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Reconstructing the Present/Past: Antimodernism and Early Film Reenactments

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**RECONSTRUCTING THE PRESENT/PAST:
ANTIMODERNISM AND EARLY FILM REENACTMENTS**

A Dissertation Presented

by

ALEX WARREN BORDINO

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

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Communication

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ANTIMODERNISM AND EARLY FILM REENACTMENTS**

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ABSTRACT

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ANTIMODERNISM AND EARLY FILM REENACTMENTS

May 2021

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This dissertation examines the cultural history surrounding early film reenactments and elucidates their relationship with modernity. Beginning in the 1890s, motion pictures became part of modern unreality. In a world that seemed increasingly more abstracted from reality, antimodernism emerged in a variety of sectors as a quest toward authenticity. Early film reenactments, despite being ancillary fabrications of real events, aligned with this antimodern sensibility, which would ultimately, and somewhat paradoxically, inform modern culture. The motion picture's appearance of reality at a cultural moment of modern disillusion, or in some cases outright discontent, formulated a simulated version of reality distinct from the quotidian. Yet the search for authenticity through indexical representations ironically informed the increasing virtuality of modern society. In the nineteenth century, both Marx and Nietzsche addressed the inherent contradictions and ironies of modernity, which have yet to be associated with the

development of motion pictures and the telling of nonfictional historical events through this medium. This dissertation outlines three specific themes prevalent across early film reenactments: public executions and lynchings, battle scenes and imperialistic conquest, and Indigenous cultural performances. Each theme demonstrates a desire to reject the unreality of modern experience and reconstruct it by underscoring and fetishizing what are perceived to be primitive behaviors, concomitantly promoting racism, colonialism, imperialism, and American exceptionalism. A close historiographical analysis of realism and fakery throughout this period informs the practice of reenactment in the digital age as we increasingly find the boundary between reality and misinformation difficult to navigate.

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INTRODUCTION

The impulse to reenact events is premised by some degree of resisting present realities. After Minneapolis police officers murdered George Floyd on Memorial Day 2020, resistance to the surging nationwide Black Lives Matter protests took the form of reenactments. Two weeks after the incident, All Lives Matter counter-protesters in southern New Jersey re-created the scene of Floyd's death for an onlooking crowd of Black Lives Matter activists. Protesters on both sides recorded video as the performers interpolated violence into what was otherwise a peaceful protest. Similarly, several weeks later, police officers in Aurora, Colorado jokingly took a photograph reenacting the carotid hold placed on Elijah McClain, who was killed by police officers in Aurora in August 2019, at the location of McClain's memorial. These disturbing incidents were a response to pervasive civil rights activism in the wake of Floyd's murder. As mobilized performative forms, these actions are distinguishable from the sphere of hashtags, where what is said may seem abstract and meaningless. Reenactments offer an authentic tangible experience of the original event, in these cases as a means toward reifying violent activity by the state against individuals of color. While contemporary reenactors of violence use social media to circulate their performances, media producers around the turn of the twentieth century used motion pictures to reconstruct violent historical events.

In this dissertation, I examine the cultural history surrounding early film reenactments and attempt to elucidate their relationship with modernity, in an attempt to draw parallels with contemporary American society. T.J. Jackson Lears outlines how, between 1880 and 1920, modern discontent encouraged many individuals and groups,

primarily of privileged status, to resist the positivism that became associated with modern progress, particularly industrial capitalist progress, throughout the latter nineteenth century. “Antimodernism” is a term that has been used in a variety of contexts—perhaps most notably between the two World Wars by philosophers like Heidegger and those associated with the Frankfurt School, as well as the writings of T.S. Eliot—and generally refers to some degree of resistance to modern progress, whether that progress be technological/industrial, moral/ethical, or social/cultural. Modern art movements were both pessimistic and optimistic about modern progress. Andreas Huyssen challenges the assumption that modernist aesthetics are adversarial to the ideologies associated with modernization and progress, but rather argues that the aesthetic of modernism is “deeply implicated in the processes and pressures of the same mundane modernization it so ostensibly repudiates.”¹ Modern art can therefore be identified by its links to modernity and its deviations from traditional, premodern schools. Antimodern art—for example, Socialist Realism and German Fascism—was associated with a desire to resist modern art and its abstractions from reality, returning to the presumed verisimilitude of traditional, premodern forms.

Beginning in the 1890s, motion pictures, as a new form of technology that was invested in both realism and fantasmatic representations of reality, participated in an antimodern yearning for authenticity, while also contributing to racism, colonialism, and the modern sense of unreality more generally. For Lears, antimodernism around the turn

¹ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 56.

of the twentieth century involved a “yearning for authentic experience” as an alternative to “modern unreality,” and “the desire to recombine a fragmented self and re-create a problematic reality through aggressive action.”² This general notion is foundational to modern thought. Both Marx and Nietzsche addressed the inherent contradictions and ironies of modernity.³ But antimodernism has yet to be associated with the development of motion pictures and the telling of nonfictional historical events through this medium. Reenactments of real events, by nature, recontextualize reality and concomitantly alter the public perception of such events. Despite reconstructing reality to an extent, as is inherent in its formula, the prevalence early motion picture reenactments, and more specifically their propensity for re-creating reality through aggression, as Lears puts it, also aligned with an antimodern yearning for authentic experience. By demonstrating the thematic alignment between early film reenactments and antimodern sensibilities, particularly as they regard racial inequality, I argue that the cinematic reconstruction of events was an impulse that sought to create something seemingly more real, or hyperreal, premised on a dissatisfaction with the perceived unreality of modern everyday life, and this hyperreality informed the racist and colonialist discourses that are inherent to modernity.

Historical reenactments are not unique to modernity. Representations of the past have been part of theatrical traditions for millennia. Modernity simply augmented the

² T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, originally published, 1983), xvii, 5, 137.

³ See Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Thin Air* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 23.

variety of forms of reenactment, turning the past into a consumable commodity. In the nineteenth century there was a unique turn from historical reenactments in painting, theatre, and other arts to the photographic reproduction of events. Photographs are generally less conspicuously dramatized and produce an indexical value that appears to be an authentic recording of an original moment. Although dramatically constructed in some way, the photograph and motion picture provide an appearance of reality that can create a documentary effect distinguishable from other media. A close historiographical analysis of realism and fakery in early cinema can throw light on this issue and may inform how we analyze the practice of reenactment in the digital age as the boundary between reality and misinformation is increasingly difficult to navigate.

