howe and his traveling exhibition companies, or American Vitagraph before 1901, few footnotes are used. Appropriate citations as well as more information on these subjects may be found in my two other books and one lengthy article.[19] The present volume builds on these works, seeking to complement their more focused perspectives with a broader overview. The still-numerous citations will enable interested readers to verify facts and interpretations and will open up primary sources for future research. It is hoped that this book will provide a starting point for future historians as well as a useful resource for those seeking a general understanding of American cinema before 1907.