

CHAPTER ONE

Trick or Treat What “Commercial Crisis,” 1900–1903?

THE NEWSIE’S POINT OF VIEW

*All what I see wit’ me own eyes I knows an’ unnerstan’s
When I see movin’ pitchers of de far off, furrin’ lans
Where de Hunks an’ Ginnes come from—yer can betcher life I knows
Dat of’ all de lans’ an’ countries, ’taint no matter where yer goes
Dis here country’s got ’em beaten—take my oat dat ain’t no kid—
’Cause we learned it from de movin’ pitchers, me an’ Maggie did.*

MOVING PICTURE WORLD (5 MARCH 1910), 333

A commonplace of early American cinema history has it that the years 1900–1903 were a “period of commercial crisis,” that moving pictures verged on not becoming a viable form of cheap amusement.¹ This was the result, Charles Musser argues, of “problems with technological standardization, patent and copyright problems, audience boredom with predictable subject matter, stagnant demand, and cutthroat competition.” Its immediate effect was a decline in American film production, a falloff in traveling exhibitor tours, and the failure of several early storefront theaters devoted exclusively to films. Without denying at least some of these problems and their effects, I want to look at these years from a different perspective, one more in line with that of Robert Allen, who has argued that, at least in vaudeville during this period, moving pictures did find “a stable market [and] a large audience of middle-class theatre-goers.”² For if one focuses on exhibition rather than production, and on the most prominent sites of consumption, where films were shown frequently and regularly, in vaudeville houses and summer amusement parks, one sees not a “commercial crisis” but rather a more or less steadily expanding market.³ The “common cry” that motion pictures “were losing their hold upon the public,” George Kleine later wrote, may have circulated widely (if misleadingly) in 1900, but not thereafter.⁴ Moreover, according to the trade press on stage performance—that is, *Billboard* and *New York Clipper*—as well as selected local papers, the trick films and *féeries* or “fairy plays” of Georges Méliès and Pathé-Frères from France, whether purchased outright or circulated in duped or pirated prints, were crucial to that expansion.

My argument begins with a *New York Clipper* report on the vaudeville program at Tony Pastor's, in New York, for the second week in January 1900:

The American Vitagraph presented a series of moving pictures illustrating the story of *Cinderella* as the feature of its display on Monday, January 8, and scored one of the most distinct successes within our knowledge of animated views. The costumes are colored to match the originals, and the reproduction of the pantomime detailed with exactness. The dear old story, thus pictured, should remain for many weeks the delight of the little ones and a charm for the elders.⁵

"Attendance," the trade weekly added, "tested the [theater's] full capacity" and led Pastor's to make sure that *Cinderella* was on the bill for another three weeks.⁶ By 1900, as Allen, Musser, and others have written, moving pictures had become a familiar, relatively reliable act on vaudeville programs, known principally by the name of the projecting apparatus or exhibition service supplying the films.⁷ So the *Clipper's* reference to a single film's popularity, over the course of a month at one location, was quite unusual. But there are other noteworthy points in this brief text that lay out the trajectories I want to pursue. One is that Vitagraph's exhibition service provided a guarantee of quality performance at Pastor's: at the time, no other company operated weekly in more vaudeville houses in the United States. Another is that the presence of children made, or could make, vaudeville houses into family entertainment centers, and that films like *Cinderella* especially appealed to them.⁸ *Cinderella* could even serve as a featured act or "headliner" because it seemed to achieve such a high standard of "reproduction" (which included hand-colored costumes) and ran four hundred feet in length (six or seven minutes). Finally, its maker, although unacknowledged at the time, was not American but French, the Paris magician Georges Méliès.

GUARANTEEING THE QUALITY OF EARLY MOVING PICTURES: FROM APPARATUSES TO EXHIBITION SERVICES

Before 1900, the moving pictures that audiences viewed in vaudeville houses, dime museums, summer amusement parks, tent shows, church halls, and legitimate theaters were "authorized" in several ways.⁹ In the beginning, the apparatus itself did the performing, through its uncanny power to animate pictures as a new kind of attraction, within what Neil Harris once called the "operational aesthetic."¹⁰ In vaudeville houses and theaters across the country, it either shared the bill with more familiar attractions or starred as the principal feature. As late as April 1897, for instance, the American Biograph machine was in its fifth month at Keith's New Union Square house in New York; nearby, the Lumière Cinematograph was still being featured at Proctor's and the Pleasure Palace.¹¹ A month later, the Grand Opera House in Des Moines was advertising Edison's Projecting Kinetoscope as the sole attraction on a three-day program.¹² By then, as Musser has shown, the locus of authority for moving pictures was shifting to traveling exhibitors, many

of whom already had made a name for themselves as illustrated lecturers, using magic lantern slides and phonographs.¹³ The most successful of these undoubtedly was Lyman Howe, who soon built up a circuit of annual concert tours for the so-called cultural elite throughout the Northeast—in local opera houses, theaters, churches, and town halls. In his advertising, Howe's name became the stable, reliable guarantee of quality entertainment, as his tours changed from "Animotiscope" and "War-Graph" exhibitions to "High-Class Moving Pictures."¹⁴ The trajectory was the same for others like Burton Holmes, whose career as an illustrated lecturer began at the Brooklyn Institute, or even D.W. Robertson, who, although operating out of New York with Edison projectors, chiefly toured summer Chautauquas and other church groups in the Midwest.¹⁵ In sum, as the moving picture apparatus grew familiar, the chief performer on many stages once again became human, in the shape of the traveling showman.

By 1900, however, a third locus of authority was on the ascendant. This was the exhibition service that could furnish a projector and projectionist, along with a series of moving pictures (renewed each week, often by means of railway transport), to a vaudeville house not just for special occasions but throughout its annual season.¹⁶ American Biograph, for instance, negotiated an exclusive contract with the Keith circuit of "high-class" vaudeville houses (in the Northeast) to exhibit its special 68mm films. But most of the exhibition services supplied 35mm films, and to a more widely distributed clientele. Some followed Biograph's example and had an exclusive contract with a major vaudeville circuit: from headquarters in Chicago, George Spoor supplied a "kinodrome" service to Orpheum houses throughout the Midwest.¹⁷ Others aligned themselves with a single vaudeville entrepreneur: William Paley's Kalatechnoscope served all four Proctor's houses in New York. Still others developed their own network of contracts: starting at Huber's Museum in New York, Percival Waters's Kinetograph Company (allied with Edison) reached out to vaudeville houses from Worcester to Toronto.¹⁸ It was American Vitagraph, however, that established the most extensive service, beginning with an exclusive contract at Tony Pastor's in New York.¹⁹ Soon the company had projection units, linked by railway arteries, in unaffiliated houses from Boston to Atlantic City, from Pittsburgh to Detroit. Based on its experience at West End Park in New Orleans, it also may have been the first to recognize the summer amusement park as a profitable vaudeville venue. If, indeed, motion pictures were a "great boon" to vaudeville managers, as *Billboard* claimed in December 1900,²⁰ it was due in large part to exhibition services like the American Vitagraph or the kinodrome, which guaranteed that the film show would consistently please their regular clientele.