Reenacting historical events is a common practice by both individual and commercial media producers in the digital age. The prevalence of cultural phenomena like #tbt (throwback Thursday) across social media platforms demonstrates our innate interest in revisiting past moments that were once deemed worthy of recording. According to Bill Nichols, reenactments illustrate “the gap between that which was and the effort to return to it.”⁴ This nostalgic fascination often precipitates the reenacting of throwback photographs, posting the present reenactment on social media alongside the original image. Commercial media producers employ similar tactics, though often far less transparently. With the exception of live events (e.g., sports, news), nonfictional content is rarely not staged in some way. Reenacting a particular moment assures that the camera

⁴ Bill Nichols, *Speaking Truths with Film: Evidence, Ethics, Politics in Documentary* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 40-41.

has not missed anything, and when aesthetic value is lacking, reenactments can reconstruct the event to the liking of the filmmaker(s). In mainstream media, particularly “reality” television, events depicting real individuals may appear as authentic views of original events when in fact they are reconstructed, and often entirely re-scripted, enactments of events that have already occurred. Having worked in nonfiction video production for a number of years, I can attest to the fact that nonfiction subjects are almost always asked to repeat statements and actions for some dramatic effect, or simply to capture missed moments. If the audience is not made aware of such reenactments, then this manipulation of reality likely goes unnoticed. But in the case of the individual staging a personal photograph from the past, the manipulative process is foregrounded. The arrangement of personal photographs almost always seems to deny their historical accuracy in favor of the individual’s nostalgic vision of what the event should represent, and the re-staging of these originally staged moments underscores the artificiality of both. Therefore, while reenactments serve to ideologically narrativize a particular event, they often perform a self-reflexive function, elucidating the inability to photographically, and performatively, reproduce the past.

I consider stagings of historical events, or reenactments, as *reconstructions*. The term “reconstruction” differs from “fabrication” and connotes a greater degree of verisimilitude. My use of the designation “reconstruction” assumes both a degree of forgery, reconstructing an event to fit a particular cultural imaginary, and a desire to re-create an authentic experience. It also alludes to the post-Civil War (1861-1865) Reconstruction period in the United States. Although this allusion is coincidental, it offers

a striking parallel. The Civil War marked an important milestone in the shift to American modernity, and the subsequent Reconstruction could be described as a period of tension between modern progress and restoration of pre-Civil War modalities. The United States changed significantly as a result of the Confederacy's defeat, but the abolition of slavery ultimately produced a facade of freedom. Building an integrated society anew became a guise for perpetuating Black oppression in different ways; for example, the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and the establishment of Jim Crow laws. Reconstruction therefore connotes a negotiation between the changing present and reclaiming something that is past. There is a gap between the interpretation of a past event in the present and the real event itself, which reconstructions attempt to fill by seeking to reassert the authentic experience of the original event, albeit based on memories or perceptions of those events, which social context will inevitably shape.

Throughout this study, I attempt to answer the following questions: Why did cinema's pioneers reenact events? Was this strictly an ideological impulse? How did the nascent medium's technological limitations and/or possibilities, as well as its ability to access certain events, factor in these decisions? What is the relationship between cinematic reenactment, global modernity, and antimodernism? How did early cinema audiences differentiate between authentic views and staged reenactments, and what formal elements (e.g., *mise-en-scène*, editing, performance style) may have aided or hindered this process? How does this history inform our contemporary reading protocols regarding reenacted historical events on screen? What is the relationship between antimodernism and documentary aesthetics? The answers are extremely nuanced and

often lead to more questions. I will first examine forms of historical representation that preceded cinema in the nineteenth century, then analyze a number of short films produced and exhibited globally throughout the silent era, with a particular focus on the medium's first two decades (roughly 1894 to 1914). Representations of historical events in both the distant and recent past will be discussed, though the focus will often be the latter. Audiences would have likely acknowledged the fictional nature of films depicting events that took place prior to 1894 (i.e., they could not have been recorded with a motion picture camera). Recent events could have been authentically captured live. The reconstruction of a current event generates a sense of presentness, despite the fact that all representations of events are past. The fact that they are so recently past that they appear to have conceivably been recorded in the event's present moment destabilizes their ontological status as reconstructed events of the past. It is interesting, however, that early film reconstructions more frequently thematized violence—or the allusion to violence through, for example, representations of colonialism—than anything else, what we might associate more with premodern primitivity than modern progress. In the broadest sense, this inquiry shall attempt to elucidate how reconstructions of current events invoked violence as a form of resistance to civilized modernity while simultaneously, and somewhat paradoxically, constructing modern culture through a popular entertainment medium. I argue, therefore, that the culture surrounding early cinema can be defined by a precarious amalgam of modern resistance and progress. In turn, I question how antimodernism may have ultimately led to the development of documentary aesthetics by the 1910s and 1920s.

Generally speaking, early cinema texts in the United States tend to reveal the ideological underpinnings of American modernity, e.g., patriarchy, imperialism, scientific/technological progress, and racism. Like the film medium itself, these ideologies would become more globalized during the transition to the twentieth century. Reconstructions more commonly depicted subject matter that resisted modern progress but in a manner more focused on evading cultural progress, not necessarily based on disenchantment with industry/technology. After all, motion pictures were an integral component of emerging technology and industry at the turn of the twentieth century. And the antimodern movements Lears identifies were not necessarily racist and imperialist. However, these common ideologies that we have come to associate with modernity reflect a resistance to modern progress, which was not just industrial/technological but also socio-cultural and moral. Lears observes how technological and moral progress were often conflated.⁵ This form of morality was associated with genteel Protestantism that prohibited mundane sins like profanity and masturbation, and it was perhaps perceived that modernity threatened these values. Resistance to social progress also exacerbates ideologies like sexism and racism. But any resistance to modern progress through motion picture representation is innately ironic insofar as motion picture technology and its industrial consumption are uniquely modern entities. Early cinema cannot be narrowly defined through the lenses of either modernity or antimodernism. Both discourses persisted, while converging and diverging in a variety of ways. There is an interesting circularity in the cultural consciousness at this time that early film reenactments

⁵ Lears, 12.

elucidate, as transgressive, resistant acts that inevitably become embedded within cultural hegemony. According to Lears, the antimodern search for authentic “intensity of feeling —physical, emotional, even spiritual—became a product to be consumed like any other.”⁶ Today this commodification is exemplified in many sectors, such as the pervasive presence of historical tourist attractions, as well as the prevalence of historical narratives in commercial media.

My inquiry is motivated by a historiographical interest in tracing the documentary tradition through its nascent stages prior to the work of Robert Flaherty and John Grierson in the 1920s. While I will avoid categorizing firsts, and generally assume cultural texts to have no specific point of origin, the period that this dissertation will study intentionally concludes at a moment—roughly between the release of Edward S. Curtis’s *In the Land of the Head Hunters* (Seattle Film Co.) in 1914 and Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (Les Frères Revillon) in 1922—when a shift toward the documentary film that we recognize today appears to begin. Grierson first coined the term “documentary” in a *New York Sun* article published in February, 1926 in response to the work of Robert Flaherty.⁷ “Documentary” was used, though seemingly infrequently, in the popular lexicon prior to Grierson, and prior to cinema, primarily in relation to evidence. While noting that French filmmakers and critics used the term in the 1910s—“documentaire romancé,” roughly translated as “storified documentary,” was often used

⁶ Lears, 300.

⁷ John Grierson, *Grierson on Documentary*, ed. Hardy (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), 13. Elder brother of the more well-known Georges, Gaston Méliès began distributing his brother’s films in the United States in 1902 and shortly thereafter started producing his own work for roughly a decade.

in reference to the work of Gaston Méliès⁸—Grierson asserts that the true documentary evolved into an entirely new form with Flaherty. Flaherty began his work filming Inuit communities in northern Canada around the time *Head Hunters* was released, even though *Nanook* was not released until 1922. Both Flaherty and Curtis shared a similar aesthetic aligned with what many scholars have referred to as “salvage ethnography,” or the reenactment of ancestral rituals and experiences threatened by the encroachment of western values. But our historical understanding of the documentary’s inauguration is not defined simply by the moment Grierson developed this definition. It is important to acknowledge this moment, but the form itself can be traced to earlier media.

Before Grierson fully developed the term “documentary” in the 1920s, and before filmmakers like Edwin S. Porter and D.W. Griffith began developing the narrative film genre between 1903 and 1910, the earliest period of motion picture production consisted extensively of nonfiction subjects. In the United States, these subjects were regarded as “actualities,” drawing from the “actualité” coined by French filmmakers Auguste and Louis Lumière. Raymond Fielding defines the actuality as “short scenes of everyday people and events—unmanipulated activity of more or less general interest.”⁹ This definition, however, requires elaboration. While actuality films often depicted everyday events, particularly in Europe, more frequently, and especially in the United States, they depicted extraordinary, or newsworthy, events. Erik Barnouw assumes the

⁸ See Paul Henley, *Beyond Observation: A History of Authorship in Ethnographic Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 90-91.

⁹ Raymond Fielding, *The American Newsreel: A Complete History, 1911-1967* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2006), 3.

Lumières to be the first documentarians. For Barnouw, as the art of film editing evolved in the early 1900s, cinema shifted away from documentary toward fiction.¹⁰ But it is problematic to claim outright that actualities were documentaries. This designation was not used contemporaneously to describe or categorize these films. Additionally, the actuality faded from popularity, as narrative fiction became the dominant paradigm by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, and nonfiction subjects began to take on more formalized genres like travel films and newsreels. When searching for the documentary's ancestors, it is somewhat misguided to look toward actualities. It is more appropriate to examine the fictional paradigms that had become the dominant form by the 1910s. Throughout this dissertation, I shall attempt to demonstrate how early documentaries were more fictional than purely observational, and the work of later documentarians like Grierson, working for the British government, and Leni Riefenstahl, operating under Joseph Goebbels and the Third Reich, became even more explicitly propagandistic. Indeed, a purely observational aesthetic is virtually absent in documentary filmmaking today. Even filmmakers like Frederick Wiseman manipulate reality through editorial decisions.

There is an interconnectedness between what we today perceive as documentary aesthetics and earlier reconstructions of current events. The erasure of reality from nonfiction, i.e., the actuality's demise, influenced the transition to fiction becoming the dominant paradigm. Throughout the medium's first decade, actualities did significantly

¹⁰ Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*, Second Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, originally published, 1974), 22.

outnumber reenactments. It is difficult to disregard the fact that reenacting events may not have been an impulse of early film producers but may have instead been a necessity based on a variety of circumstances (technological limitations, inability to access events, etc.). I do not doubt that such circumstances existed. However, cinematic reconstructions sought to create something more real, or hyperreal, premised on a dissatisfaction with the unreality of actuality, i.e., the unreality of modern everyday life. The search for something more authentic than reality itself would come to define the work of later documentarians. For example, Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov developed *Kino-Pravda* (1922-23) to distinguish empirical reality from cinematic truth, which can potentially unearth something truthful that is not obvious. A similar idea informed the work of Jean Rouch and the cinema vérité movement in the 1960s, where surveillance is perceived as inadequate, and the documentarian must be a provocateur, encouraging subjects to reveal something truthful, though perhaps hidden, in themselves. Experiential truth becomes more valuable than objective observation. Staged reenactments underscore the constructedness of what appear to be real events and are therefore more direct ancestors to the documentary than actualities. Like documentaries produced after 1920, early film reenactments are often conspicuously fantasmatic and ideologically bent but nevertheless representative of real people and real events.

This study ultimately seeks to place the subfields of early cinema and documentary studies in dialogue with each other, while also informing the broader field of American cultural history. An examination of this cultural history shall inform our contemporary media practices and offer insight into how the reproducibility of events

shapes the way we perceive those events. Likewise, there are interesting parallels that can be drawn between the antimodern ethos around the turn of the twentieth century and our current political climate in the United States. In the case of the reenactment of the killing of George Floyd and Elijah McClain, this performative form serves as a method of leading audiences to experience something authentic and visceral while also reifying the ideological position of one side in opposition to another. Disenchantment with social progress leads to violent rhetoric, which begets real physical violence, and the power of the state's disciplinary apparatus is reaffirmed.

Indexicality and Historiography

The 1890s, in many ways, marked a culmination in modern, first-world development. Throughout the nineteenth century, empirical perceptions of time and space became increasingly destabilized through developments in photographic, telegraphic, and transportation technologies.¹¹ Time became formalized through the institution of time zones, and space could be dismantled entirely through a network of telegraphic wires that no longer required physical travel for message dissemination. In other words, an organic sense of both time and space became increasingly difficult to grasp. This is particularly salient in the case of photographic technology, developed early in the nineteenth century, which could literally suspend physical motion and visually archive specific moments in

¹¹ See Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). Also see James Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

history. While the stasis of movement and seizure of historical events would have been familiar to early nineteenth-century audiences through previous arts like painting and sculpture, the indexical quality of the photograph provided something closer to visual evidence of a particular event's reality, as opposed to an artist crafting a likeness.¹²

Additionally, the photographic experience fundamentally differed from previous forms of written histories. In distinguishing photography from written text, Roland Barthes claims the former as "*a message without a code*."¹³ Because the photograph is a reproduction of real objects (index), not representative of a language system (symbol), it has no linguistic referent and therefore no meaning. Barthes admits, however, that photographic texts are treated through artistic practice. While demonstrating the possibility of some level of encoded meaning, the photograph is paradoxically a message with a code (ideology) and one without a code (empirical objectivity).