EXPANDING THE CINEMA MARKET THROUGH VAUDEVILLE

Over the next three years, the growing market for moving pictures was closely tied to the expansion of vaudeville.²¹ By January 1901, according to *Billboard*, there

were at least seventy major vaudeville houses in the United States and Canada, predominantly in the Northeast and Midwest.²² Most of these theaters offered “high-class” vaudeville, that is, long programs of “respectable” variety acts that could attract middle-class patrons, “with special provision made,” as a Keith’s ad in *The Club Woman* discreetly put it, “for the accommodation and comfort of ladies and children.”²³ Such a program might include as many as fifteen acts (common on the Keith circuit of houses) or as few as eight or nine (on the Orpheum circuit). Moving pictures usually occupied the last act on a vaudeville bill, although certain subjects such as *Cinderella* could be positioned as headliners. According to sources that long dominated histories of early American cinema, this put moving pictures in the category of the “chaser,” a final act so poor that it served to trick an audience into leaving the theater and making room for a fresh one.²⁴ Allen’s research has shown, however, that the term was hardly derogatory, at least for the Keith and Orpheum circuits, and usually meant an inexpensive or “medium” act (often silent, one not based on dialogue or monologue) that signaled the end of a show or filled the slack time in “continuous” shows (allowing people to move in and out of houses at their leisure).²⁵ For some, this even meant that moving pictures could serve as the “big flash” that closed a performance, “filling all spectators with the memory of a show that had been action-packed to the last moment.”²⁶ Whatever function the chaser served—and distinctions may have depended on the quality of film subjects shown in any particular week—moving pictures remained a reliably popular vaudeville act.

Significantly, a new venue for moving pictures opened up during this period in what soon was called “cheap” vaudeville or “family” vaudeville. These theaters tended to be smaller and ran shorter programs of just five or six acts, and their lower ticket costs also made them more accessible to working-class and, perhaps more significant, white-collar audiences.²⁷ Allen first called attention to cheap vaudeville’s rapid development but mistakenly claimed that moving pictures were not shown there before 1906.²⁸ He also followed other historians who located its origins on the West Coast (particularly in the Northwest), but cheap vaudeville also emerged in the Northeast and Midwest.²⁹ In the fall of 1901, for instance, in the textile factory town of Lowell, Massachusetts, both the Boston and People’s showed “bioscope” moving pictures as the last of five or six acts.³⁰ So did the Gem and Mechanic’s Hall in nearby Lynn, whose principal audience was the families of shoe factory workers.³¹ But such houses also were a feature attraction in summer amusement parks (now growing in number following the success of Steeplechase on Coney Island and the Chutes and Sans Souci in Chicago).³² Ingersoll Park, which opened on the west side of Des Moines in June 1901, offers a good example of this cheap vaudeville: its weekly bill comprised five or six acts, and its ads targeted the working-class population of the city’s east side—encouraging them to use the crosstown trolley cars of the company that built the park.³³ And the closing act, in both 1901 and 1902, was Selig’s Polyscope (another exhibition service headquartered in Chicago). Most likely, these were the “small

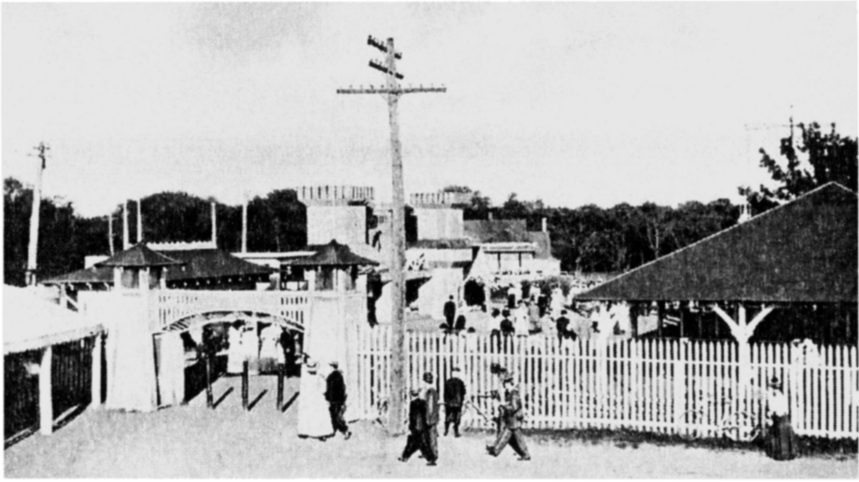


Figure 1. Postcard of Ingersoll Park Entrance (Des Moines), ca. 1902.

exhibitors” that, in the *Clipper*’s words, served “the general mass of the public” throughout the country.³⁴

Summer parks, those “laboratories of the new mass culture,” in John Kasson’s insightful phrase, seem to have become an established venue for moving pictures by the summer of 1902.³⁵ Vitagraph exploited them with some regularity, perhaps drawing on its long experience at West End Park in New Orleans. That summer, for instance, the company’s films were found on vaudeville programs in parks from Atlantic City and Baltimore to Toronto. But Spoor’s kinodrome matched its advance with park bookings from Sandusky and Toledo, Ohio, to Evansville, Indiana. Once having fended off Edison’s patent suit, in March 1902, Biograph also began to target the “managers of summer parks” for “standard size sprocket films” (35mm prints) of its catalog titles. Its “biographet” projector (and films) began showing up in parks from Birmingham, Alabama, to London, Ontario. Through *Billboard* specifically, Lubin, too, began advertising its “cineograph” projector (and films) to “park managers and street fair men.” Small businessmen also started up local exhibition services. W.A. Reed, for instance, operated his “komo-graph” in several parks in Boston, as well as at Sea View, near Portland, Maine; Prof. Atwood, who had been showing moving pictures in Lynn vaudeville houses, now was projecting them for vacationers at the Seaside Theatre, Marblehead.³⁶ As a further sign of their importance, for the first time, a major poster printer, Hennegan and Company (Cincinnati), now offered a “new line” of “moving picture paper” to its clients.³⁷