This unique amalgam of artistic treatment and scientific recording would become an integral component of the modern experience. The newly developed motion picture would, like the telegraph, become a medium for communicating across space, and like the photograph, participate in a mode of historical archivization that conflated positivism and art. Like rail travel, telegraphy, and photography, motion pictures further contributed

¹² It is, however, worth noting that the tradition of pictorialist photography is nearly as old as the medium itself. Despite the photograph's indexical quality, pictorialism attempts to aesthetically align the medium more with painting. See Henry Peach Robinson, *The Elements of a Pictorial Photograph* (New York: Arno Press, 1973, originally published, 1896) and Henry Peach Robinson, *Pictorial Effect in Photography: Being Hints on Composition and Chiaroscuro for Photographers* (Pawlet, VT: Helios, 1971, originally published, 1869).

¹³ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Noonday Press, 1988), 17.

to the extinction of unique experiences in favor of reproducible, universalized cultural norms. As Walter Benjamin asserts, “The desire of contemporary masses to bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly... is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction.”¹⁴ Motion picture reenactments are further removed from reality, as both a mechanized form of reproduction and as reconstructions of actual events. The reproducibility of events on screen paradoxically sought to artistically treat authentic experiences while also formalizing them, in a positivistic sense, for a mass audience.

By drawing from the motion picture’s nineteenth-century predecessors, I assume that the new medium was not an entirely unique experience and constructed its identity through prior forms. In evaluating forms of sound in silent cinema, Rick Altman uses a methodology he identifies as “crisis historiography,” which examines how new technologies possess identity crises and are concomitantly defined in various ways, based on established technologies, and not always in a linear, teleological manner.¹⁵ In the case of motion pictures, designations like “film” or “movie” were not initially used in the popular lexicon. Instead, terms like “moving pictures,” “animated photographs,” and perhaps more popularly “photoplay,” referred to the medium’s relationship to photography and theater. With regard to representations of current events, there is a connection between early cinema and print journalism. The act of reconstructing current

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), 222.

¹⁵ Rick Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

events aligns with the sensationalism and staunch political bias prevalent in late nineteenth-century (“yellow”) journalism.

Altman’s approach assumes that pre-existing social codes, not objective reality, predicate not only technologies but also representations produced through those technologies. Altman claims, “realist film theory diverts attention from the fact that reality itself is already coded... In other words, *there is no such thing as direct representation of the real; there is only representation of representation.*”¹⁶ Realist film theorists like André Bazin have attempted to hierarchize photography and cinematography as artistic mediums that reflect reality, as opposed to other media (e.g., painting) that produce likenesses. But documentary images reflect a world that is already socially coded (or to use Lacanian language, symbolic and imaginary, not real). Moreover, individual viewers possess reading protocols for distinguishing generic conventions, and this is particularly important when considering how nonfiction differs from fiction. Nichols asserts that if the historical world depicted is unrecognizable we may read it as fiction.¹⁷ But rarely nowadays do we watch a film or television show without a preconceived notion of its status as fiction or nonfiction, regardless of its historical recognizability. For example, I have no connection to the historical events in Patricio Guzmán’s three-part documentary *The Battle of Chile* (1975-79)—I have never been to Chile and was not alive in the 1970s—but in anticipation of watching the film, my preliminary research (e.g., trailers, synopses, and genre classifications) indicates that

¹⁶ Altman, 17.

¹⁷ Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 17.

my expectation should be for historical nonfiction. This level of preconceived knowledge is difficult to avoid today, which is one reason why studying early nonfiction cinema is valuable. The socially constructed codes and genre protocols that define contemporary viewership simply did not exist in the 1890s. The judgment of a film's historical verisimilitude would have been based on pre-existing codes and genre protocols for viewing older forms of media. Audiences, and producers, would have had to cultivate reading protocols to distinguish fiction, authentic objectivity, and various amalgams in between (e.g., reenactments). A similar process occurs in how we learn the proper protocols for consuming new media in the twenty-first century. As digital media platforms are still in the process of establishing their formal properties and regulations, we find ourselves in a similar technological climate, and there seems to be a parallel, albeit of varying proportions and implications, between forgery in the cinema as that medium developed in the 1890s and early 1900s, and our contemporary struggle with media disinformation.

The impulse to seize history through photographic technology prompts an analysis of a broader condition of American culture around the turn of the twentieth century. In the face of modern progress, many thinkers promulgated an antimodern yearning for premodern, agrarian modalities. By seeking a similar message through the embrace of new technology, early filmmakers often oscillated between, or in some cases interweaved, optimism and discontent. This is evident in the work of Curtis and Flaherty, in the popularity of the western genre beginning around 1903, and more generally across a variety of genres throughout the first twenty years of the medium, particularly if one

examines films that reconstructed current events. The symptom of fetishizing and repeating the past through new technology may have also functioned as a middle ground between the certainty of the past and the uncertainty of the present and future, a way to cope with the disruptive shocks of rapid modern expansion. In this dissertation, I outline three specific themes prevalent across early film reenactments: public executions and lynchings, military activity and battle scenes, and Indigenous cultural performances. Each theme presents a desire to reject the unreality of the modern experience and reconstruct it by underscoring and fetishizing what are perceived to be primitive behaviors.

This interpretation of early cinema insinuates that from the beginning an impulse to dramatize reality meant a search for authenticity, not simply a deferral to fabrication, which seems to align with the impulse of many contemporary documentarians. Today dramatic re-creations of history, whether historical fiction or documentary reenactment, insert the viewer into a subjective position that is more immersive than voyeuristic. This experience of history is never real but rather a reconstruction of the past on the part of the filmmaker(s) and performer(s) through the creation of the text, as well as by the viewer through the consumption of the text. The negotiation between fabrication and realism occurs when one attempts to navigate a documentary text and define it as such. What ultimately qualifies the documentary is a process of reception, its resonation of authenticity, as a dramatization of reality that attains authenticity for the viewer. Our protocols for reading fiction are much different. We generally accept their fabrication, and even historical fiction is recognizable through certain formulas. Therefore, if we assume a definition of documentary film to involve a process of reception, one in which

the viewer attempts to grapple with the degree of verisimilitude present in the text, then a study of *proto-documentary*, produced at a time of greater confusion, and presumably more dialogue regarding what the medium was actually doing, can illuminate our current understanding of the documentary form.