By the end of that summer, moving pictures were “coining” so much money in the parks, as both Edison and Lubin ads put it, that they helped fuel a further

boom in both cheap and high-class vaudeville houses. In Evansville, for instance, the kinodrome simply shifted from Oak Summit Park to the new Park Theatre. Atwood moved from Seaside to the new Grover's Garden Theatre in Lynn; Reed's komograph took up new quarters at the Boulevard Theatre in Boston. Vitagraph added several new houses to its service: S. Z. Poli's two big theaters in New Haven and Bridgeport, the smaller Bon Ton in Jersey City, and (at least briefly) Dixie's Orpheum in Scranton.³⁸ On the opposite coast, it was that summer that cheap vaudeville (with moving pictures) really established itself in the Northwest. One of the first houses to make an impact was A. S. Rohrer's La Petite Theatre in Seattle, which may have used an Edison kinetograph to show its moving pictures; but the model was soon followed by the Edison Theatre (with its "projectoscope"). And the *Clipper* described La Petite's initial bills that June as "high class vaudeville, catering to lady audiences."³⁹ This phrase would be picked up and repeated over the course of the next year, as cheap vaudeville houses throughout the country (in and out of the summer parks) promoted moving pictures as part of what one Council Bluffs ad described as a "cultured rendezvous for ladies and children."⁴⁰

MÉLIÈS WORKS HIS MAGIC ON THE NEW WORLD

Assuming there was indeed some basis for *Billboard's* claim, made as early as December 1900, that motion pictures were a "great boon to the vaudeville manager," there still is the question of whether French films were an unstated referent in that claim. Was a film like *Cinderella*, for instance, an anomaly or something closer to the norm? Some years ago, Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault coined the still useful term *cinema of attractions* to describe the first ten years of cinema history, a period in which moving pictures served as one of a variety of attractions within a wide range of public amusements, especially vaudeville.⁴¹ The films, too, came in such variety in order to fulfill the sense of novelty, change, and "shocking" juxtaposition that many sought in weekly vaudeville programs.

From 1900 through 1902, all kinds of films were advertised in the trade press and occasionally even cited in specific exhibition venues. Lubin, Selig, and Edison continued to promote boxing matches, for instance, but these usually were shown in burlesque houses, such as the Court Street or Lafayette in Buffalo. *Actualités*, or current events, such as Edison's films of President McKinley's funeral, remained timely attractions, watched with "deep interest" at Proctor's and Pastor's in New York, Méliès's *Coronation of King Edward VII*, or French views of Mount Pelée's volcanic eruption on Martinique.⁴² The latter two films were shown widely across the continent, including park venues in Kansas City and Des Moines, and were featured for two weeks at the annual International Exhibition, in Saint Johns, Nova Scotia.⁴³ Local *faits divers* sometimes also caught the trade press's attention, but more rarely now; although advertised by both Edison and Lubin, comic subjects, similarly, received scant notice.⁴⁴ What did excite consistent interest, however, were "magical subjects" or "mysterious films,"⁴⁵ especially the longer spectacle

plays like *Cinderella*, nearly all of them French. These were the real boon to vaudeville.

One way to gauge this interest is to track the French films that gained notices, in the trade press and local papers, between 1900 and 1902. *Cinderella*, for instance, not only played for at least a month at Tony Pastor's in New York; the following summer it played for three weeks without losing any "of its extraordinary popularity" at the West End in New Orleans, and that Christmas it was the "most notable feature of the week" at Heck's Wonder World in Cincinnati.⁴⁶ In May 1901, Méliès's long spectacle film, *Joan of Arc*, was "warmly applauded," again at Pastor's; in June, Vitagraph made it "one of the regular features" of the West End's weekly summer programs.⁴⁷ Six months later, another Méliès *féerie*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, was singled out at the Orpheum in Brooklyn; and when Vitagraph began exhibiting at the Avenue in Detroit, in February 1902, *Little Red Riding Hood* was the first film it put up on the screen. Later that spring, a new Méliès *féerie*, *Bluebeard*, not only turned up at the Avenue and at Shea's Garden in Buffalo⁴⁸ but also was held over for an extra week at Huber's Museum in New York. That summer, along with views of Mount Pelée's eruption, the Polyscope presented Pathé's long fairy play, *Aladdin and His Lamp*, at Ingersoll Park in Des Moines.⁴⁹ All this would culminate, in the fall and winter of 1902–1903, with the enthusiastic reception given to Méliès's *A Trip to the Moon*, which Kleine would later recall as the first important story film on the American market.⁵⁰

The level of attention this film garnered in the trade press was unprecedented. In their weekly listing of vaudeville programs that season, both the *Clipper* and *Billboard* cited at least fifty houses showing moving pictures on a regular basis. These citations only once mentioned a boxing film, Lubin's *Jeffries-Fitzsimmons Fight*, playing at the Crystal, a burlesque house in Lowell. They referred perhaps ten times to specific travel views, such as *A Trip through Algiers*, at the Orpheum in Brooklyn, or *A Trip through Europe*, at the Empire in Cleveland, most of them unacknowledged Pathé subjects.⁵¹ But the majority referred to just one film, *A Trip to the Moon*. There were seven alone in November: from the Avenue in Detroit and Chase's in Washington to Poli's in New Haven and Hurtig & Seamons in Harlem (all using Vitagraph's exhibition service). At the Orpheum in Kansas City, *A Trip to the Moon* was a "decided feature" of the kinodrome; at the Empire in Cleveland and then at the St. Charles Orpheum in New Orleans, it was "the best [film] ever seen."⁵² The film's popularity extended to cheap vaudeville as well: in early December it proved "one of the hits" at Grover's Garden in Lynn. When Keith's Union Square Theatre in New York switched its exhibition service from Biograph to Vitagraph in early April 1903, one of the first programs included *A Trip to the Moon*—"the best moving picture film which I have ever seen," manager S. K. Hodgdon reported, "it held the audience to the finish and was received with a hearty round of applause."⁵³ Finally, in Los Angeles, when T. L. Talley reopened his "vaudeville of moving pictures," the Electric Theater, in January 1903, he often featured the film during its first two months of operation, identified

SEND FOR OUR LATEST SUPPLEMENTS DESCRIBING
JACK AND THE BEANSTALK, **MARTINIQUE**, **CORONATION**, **WAR DANCE** FILMS AND **TWO HUNDRED**
 Other Comic and Mysterious Pictures. The Greatest Films Ever Treated Out,
CORONATION OF KING EDWARD. Motion Picture Film of the Coronation of King Edward,
 which took place on Aug. 9, 1902, Now Ready for Issue.
THE MONEY MAKERS OF THE HOUR.

EDISON

PROJECTING KINETOSCOPE

is universally approved by the Professional Exhibitor. Full particulars in NEW CATALOGUE.

The Latest Sensation in Motion Pictures,
A VOYAGE TO THE MOON 850 feet. Price \$127.50
 Price, Colored, \$367.50

NEW MARTINIQUE PICTURES.
 Reports from Leading Exhibitors tell us that the Mt. Pelée Films are Simply Ceiling Money
 for our staff photographers have returned from Martinique with the most
 sensational and have brought with them a complete series of typical and genuine
 Martinique films which, when shown in connection with our great picture of
 the volcanic eruption and the destruction of St. Pierre, will make a show in
 themselves.

See Write for New Supplement Giving Full Description of These Films.

JACK AND THE BEANSTALK.
 Code word (unassessable), length 600 ft. Class A, \$11.75
 THIN FILM UPPER SILKAT IMPROVED WITH COLORING \$10.00
 Price for coloring complete, including background and all details, \$16.00
 Price for coloring figure only, with beautiful tinted, \$3.00

EDISON MFG. CO., Main Office and Factory:
 NEW YORK OFFICE AND RETAIL SALEROOM, 41 E. 34th STREET.
 CHICAGO OFFICE, 131 WABASH AVE.
 FOREIGN DEPARTMENT, 45 CHAMBERS STREET, NEW YORK.
 PACIFIC COAST SELLING AGENT, PETER WALSH & CO., 20 MARKET STREET, SAN FRANCISCO, CAL.
 LONDON OFFICE, 16 CHANCERY LANE, LONDON, W. U. ENGLAND.

BIOGRAPH

Greatest of All Motion-Picture Devices.

SPECIAL PRIZE for a continuous Engagement of 10 Weeks \$50.00 per Week, and
 Transportation for Man, Machine and Film, Regular Price, \$10.00 per week.
 The Mutoscope and Biograph Machine, PER HOUR, or any other machine
 using standard size sprocket film, \$10.00 a week for an engagement of a
 consecutive weeks. All Warwick and Standard Size Films from Biograph Ve-
 nance, 10c. per ft.

IMPORTANT NOTICE.
 Melie's Magnificent Spectacle,
A TRIP TO THE MOON
 The Most Extraordinary Moving Picture Production the World has Ever
 Known. "Short, Long, Good for nothing at all" price and full particulars.

MUTOSCOPES
 THE BEST MONEY GETTER OF ALL SLOT MACHINES.
No More Second Hand Machines.
 Our Last CLIPPER Ad. Cleared Them All Out.
PLENTY OF NEW MACHINES AT \$15.
American Mutoscope and Biograph Co.
 411 BROADWAY, NEW YORK.
 CHICAGO BRANCH, 125 CLARK STREET.

Figure 2. Edison and Biograph ads, *New York Clipper* (4 October 1902), 712.

Méliès (from Paris) as its creator, and called it "the most wonderful subject ever attempted in moving pictures."⁵⁴

Another, more indirect way to gauge exhibitor interest is to look at the ads that Edison, Lubin, Selig, and Biograph placed in the trade press, particularly in the *Clipper*. For two years after the opening of *Cinderella* at Pastor's, only one subject was promoted more often than Méliès's spectacle films: the *Passion Play of Oberammergau*.⁵⁵ In March 1902, when Biograph won a temporary legal decision in the patents war initiated by Edison,⁵⁶ none of the American companies felt secure

NORTH, — SOUTH, — EAST — and — WEST!

The American Vitagraph

IS NOW ENGAGED BY ALL THE
LEADING THEATRES And will be featured at the Best
SUMMER PARKS.
WORTH BOOKING and WORTH KEEPING.

Our prices have never been so low as now. It is a certainty that we receive just the same amount per week NOW as we did five years ago. We have no BARGAIN COUNTER RATES! Cheap competition has increased our business!

Hanging from the West Remote Corners of the Globe in Every Day Local Views in your own town.
ALL THE LATEST "NEWS" PICTURES.
ALL THE NEWEST PATHEMONTES.

AMERICAN VITAGRAPH

10,000 Different Subjects,
500 HEADLINE ATTRACTIONS!
ALL NEW! ALL NEW!

GREATEST EXHIBITION LIST ON EARTH!

ROBINSON CRUSOE,
CULLIVER'S TRAVELS,
LIFE OF AN AMERICAN FIREMAN,
AFTER DARK—LIFE OF A LONDON "BOBBY,"
THE WORKMAN'S PARADISE.

THE LITTLE MATCH SELLER,
LIFE OF A LONDON FIREMAN,
THE FAIRY GODMOTHER,
THE DOG'S FUNERAL,
A CHRISTMAS STORY FOR CHILDREN,
PUSH BALL CONTESTS AT THE CRYSTAL PALACE,
MOTHER GOOSE NURSERY RHYMES,
THE SOLDIER'S RETURN,
Jules Verne's Wonderful Story,
"A JOURNEY TO LUNA,"
SIX SISTERS DAINES,
Most Marvelous Acrobatic Act on Earth:

ALI BABA AND THE FORTY THIEVES,
SAMPSON AND DELILAH,
THE ENCHANTED CUP,

MAN'S FAITHFUL FRIEND—Prize Winners at the recent Dog Show.
THE ASCENT OF MOUNT BLANC,
TRIP TO THE LONDON ZOO,
THRILLING LOGGING SCENES IN CANADA,
HORSE BREAKING, SALMON SPEARING and
VIEWS OF THE GREAT NORTHWEST,
NEW KLONDYKE SERIES,
GERMANY AND THE RHINE,
THE VITAGRAPH IN ALGIERS,
CAIRO AND THE ANCIENT PYRAMIDS,
A JOURNEY THROUGH INDIA,
THE RECENT UPRISING IN MOROCCO,
MAGNIFICENT DELHI DURBAR,
EGYPT AND THE NILE,
AND IN FACT, VIEWS FROM EVERY COUNTRY ON THE GLOBE.