Attractions and Antimodern Authenticity

Tom Gunning has famously distinguished between the “cinema of attractions” (pre-1907) and the subsequent period of narrative integration (post-1907). For Gunning, early motion pictures focused less on telling stories and more on formulating a spectatorial experience that was primarily for the pleasure of looking, similar to popular turn-of-the-century attractions like world’s fairs and amusement parks.¹⁸ Gunning’s view challenges Noel Burch’s use of the somewhat pejorative designation “primitive” to identify films of this period. For Gunning, these films are not evolutionarily inferior to the narratives of subsequent decades but rather sought something very different. However, both Burch and Gunning maintain a dichotomous relationship between pre-1907 and post-1907 cinema. Gunning also identifies a “view” aesthetic, which is part of the cinema of attractions insofar as the viewer derives pleasure from looking at the view depicted.¹⁹ But there is a complicated distinction to be made between view films and films with acted scenarios. Gunning recognizes that these boundaries often blurred, and viewers likely did not rigidly

¹⁸ Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde,” *Wide Angle* 8, no. 3 (1983): 63-70.

¹⁹ Tom Gunning, “Before Documentary: Early Nonfiction Films and the ‘View’ Aesthetic,” in *The Documentary Film Reader*, ed. Jonathan Kahana (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016, originally published 1997), 52-63.

classify them in the same way that genre categories frame our expectations today. He also identifies the aesthetic of early cinema as astonishment, in which “the astonishment derives from a magical metamorphosis rather than a seamless reproduction of reality.”²⁰ The novelty of the motion picture’s particular astonishment, however, was based on its indexical quality, hence what Gunning describes as “a vacillation between belief and incredulity.”²¹ Reenactment scenes offered viewers a similar opportunity to negotiate between authenticity and fabrication. The conflation of spectacle and documented reality—or the reconstruction of a particular reality to enhance the spectacle—on the one hand fictionalizes the portrayal of real events through some ideological lens, but on the other hand, it allows the spectator to participate in a dialogic process of determining what is believable and what is not.

It is crucial to assume that at least some early cinema audiences genuinely engaged in a contemplative, and perhaps even intellectual, process when viewing reenactments of current events that were shaping the modern world around them. Charles Musser complicates the cinema of attractions model in a productive way. He contends that attractions and narrative fiction were co-existing forms.²² This is not in opposition to

²⁰ Tom Gunning, “An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator,” in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, Fifth Edition, eds. Leo Braudy & Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, originally published, 1989), 822.

²¹ Gunning, 823.

²² See Charles Musser, “Rethinking Early Cinema: Cinema of Attractions and Narrativity,” in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 389-416. Also see Charles Musser, “A Cinema of Contemplation, A Cinema of Discernment: Spectatorship, Intertextuality and Attractions in the 1890s,” in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 159.

Gunning per se but rather serves as a much needed elaboration on his original thesis, and Gunning himself later clarified that he did not mean to insist that attractions were the only aspect of early cinema.²³ Musser identifies a “cinema of contemplation” and a “cinema of discernment” to flesh out a more multifaceted system of representation and spectatorship during this period than the cinema of attractions alone offers. The fact that the repetition of films and extended runtimes were common practices, encouraging spectators “to contemplate and explore the image,” much like a painting, demonstrates Musser’s model of contemplation and discernment.²⁴ Furthermore, it would be easy, though misguided, to assume that long runtimes and slow editing, by today’s standards, suggest an audience less sophisticated than twenty-first century viewers. For example, one account of *The Kiss* (1896), also known as *The May Irwin John C. Rice Kiss*, insisted that the kiss went on forever, even though it is quite short, and the entire film is less than thirty seconds.²⁵ What we might today consider slow editing intentionally allowed the nascent motion picture audience time to contemplate and discern. Cinemas of contemplation and discernment align with, and indispensably build on, Gunning’s early spectator as vacillating “between belief and incredulity,” which itself suggests that audiences negotiated, and perhaps even engaged dialogically, with early film texts. However, while reconstructions of historical and current events may have provided both a visual spectacle for (re)experiencing past moments that had been lost and the possibility

²³ Tom Gunning, “Attractions: How They Came Into the World,” in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 36.

²⁴ Musser, “A Cinema of Contemplation,” 160-62.

²⁵ “At the Orpheum,” *San Francisco Call*, June 30, 1896, 5.

for individual spectators to formulate their own ideological opinions, discerning between presumed verisimilitude and possible fabrication, such reenactments ultimately tended to efface interpretive ambivalence in favor of cultural hegemony.

Miriam Hansen argues that early cinema catered to a heterogeneous audience while often simultaneously homogenizing that audience, which emphasizes the tension “between the cinema’s role as a universalizing, ideological idiom and its redemptive possibilities as an inclusive, heterogeneous, and at times unpredictable horizon of experience.”²⁶ Audiences became more collectively silent and less participatory by the early 1900s, often as a way to distinguish gentility from working class audiences, imposing “a middle-class standard of spectatorship” and “suppressing a locally and regionally specific linguistic environment,” which ultimately fostered individuals reacting for themselves while also homogenizing audiences culturally and linguistically.²⁷ Reconstructions of events align with this model in terms of both their potentially ambivalent veracity, which in turn would have incited inquiry and perhaps even resistance from heterogeneous audiences across various cultural divides, and the possibility that their assertions about the past were interpreted as accurate. The process of cinematic consumption throughout the medium’s first two decades oscillated between these two poles, perhaps more so than it would later in the twentieth century. The majority of film producers were part of the affluent bourgeois class Lears associates with antimodernism. Upper class antimodernism transferred to the masses through cinema, as

²⁶ Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 19.

²⁷ Hansen, 95.

it became increasingly more inclusive, assimilating various groups, not just European immigrants but also African Americans and Indigenous peoples. However, while the possibility of heterogeneous, interrogative responses may have been more likely during the earliest years, we should not assume that this form of spectatorship disappeared entirely as universalized formulas became more dominant by the 1910s. Rather, spectatorship remained, and continues to remain, genealogically linked to the early viewer's desire to contemplate and discern, to encounter and negotiate authenticity.

There is, however, an inherent irony in this form of truth seeking. French intellectuals of the May 1968 era, such as Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard, have described modernity as a cultural shift around the turn of the twentieth century in which reality begins to become defined through simulated experiences. Individual reality is eclipsed for mediated reality and inevitably reaches a postmodern moment of hyperreality. For Baudrillard, the continual duplication and reproduction of reality reduces reality to the hyperreal, i.e., the real is "always already reproduced."²⁸ Motion picture realities seek truth while consequently reproducing, and therefore simulating, reality, which in turn demonstrates how modernity and antimodernism are unstable dichotomies. While we can assess this critically, as does Baudrillard, assuming that reality no longer truly exists, it is important to note that, as the motion picture medium developed, filmmakers increasingly sought authenticity in their simulations. Motion picture simulation, while never quite real, ultimately jettisoned outright fabrication in an attempt to represent something close to reality.

²⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 147.

According to Lears, antimodernism invoked 4 traditions: 1) republican moralism 2) romantic literature 3) revolt against positivism 4) recovery of the primal.²⁹ Drawing from Freud's notion of "ambivalence," that character traits are not fixed and separate but fluid and intermingled, Lears demonstrates how antimodern ideologies were often contradictory.³⁰ It was therefore not an ideological movement per se but rather a sensibility present in the cultural consciousness at this time, a sensibility that sought authentic experiences, not regimented modern banality. Resistance to modernity occurred in a variety of sectors, not necessarily as one unified movement. Moreover, its ideological underpinnings were often contradictory, as Lears notes: "Antimodernism was not simply escapism; it was ambivalent, often coexisting with enthusiasm for material progress. And it was part of a much broader quest for intense experience which ranged from militarism and 'Progressive' social reform to popular occultism and the early fascination with depth psychology."³¹ This is why Peter King's assertion that modernity's motive force is "the idea of progress"—which is tied to the belief that the human will and the material world are distinct, thus forcing us to look forward, never backward—is problematic.³² This strict dichotomy is too simplistic and ahistorical. Resisting progress merely informs an inevitably new and different future, and invoking the past only recontextualizes it in the present. Arthur Versluis offers a more nuanced approach: "antimodernism is fundamental to the creative impulse in modernity. Modern industrial society in its very nature calls

²⁹ Lears, 57.

³⁰ See Lears, 218.

³¹ Lears, xiii.

³² Peter King, *The Antimodern Condition: An Argument Against Progress* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 1.

forth antimodernism in the creative individual.”³³ He distinguishes between “hard” and “soft” antimodernism, the latter of which is neither radical nor extreme and attempts to function within modernity. With rare exceptions, most forms of antimodernism fall into this category. Attempts to evade modernity provide nothing more than an “illusion of escape,” not transformation.³⁴ This is precisely what motion pictures did through the guise of seemingly authentic experiences. As both a new technology and a new commercial industry, motion pictures acknowledged modernity and industrial capitalism while simultaneously defining it through representations that often alluded to frictions with modern progress.

Miles Orvell likewise associates modernism/antimodernism with authenticity: “The culture of authenticity that developed at the end of the century and that gradually established the aesthetic vocabulary that we have called ‘modernist’ was a reaction against the earlier aesthetic, an effort to get beyond mere imitation, beyond the manufacturing of illusions, to the creation of more ‘authentic’ works that were themselves real things.”³⁵ Early motion pictures demonstrate a culture of replication. Films repeated content already popularized by other media (news, theater, vaudeville). The practice of repeating films during exhibitions was also prevalent. Drawing from Benjamin’s link between technology and culture in the face of mechanical reproduction, Orvell observes how increased mechanization forces individuals to question what is perhaps taken for

³³ Arthur Versluis, “Antimodernism,” *Telos* 137 (Winter 2006): 96.

³⁴ Versluis, 100.

³⁵ Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), xv.

granted as the real thing, which creates a gap between scientific objectivity and something more real than reality.³⁶ This form of increasing skepticism regarding reality echoes Baudrillard's assertion that scientific objectivity is merely a simulated discourse.³⁷ But we do not necessarily have to simplify the hyperreal as the unreal. Orvell's model provides a space in which simulated reality might produce something more emphatically real than the quotidian. With the notable exception of most of Georges Méliès's oeuvre, direct allusions to outright forgery were rare in early cinema, and advertising for these films generally emphasized their authenticity. It is therefore striking that actualities were initially the dominant cinematic form but very quickly faded into obscurity in favor of both fictional content and heavily-narrated nonfictional content. Reconstructing reality was potentially perceived as more authentic than simply showing it.

I argue that cinematic reconstructions of current events during this period were less intentionally illusory and instead functioned as attempts to achieve authenticity. They subscribe to an antimodern ethos through their subject matter while also, more fundamentally, rejecting modern reality in favor of something potentially more real. This sensibility, revising the quotidian in search of truth, would inform how later filmmakers approached both fiction—jettisoning, for example, the highly fabricated style of Georges Méliès—and documentary—which established itself through realistic, but nevertheless fictional, reconstructions. It is these seemingly oppositional but ultimately complementary impulses—on the one hand, antimodern truth-seeking, and on the other

³⁶ Orvell, xvii-xviii.

³⁷ Baudrillard, 113.

hand, simulated, narrativized reality—that define early film reenactments and to an extent inform the overall development of the motion picture medium.

Proto-Documentary

Grierson's "first principles" for documentary include: 1) filming life itself 2) using original actors 3) using material "taken from the raw."³⁸ In his praise for Flaherty's work, Grierson does not acknowledge that *Nanook of the North* and *Moana* (Famous Players-Lasky, 1926) consist primarily of staged events, an observation that perhaps was not obvious at the time. In these films, principle 1 is upheld to some extent, but principles 2 and 3 are conspicuously absent. Staged reenactments rarely involve original actors and can never be taken from the raw, but documentary filmmakers invoke them, so Grierson's model requires further elaboration, particularly since he uses examples of films that are staged! One therefore wonders whether Grierson, and the broader audience who watched Flaherty's films, knew that his characters, while authentic Indigenous individuals, were performing outdated rituals. Grierson does not acknowledge this form of salvage ethnography. In fact, it is likely that Flaherty duped Grierson; or perhaps more appropriately, he was able to define documentary aesthetics through the discovery of films that he interpreted as authentic experiences, despite their constructed nature. The authenticity of real Native actors in their indigenous milieu, as opposed to actors in a studio, aligns with Grierson's second principle and is a characteristic that we use to identify documentary texts today. Whether an individual on screen is reenacting an event

³⁸ Grierson, 146-47.

or repeating a sound bite for the camera, the presence of real human subjects ultimately suggests documentary.

Nichols further canonizes the Griersonian history of early documentary. He distinguishes between documentary and fiction by assuming that, when subject to documentary images, the “viewer employs ‘procedures of rhetorical engagement’ rather than the ‘procedures of fictive engagement.’”³⁹ Both forms represent the real world in some way, but what delineates the documentary is our recognition of its argumentative nature. This recognition is also true for films that perform staged reenactments. How do we distinguish, for example, between a staged reenactment and a fictional docudrama? The staged reenactment in a documentary serves a purpose that is often less dramatic and more aligned with propagating a particular argument about a past event. But this is a problematic dichotomy. Certainly many fiction films elicit rhetorical engagement from viewers. And likewise some documentaries may read as more fictive than rhetorical. Michael Renov challenges Nichols’s strict binary between fictive (oriented toward a world) and nonfictive (of the world) by demonstrating that nonfiction can likewise appeal to the desires of the imaginary. Additionally, the notion that a documentary is argumentative assumes that it knows what its argument is, which is rarely the case.⁴⁰ I would suggest that what most noticeably distinguishes fiction from nonfiction is the use of real social actors. When we watch historical fiction, the opening credits serve as a dead

³⁹ Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 26.

⁴⁰ Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 22-23, 98.

giveaway that certain actors will be playing the role of historical characters. The opening of Oliver Stone's *JFK* (Warner Bros., 1991), for example, resembles a nonfiction newsreel while title cards credit the cast of relatively well-known stars, thus priming the audience for historical fiction, not documentary. In a documentary, we acknowledge the subjects as real people. The insertion of a staged reenactment in a documentary, which may contain performers as substitutes for real individuals, is generally situated within the context of a documentary text that, alongside the reenactment, depicts real social actors. In historical fiction, the primary subjects are actors. Ultimately, however, the viewer negotiates these distinctions, and early cinema audiences in particular, possessing few established reading protocols, and less visual knowledge of actors and/or famous personas, would have had to engage more thoroughly in such negotiations. The fact that reenactments eventually became formulas for both documentary and historical fiction, a precursor to both forms, demonstrates a certain degree of ambivalence in the decades before these categories were more established but also suggests the possibility that this distinction was not essential for pre-Grierson cinema producers and their audiences.

Writing in the 1940s and 1950s, film theorist and *Cahiers du Cinéma* founder Andre Bazin famously argued in favor of cinematic realism. For Bazin, plastic arts like painting consist in a "mummy complex." The ancient Egyptian ritual of mummification sustains itself through various traditions of reproduction (for example, painting), which similarly preserve one's image for eternity.⁴¹ However, unlike previous arts, photography

⁴¹ Andre Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, Fifth Edition, ed. Leo Braudy & Marshall Cohen (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 195.

and film provide a duplication of the real world that goes beyond aesthetic symbolization. It is a mechanical reproduction “of which man plays no part,” that is, “without the creative intervention of man... we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually *re-presented*, set before us, that is to say, in time and space.”⁴² Bazin’s myth of total cinema asserts that innovators of the nineteenth century sought a totally faithful reproduction of reality through mechanical means. The photograph, phonograph, and their amalgam in the motion picture were stepping-stones toward achieving “total” cinema, which has yet to fully evolve.⁴³ Motion picture innovators’ quest for realism is evident if one considers how scientific objectivity fueled the studies of motion conducted by Étienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge in the 1870s, along with the abundance of actuality films produced throughout the medium’s first decade. Part of the commercial appeal of motion pictures, particularly in the 1890s and early 1900s, was their life-like, indexical quality. However, while the Lumières often depicted everyday occurrences, American actualities tended toward the extraordinary, not the quotidian. Therefore, the quest for authenticity paralleled commercial impulses that were not always interested in faithful mechanical reproduction.

Objectivity and entertainment are competing tendencies in film reenactments, which are not simply deviations from nonfiction toward something more fictive but rather elucidate a narrativized representation of the real world. Human agency always produces, and therefore manipulates in some way, cinematic images and sounds. The only

⁴² Bazin, 197-98.

⁴³ Bazin, 202.

exception to this would be non-commercial images like x-rays and surveillance footage, which are often invoked in film scholarship but serve very different purposes than commercial cinema. There is an important distinction to be made between reality and indexical representation. The latter appears real but is merely a likeness to reality, much like the plastic arts; constructed, and to various degrees manipulated, by a human agent, despite Bazin's assertion of human absence. But indexical representations, as direct reproductions of real objects and subjects, are at least *more real* than the plastic arts. The motion picture's appearance of reality at a cultural moment of modern disillusion formulated a simulated version of reality distinct from the quotidian. Yet the search for authenticity through indexical representations ironically informed the increasing virtuality of modern society.

Chapter Outline

Chapter One traces cinema's genealogical antecedents throughout the nineteenth century. The focus is on the reenacting of recently past events in photography, print journalism, and other cultural performance sites. Specific topics include Civil War press coverage and the staging of wounded soldiers on the battlefield, the rise of yellow journalism in the press, Buffalo Bill's Wild West, the staging of ethnographic spectacles at fairs, and reenactments as amusement park attractions. By linking their institutional and aesthetic connections to early cinema, I illustrate how the new medium attempted to negotiate its initial identity crisis and, more specifically, analyze what this negotiation implies about cinematic reconstructions of current events. For example, both cinema and print

journalism overlapped institutionally, and there are aesthetic commonalities, notably the sensational re-creation of current events. I argue that early cinema relied on formulas similar to print journalism to mitigate its identity crisis, hence the prevalence of both actualities (objective reporting) and reenactments (sensationalized reporting) throughout the first decade of the medium. By examining a broad scope of films produced during this period, with a focus on events that both motion picture producers and the mainstream press covered, I assert that while the former was stylistically aligned with the sensationalism of the latter, motion pictures far less egregiously misinformed viewers than yellow journalism. When reconstructions were performed on film, producers did not necessarily obscure this fact. I conclude this chapter by tracing a broad history of reenactments in early cinema, then focus on several films that fall into the thematically consistent and newsworthy categories of theatrical performances, political figures, and disasters.

Chapter Two analyzes the execution film, a popular genre around the turn of the twentieth century, which was almost always either fiction, historical fiction, or a staged reenactment. Drawing from Michel Foucault, I argue that the prevalence of these films can be linked to the modern impulse to discipline and punish—the Othering of not only criminals but also both foreign and domestic enemies through capital punishment—and illuminate an ideology that aligns with antimodernism and imperialism. Such films also served audience’s desire to encounter death while recognizing its artifice in these fictionalized or fabricated accounts. One film of note is the Edison Company’s *Execution of Czolgosz with Panorama of Auburn Prison* (1901). The editorial strategy in this film

conflates reality (authentic exterior images of Auburn prison) with fabrication (a reenacted scene, with actors, of Czolgosz's execution), juxtaposing the former with the latter. In this chapter, I use this film as a case study to examine developments and transitions in editing techniques during this period. Editing, like other formal qualities of media at the time, particularly illustrated newspapers, contributed to the increasing perception of fragmented reality. The realism inherent in *Czolgosz*'s images may have incited belief, while the disruption of verisimilitude through editing may have incited incredulity. With no established reading protocols, and the spatiotemporal disruption of the editing, a dominant reading of the text would have been impossible, and viewers most likely had to draw their own conclusions regarding the images' verisimilitude. This chapter also explores the popularity of public executions and lynchings during this period, an antimodern reaction to the abolition of capital punishment, which was increasingly being perceived as a barbaric practice that could no longer be tolerated in civil society.