NOTE:—WE ARE EXHIBITORS ONLY.

WE DO NOT HIRE OUT OUR PATHEMONTES' INTERESTS BY SELLING OUR FILMS.
Theatres and Parks Engaging the Vitagraph are SUPPLIED WITH EXCLUSIVE PICTURES and an Entirely NEW SHOW Every Week.

MAIN OFFICE, MORTON BUILDING,
116 NASSAU STREET, N. Y. Telephone—2754 Jabs.
Cable Address: "Vitagraph."

Figure 3. Vitagraph ad, *New York Clipper* (21 March 1903), 108.

enough to rush into producing more films; instead they opted to buy and/or dupe "foreign" subjects from Europe. Biograph, for instance, sold itself as the "sole agent" for "original" Warwick Films and Méliès "Star" Films. Edison and Lubin offered dupes of Méliès subjects for summer amusement parks and then vied with one another in promoting films of the Martinique disaster (made by either Méliès or Pathé) as products of their own photographers.⁵⁷ Selig said it was making "a speciality of mysterious films," among them Pathé's biblical subject, *The Prodigal Son*.⁵⁸ That fall, every company had its own version of *A Trip to the Moon*, but only Biograph identified the film as "Méliès's Magnificent Spectacle"—in one of the earliest references to Méliès's cultural capital in the United States.⁵⁹ For the first time, also, both Biograph and Edison began to advertise Pathé films (without identifying their maker, of course): "a new series sensation," *The Downward Path*, and a "new . . . spectacular production," *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*.⁶⁰ By January 1903, Edison and Lubin were listing the titles of short French "mysterious" films such as *Magical Egg*, *Wonderful Suspension and Evolution*, and *The Resourceful Waiter*. The following spring, when Vitagraph replaced Biograph on the Keith vaudeville circuit and began promoting itself as the leading exhibition service for theaters and summer parks (although that honor equally may have gone

to the kinodrome), at least half the films the company featured as “spectaculars” or headliners came from Méliès and Pathé.

MARKETING FRENCH FILMS FOR VAUDEVILLE

These trade press notices and ads give some sense of how significant the French “spectaculars” were in generating interest in moving pictures on vaudeville programs. The way they were marketed, however, suggests another reason for their importance. Perhaps the first instance of this approach comes in a December 1900 Edison ad that featured three titles as especially apt for the Christmas season (a recently invented, commercial tradition), with two of them by Méliès: *Cinderella* and *Astronomer’s Dream*.⁶¹ A year later, Edison promoted Méliès’s *Little Red Riding Hood* for “the holiday season” but again included *Cinderella* as a suitable subject.⁶² The following summer, Lubin listed both films in its ads for *Bluebeard*, *Martinique Disaster*, and *Jack and the Beanstalk* (all dupes, of course), the last of which was an Edison attempt to imitate Méliès. And Edison itself advertised the same Méliès titles once again as “Christmas pictures” in late 1902.⁶³ What this meant was that, unlike *actualités*, Méliès’s spectacle films could have a relatively long shelf life; like the best live acts in vaudeville, they offered repeated performances, from one season to the next. In other words, once acquired and as long as the print held up, a Méliès moving picture could be a continuing source of profitable exploitation. D. F. Grauman of San Francisco testified retrospectively to this advantage in calling *A Trip to the Moon* “one of the funniest subjects ever shown at the Unique,” his vaudeville house: it created such a sensation that he “showed it a great many times.”⁶⁴

That it was French films, not just “European imports,” that fueled what Musser concludes was, by 1902–1903, “a growing demand for story films” on the American market probably should come as no surprise.⁶⁵ By then, Méliès and Pathé were perhaps the world’s biggest producers of films (especially long spectacle films), so they could more or less guarantee a supply of product in quantity. Moreover, the French films meshed smoothly with certain practices that were already well established in American vaudeville. One was the large number of “foreign” acts on “high-class” programs, acts that could be exploited for their “artistic” and/or “exotic” appeal. This had been the case when the Lumière Cinematograph premiered at Keith’s Union Square Theatre in 1896 and went on, briefly, to become a regular feature at Proctor’s, as well as at Koster & Bial’s (which specifically advertised “great foreign stars” like Yvette Guilbert or “the latest sensation from Paris”).⁶⁶ It was still the case five years later, particularly on the Keith circuit, then still a model for vaudeville programs. When Méliès had his brother Gaston open a sales office and printing laboratory in New York in May 1903, he was seeking not only to curtail the circulation of “bad and fraudulent copies” of “genuine and original ‘Star’ Films” but also to promote himself as a Paris inventor and theater proprietor who could supply, on a consistent basis, quality foreign acts for American vaudeville.⁶⁷

SEND FOR OUR LATEST SUPPLEMENTS DESCRIBING
JACK AND THE BEANSTALK, Martinique, Coronation, War Game Films and Two Hundred
 Other Comic and Mysterious Pictures. The Greatest Films Ever Turned Out,
CORONATION OF KING EDWARD, Motion Picture Films of the Coronation of King Edward 7th,
 which took place on Aug. 9, 1902, Now Ready for Delivery.
THE MONEY MAKERS OF THE HOUR.

EDISON

PROJECTING KINETOSCOPE

Is universally approved by the Professional Exhibitor. Full particulars in NEW CATALOGUE 111.

The Latest Sensation in Motion Pictures,

A VOYAGE TO THE MOON 850 feet. Price \$127.50
 Price, Colored, \$367.50

New and Original Moving Picture Spectacular Production.

ALI BABA AND THE FORTY THIEVES.
 600 FEET, CLASS A, \$90.00.

NEW MARTINIQUE PICTURES.

Reports from Leading Exhibitors tell us that the Mt. Pelée Films are Simply Coining Money

Our staff photographers have returned from Martinique on the S.S. Korona, and have brought with them a complete series of typical and genuine Martinique films, which, when shown in connection with our great pictures of the volcanic eruption and the destruction of St. Pierre, will make a show in themselves.

See Write for New Supplement Giving Full Description of All These Films.

JACK AND THE BEANSTALK

Is predicted the greatest Christmas scene yet prepared. It is a hit when made from our original and perfect negative, and when shown in our perfect color.
 Price plain, 645 feet, Class A, Code word (Unmeasured)..... \$93.25
 Price for coloring complete, including background and all details..... 140.00
 Price for coloring figures only, with beanstalk tinted..... 85.00

Now is the Time to Order Your Christmas Pictures.

JACK AND THE BEANSTALK.

THE CHRISTMAS DREAM.

CINDERELLA AND THE GLASS SLIPPER.

LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD.

SANTA CLAUS' VISIT.

And a large number of other appropriate pictures.

EDISON MFG. CO., Main Office and Factory:
 ORANGE, N. J., U. S. A.

NEW YORK OFFICE AND RETAIL SALESROOM, 41 E. 25th STREET.

CHICAGO OFFICE, 144 WABASH AVE.

PACIFIC COAST SELLING AGENT, PETER BACIGALUPI, 808 MARKET STREET, SAN FRANCISCO, CAL.

LONDON OFFICE, 56 CHANCERY LANE, LONDON, W. C., ENGLAND.

Figure 4. Edison ad, *New York Clipper* (15 November 1902), 712.

Another practice was program bookings that could appeal specifically to women and children. This was something, Musser recently suggested, that American producers seemed slow to recognize, or at least plan for, as an investment opportunity.⁶⁸ The reason could be a lingering assumption that the cheap amusements for which they made and sold both apparatuses and films were primarily masculine spaces of leisure. With its boxing films, for instance, Lubin consistently targeted burlesque houses and other venues catering to a working-class male audience. Edison, it should be remembered, first tried to exploit moving pictures in kinetoscope or peep-show parlors (a variation on the phonograph parlor), a move that Biograph then imitated.⁶⁹ However important the parlors briefly may have been as “drop-in” centers “offering entertainment in compact packages” for a diverse clientele in downtown business districts, David Nasaw argues, by 1900

they were being transformed into penny arcades that cultivated a male-only crowd.⁷⁰ In Indianapolis, for instance, arcades first “were patronized liberally by the tougher element of the city”; in New York, they could raise the ire of middle-class reformers when, as on Coney Island, the “disgusting photographs” of their peep-show machines inadvertently attracted women and children.⁷¹ Some observers flatly linked the arcade and the saloon, which was anything but a “family resort.”⁷² Herbert Mills, an early arcade entrepreneur, claimed that when he entered the business in 1901, “it was essential that the operator be a man of extreme sporting proclivities.”⁷³ The clientele of the arcades would shift and expand within a few years, but that would come as a delayed response to the feminization of cheap amusements generally, especially to vaudeville and its unusual growth and popularity.

If Edison, Lubin, and Biograph seemed unable to adapt quickly to this change, perhaps they acted prudently in the short term, as manufacturers, in buying and selling “foreign” products. Whatever the case, they seemed slow to realize that vaudeville, whether of the high-class or cheap family variety, inhabited the larger emergent space of mass consumption (encompassing both the middle class and working class, but perhaps most crucially the aspiring class of white-collar families), where women, according to *Printer’s Ink*, already did “75 to 90 per cent” of the shopping.⁷⁴ Indeed, as “The Matinee Girl,” a lighthearted 1897 article in *Munsey’s* had to admit, “woman is the mainstay of the amusement business.”⁷⁵ This, then, was a feminized cultural space of leisure largely defined by the presence of women and children.⁷⁶ For children, who tended to be afternoon customers, may well have been important as regulars, especially on the Keith circuit, if only to incite the rest of the family to attend the evening program.⁷⁷ The “dear old stories” of the Méliès and Pathé spectacle films turned out to be perfectly suited “treats” for such “regulars,” as Vitagraph had claimed at least as early as 1900, with its first “hit,” *Cinderella*.⁷⁸ Throughout 1902 and 1903, Pathé added more and more such story films to its catalog of available titles, from *Spring Fairy* and *Fairy of the Black Rocks* to *Sleeping Beauty* and *Puss-in-Boots*. In the fall of 1903, Méliès’s latest “spectacular,” *Fairyland* (which, according to the company’s publicity, “took three months” to make, using “the leading pantomimists of Paris”), was an even bigger hit than *A Trip to the Moon* in Keith houses from New York to Cleveland, playing three weeks straight, for instance, in the New Theatre in Philadelphia.⁷⁹ In Providence, the local newspapers pointedly reported that the “weird and gorgeous moving pictures” called *Fairyland* “made quite a stir” at Keith’s, most notably “among the little people.”⁸⁰

Trick or treat? The French, unlike their American competitors, cannily elided the difference. Within the expanding markets of mass consumption in the United States, both Méliès and Pathé turned the tricks and transformations of their new trade into magically renewable treats.

DOCUMENT 1

"Clever Moving Pictures," *Los Angeles Times* (11 October 1903), 6.2

A set of moving pictures called "Fairyland," shown at the Lyric Theatre in this city now, is an interesting exhibit of the limits to which moving picture-making can be carried in the hands of experts equipped with time and money to carry out their devices.

In brief, "Fairyland" relates an old fairy story—of how the prince and the princess are betrothed, of the wiles of a witch, of spells thrown over both prince and princess by her, and then a long series of impossible and supernatural happenings supposed to come to these parties.

The series was made on a large Paris stage, with an infinite variety of mechanical and scenic accessories. According to statements of the manager, people from seventeen Parisian theaters were engaged in the photographic production, and rehearsals have been going on since March. It is said that the same set was produced simultaneously in London, Paris, and New York in the month of September. T. L. Talley, manager of the Lyric, claims to have the only film of its kind in the West.

The action and the various scenic enchantments, of course impossible before an audience, who would have to see the mechanical makeshifts, is an easy thing for the biograph. There are no curtains or changes of scene. Although there are numerous sets, all fade into each other, just as the fairyland scene is supposed to do.

Perhaps the best one is that representing the sinking of a ship, with the aftermath that comes to the sailors. These are rescued by a mermaid queen, who comes with a chariot drawn by great crabs to release them from the spell of the water. By some interposition of an aquarium before the films, when these were exposed, pictures of real fish, swimming around in real water, are given. There is also a huge devil-fish, constantly waving its arms about the drowning mariners.

Various submarine scenes are afterward shown, always with the same live fish photographically exhibited. Some of the sets are evidently of careful and painstaking design, and show considerable cleverness.

Another pretty picture is that of a castle interior, with all its woodwork in flames, and the hero coming to rescue the princess, "just in time." Through smoke and flame, with red fire flashing around them, they pass unscathed, although the woodwork is seen to fall on all sides. By double exposures such a thing, of course impossible of accomplishment on a real stage, is made pictorially picturesque in this way. . . .

ENTR'ACTE 1

Marketing Films as a Product Category

Brand Names and Trademarks

What's in a name, a brand, a mark, especially one that seems to be everywhere and available to everyone? That is something often ignored yet crucial to the American cinema's emergence. Here, again, the point is to turn our attention from production (and the litigation over patents and copyrights that sought to protect it) to consumption and the efforts to both stimulate and control that consumption through marketing.¹ What we ignore is what Susan Strasser calls national "product education," an essential component of the new system of mass marketing being put in place at the turn of the last century.² Talking about his success with Quaker Oats, Henry Crowell said simply that his aim "was to do educational and constructive work so as to awaken an interest in and create a demand for cereals where none existed."³ Much like packaged cereals, soups, and soaps, in other words, moving pictures had to be promoted as a new "product category" worthy of being accepted as a regularly repeated cultural experience in cheap amusements everywhere.

Exhibition services such as American Vitagraph and the kinodrome had done this so successfully, with just enough support from manufacturers, that, as vaudeville steadily expanded, so did the market for moving pictures. By 1903, a new and improved means of promoting and marketing was taking shape. This, of course, was advertising, whose success in stimulating "new needs and new desires through visual fascination" now made it a major institution of cultural hegemony.⁴ Only recently had advertising in mass magazines and on billboards "educated" Americans, through a process of "*incremental* repetition," writes Ohmann, to connect their expectations about a product with recurring symbols or brands.⁵ "Once we skipped [ads] unless some want compelled us," quipped a writer in *Harper's Weekly* (1897), "while now we read [them] to find out what we really want."⁶ The very foundation of American business, a later treatise asserted, was "built upon the significance and guaranty conveyed to the purchasing public through the medium of those particular marks, names, and symbols."⁷ The "good will value" of the brand name and trademark now assumed an increasing importance for moving pictures, particularly as the new industry began to concentrate on the commerce of story films. Yet striking differences developed between American and French manufacturers in how they used a brand for the purposes of exploitation.⁸

Surprisingly, at first American companies exploited the "name on the label" in a rather limited fashion. The names of Edison, Biograph, and

Lubin, for instance, appeared in trade press ads in the *Clipper* and *Billboard*, which circulated to a wide range of exhibitors and showmen. These served to guarantee, more or less, the quality of the film reel(s) offered for sale that week or month. This use of brand names may have stemmed from Edison's general prominence on the market. Through such new products as electric lightbulbs and phonographs, the Edison name had become a mark as familiar as that of Ivory Soap, Quaker Oats, or Kodak.⁹ Edison's strategy for films as a product category, however, was not so much to "brand" each commodity sold (or even copyright its materiality) but rather to monopolize the commerce in films through exclusive patents on apparatuses involved in their production and exhibition.¹⁰ Because films were consumed in cheap amusements, and not in the home, supposedly only those who managed that public space needed to be assured, by the Edison name, of product quality.

Yet Edison films did appeal directly to audiences in at least two ways. Musser has shown that the company tended to manufacture films with stories that were already familiar—and thus "readable"—to American audiences.¹¹ In other words, Edison assumed a cinema market that marginalized or even excluded recent immigrants. Many of these films were based on stage plays, from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) to *The Miller's Daughter* (1905), or were adapted from vaudeville sketches, such as *The Ex-Convict* (1904). Some, however, exploited the trademarks of well-known advertising campaigns: *A Romance of the Rail* (1903), for instance, sent a white-gowned Phoebe Snow, the chief promotional figure of the Lackawanna Railroad (a major carrier of anthracite coal), through a whirlwind courtship, spoofing the romance associated with train travel.¹² Perhaps the most intriguing example of this exploitation came in *The Great Train Robbery*, specifically in the emblematic shot of a robber firing point-blank at the spectator that has long been an icon of early cinema history. This famous shot, which Edison even reproduced in its ads, actually was an unacknowledged "dupe" of a widely circulated poster at the time.¹³ The poster was Sam Hoke's "Highwayman" for Gold Dust Powder (a packaged cleanser), which *Billboard* hailed as unusually compelling: one "weak-minded" seamstress in Des Moines, forced to look at it for hours out her apartment window, supposedly was "driven to the verge of insanity."¹⁴ *The Great Train Robbery* impressed itself so deeply on audiences, then, partly because it re-created the shock value of a notorious poster brand.

French film manufacturers, by contrast, put more stock in the "authorizing" power of trademarks. Georges Méliès, for instance, came up with the brand name "Star" Films, for which he could substitute an easily identifiable logo. When Gaston Méliès set up facilities in New York to print and sell "Star" Films, in May 1903, his *Clipper* ads promoted the trademark star as much as the Méliès name in order to authorize the



Figure 5. Gold Dust “Highwayman” poster, *Billboard* (18 May 1901), 3.

company’s products.¹⁵ That star appeared in black in all “Star” Films ads, and its “negative” (a white cutout) was punched into, and later embossed on, the opening frames of every film reel the company sold. Méliès adopted this trademark strategy for several reasons. One, of course, was to counteract Edison’s and Lubin’s extensive practice of duping and selling his films as their own, which reached a crisis point with the phenomenal success of *A Trip to the Moon*. The trademark proved ineffectual for Méliès as a means of asserting ownership (as did copyright), but it did assure the quality of his “original” film subjects in contrast to that of the dupes.¹⁶ Another reason, perhaps, was that Méliès saw his films as artistic creations. The trademark star, Paolo Cherchi Usai argues, was an extension of his signature, allowing him to sign each film

EDISON FILMS

PATENTED AND COPYRIGHTED.


Replete with Thrilling and Exciting Incidents in Fourteen Scenes.

THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY

Was shown to enthusiastic houses during Xmas week in New York at the following theatres:

**Hurtig & Seamon's
Circle Theatre
Proctor's 125th St.**

SEND FOR FULLY
ILLUSTRATED
AND
DESCRIPTIVE
PAMPHLET.



**Keith's 14th St.
Harlem Opera House
Tony Pastor's
Eden Musee
Huber's Museum
Orpheum, Brooklyn
Comedy Theatre
Orpheum Music Hall**

LENGTH, 710
FEET.
PRICE, \$111.
CODE WORD,
VACUNABAN.

Edison Exhibition Kinetoscope, \$115.00. Edison Universal Kinetoscope, \$75.00.

MAIN OFFICE and FACTORY, Orange, N. J.

EDISON MANUFACTURING CO., NEW YORK OFFICE: 83 Chambers St.

OFFICE FOR UNITED KINGDOM: 52 Gray's Inn Road, Holborn, London, W.C., England.

EUROPEAN OFFICE: 32 Rempart Saint Georges, Antwerp, Belg

SELLING AGENTS:

THE KINETOGRAPH CO.....	41 E. 21st St., New York
KLEINE OPTICAL CO.....	52 State St., Chicago, Ill
PETER BACIGALUPI.....	933 Market St., San Francisco, Cal.

Figure 6. Edison ad, *New York Clipper* (9 January 1904), 1113.

print much as an artist would sign a painting or, perhaps more pertinent, a lithograph poster.¹⁷ As a sign of “authorship,” then, this could be read as a literal mark of Méliès’s unique anti-industrial position during the early cinema period.

At the same time, Pathé-Frères adopted a similar strategy of quality guarantee, but for quite different reasons.¹⁸ At least as early as 1903, the French company’s catalogs began to carry an announcement that claimed its own trademark, the Gallic cock or rooster.¹⁹ More important, each film subject bore that trademark (a rooster drawn in profile) on an opening title

★ IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT! ★ From this date, GENUINE and ORIGINAL "Star" Films will be manufactured in this country, and may be purchased direct from the makers through GASTON MÉLIÈS, the General Manager for the United States of

★ WARNING ★ All MÉLIÈS "STAR" FILMS are protected by Copyright and Trade Mark, and we have instructed our attorneys to vigorously prosecute all unauthorized makers, or persons using or having in their possession fraudulent copies.

Until now the firm of GEO. MÉLIÈS has had no Factory in the United States, and almost all of the Magical and Trick Films sold in this country and identified with M. MÉLIÈS' name, such as "The Devil's Castle," "Cloderella," "Red Riding Hood," "Blue Beard," "Jean of Arc," "The Astronomer's Dream," "Gulliver," "Christmas Dream," "Robinson Crusoe," "A TRIP TO THE MOON" and others, have been BAD AND FRAUDULENT COPIES.

GEO. MÉLIÈS
Proprietor and Manager of the ROBERT HOUDIN THEATRE, of PARIS, and the INVENTOR and MAKER of the WORLD FAMOUS
"STAR" FILMS

GASTON MÉLIÈS,
GENERAL MANAGER,
204 E. 38th Street, New York City.
L. GAUMONT'S FILMS, ELGE BRAND

SPECIAL AGENTS
AMERICAN
AUTOSCOPE & BIOGRAPH CO.,
11 East 14th St.,
NEW YORK CITY.
Catalogues and Prices on Application.

SOLE AGENTS FOR

American Headquarters, Offices and Works,
GASTON MÉLIÈS,
GENERAL MANAGER,
204 E. 38th Street, New York City.
L. GAUMONT'S FILMS, ELGE BRAND

★ Film, genuine, marked with this red rooster mark. ★

Figure 7. Méliès "Star" Film ad, *New York Clipper* (6 June 1903), 368.

1172 THE NEW YORK CLIPPER. FEBRUARY 4.

PATHE FILMS
CLASS A. 12 Cents Per Foot.

ALL OUR FILMS COME WITH RED TITLES, AND SHOW OUR TRADE MARK.

COME AND LOOK AT OUR ORIGINAL FILMS AND YOU WILL NEVER BUY "DOUPES."

INNOCENT FLIRTATION . . . 49
PROMPTING PHOTOGRAPH . . . 65
WONDERFUL BEE HIVE (Colored) . . . 246
BURGERS AT WORK . . . 246
FOUNTAINS AT VERSAILLES . . . 196

LIFE OF CHRIST
IN
27 PARTS.
ABOUT 2,000 FEET

FIREWORKS
65 FEET, 612
ALL RED COLORS.
The Greatest Cinematograph Production.
HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.

LOUIS XIV VINTAGE . . . 852
DRAMA IN THE AIR (Sensational) . . . 114
ANTI-SEMITIC ATROCITIES IN RUSSIA . . . 114
CHRISTIANIA TO NORTH POLE . . . 426

NEW CATALOGUE, WITH 150 ILLUSTRATIONS.

PATHE CINEMATOGRAF CO., 42 E. 23d Street, New York.

SELLING AGENTS
KLEINE OPTICAL CO.
88 State Street,
CHICAGO, ILL.
MILES BROS.
216 York Street,
SAN FRANCISCO, CAL.

Figure 8. Pathé ad, *New York Clipper* (4 February 1905), 1172.

card, and in a red tint matching the title's large block letters on a black background.²⁰ Soon Pathé's longer story films, such as *Don Quixote*, *Napoleon*, and *Puss-in-Boots*, also were including intertitle cards (a company innovation), with terse phrases in the same red block letters, accompanied by the red rooster trademark. For Pathé, as for Méliès, the trademark served (not all that effectively) as a deterrent against forgery (Pathé never even bothered to seek the protection of copyright). But the trademark did much more. Unlike its American competitors, whose products circulated chiefly within the North American continent (the border limits of their "readability"), Pathé quickly began marketing its films across the globe (which also meant translating its titles and intertitles into other major languages). Because of its high visibility, the Pathé red rooster traveled as a kind of supersalesman, promoting the excellence and dependability of the company's films to audiences anywhere in the world.²¹ Pathé became perhaps the first film manufacturer to use the trademark much like the American companies selling packaged soaps or cereals: it forged a direct link to

consumers.²² The red rooster gave the French company a singular, fixed identity, distinguishing it from most other companies; and it circulated as a recurring symbol of goodwill that, in guaranteeing the quality of its products' performance on any stage or screen, incited increasing consumer demand.²³