Battle scenes were the most prevalently reenacted subjects during this period. The world experienced several military conflicts between 1896 and 1905, most of which involved the United States. Chapter Three explores the battle reenactment as a propagandistic tool promulgating nationalism through antimodern violence. It must also be considered that motion picture producers recognized early on that adequate coverage of real war scenes was impossible, hence the need to stage them. And although these reconstructions were propagandistic, producers rarely attempted to straightforwardly deceive an audience but rather sought to re-create a particular battle scene as

authentically as possible, albeit through a nationalistic narrative. Ultimately this chapter uses the battle reenactment as a case study to investigate the relationships between the culture of masculinity, antimodernism, global expansion, and the implication of cinema as a tool for fashioning these ideologies through reconstruction. Additionally, this chapter questions why nonfiction seems to decline during the nickelodeon age. I argue that reenactments were partially responsible for this decline. While the introduction of editing to conflate realism with forgery encouraged multiple possibilities of reception, the establishment of institutionalized editing strategies paved the way for the system of the suture, which seeks to immerse the viewer.⁴⁴ Part of this transition involved the foregrounding of narrative integration, while the cinema of attractions became subdued, though never entirely absent. This chapter explores how the battle reenactment may have affected this shift.

The fourth and final chapter examines the representation of Indigenous peoples in various media around the turn of the twentieth century. This history culminates with Edward S. Curtis's monumental *The North American Indian* (1907-1930) project and finally *In the Land of the Head Hunters* (1914). Although it is essentially historical fiction, *Head Hunters* is often considered the first documentary film, and while I have no intention of making this claim, it is important to situate it as a feature-length reenactment

⁴⁴ See William Rothman, "Against 'The System of the Suture,'" in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, Fifth Edition, eds. Leo Braudy & Marshall Cohen (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, originally published, 1975), 130-136. Also see Kaja Silverman, "On Suture," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, Fifth Edition, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, originally published, 1983), 137-147.

that would influence documentary filmmakers like Robert Flaherty. While much has been written about Curtis's work, few scholars have engaged in a dialogue between his work and earlier forms of photography and cinema. Reenactments of Indigenous dances and rituals were quite common in the 1890s and early 1900s, and the western genre, which frequently included fictional and nonfictional Native subjects, was incredibly popular between 1907 and 1912. I explore how the popularity of indigeneity aligns with representations in which Native subjects are contained and controlled. Affluent Euro-American society frequently participated in an antimodern yearning for, or fetishization of, Indigenous culture, often resulting in industrial capitalism appropriating and commodifying the latter. While Indigenous representations during this period serve to provide a voice for Native subjects, films like *Head Hunters* conspicuously efface modernity and ultimately perpetuate "vanishing Indian" stereotypes, failing to address indigeneity in the modern, post-cultural-contact moment. This amalgam of fetishizing the past (one that is foreign to Euro-Americans), erasing the modern present, and reifying racist stereotypes that define modern Euro-American culture, elucidates the synthesis of antimodernism and modernity.

In charting the early history of film reenactments, it is my hope that a clearer understanding of our cultural history may be revealed, one that informs later developments in cinema but also contemporary American culture amid several crises. Like the antimodern fascination with authentic experiences in the face of modern banality, early film producers developed a form of representing reality distinct from the observational aesthetic of actualities, thus paving the way for the dramatic reconstruction

of reality as a method toward attaining authenticity. But the presence of antimodern sensibilities in early film reenactments illustrates a circular paradox. They participated in a hegemonic process of homogenization and commodification that exemplifies global modernity, while also providing a potential space for debating between authenticity and fabrication and performatively resisting homogenization. There is a postmodern sensibility in the self-reflexive use of reenactment, of which we see traces of as early as Curtis's *Head Hunters* (and perhaps earlier), that some contemporary media producers commonly invoke, while others conceal this to intentionally misinform. In other words, reenacting events can have either positive or deleterious cultural effects. Reenactments of the deaths of George Floyd and Elijah McClain at the hands of the state demonstrate how this performative action, as well as the antimodern ethos more generally, can ultimately lead to fascism, reifying power and further subjugating individuals in vulnerable positions.

CHAPTER ONE

REENACTMENT AND POPULAR CULTURE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The tradition of documentary and the tradition of reenactment have historical overlaps leading up to the twentieth century. Charles Musser traces the documentary tradition back to the mid-seventeenth century, specifically the proto-magic lantern lectures of Athanasius Kircher. The projection of images marked a turning point in visual cultural history. As reproducible archives, illustrated lectures differed somewhat from the likenesses produced by older media like painting. For Musser, the development and prevalence of illustrated, and later photographic, lectures throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries demonstrates the continuance of a documentary tradition that photographers and motion picture producers would standardize in the early twentieth century.¹ Simon During argues that forms of proto-reenactment emerged in the late eighteenth century, which paved the way for modern reenactments to emerge after the Civil War.² It is important, however, to acknowledge that reenactments and documentations of history were not altogether new in the eighteenth century. What was unique were the forms they began to take; the indexical documentation of events through photographic technology, and the dislocation of reenactment from artistic practices (e.g.,

¹ Charles Musser, "Problems in Historiography: The Documentary Tradition Before *Nanook of the North*," in *The Documentary Film Book*, ed. Brian Winston (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 119-128.

² See Simon During, "Mimic Toil: Eighteenth-Century Preconditions for the Modern Historical Reenactment," in *Historical Reenactment: From Realism to the Affective Turn*, eds. Iain McCalman & Paul A. Pickering (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 180-199.

theater and painting). Reenactments became less focused on aesthetic representation than re-creating an event for posterity, to continually repeat its historical veracity. In the face of rapid social and industrial transitions, the increasing prevalence of reenactments in the latter nineteenth century functioned less as reinterpretations of the past than as a means for restoring the past accurately to cope with the present. Civil War battles would become some of the most prevalently reenacted historical events in American history, and the war was also one of the earliest instances of photographic technology documenting current events for journalistic purposes. While the intersection of the documentary and reenactment traditions has never been entirely fluid, the Civil War does seem to posit a particular moment in which the ideas of reconstructing and documenting history were part of the cultural consciousness—and it is important to note this was a politically charged moment in American history—ideas that began to conflate, as evident in many Civil War photographs.

The following chapter attempts to outline these histories, elucidating their potential intersections and divergences, focusing primarily on the period spanning from the Civil War through the end of the nineteenth century. This chapter serves as a theoretical precursor, a precinema historical overview, and a broad discussion of early cinematic reenactments. An examination of forms of reenactment, as they were performed in a variety of media prior to the emergence of motion pictures, shall provide a useful foundation for the filmic case studies analyzed in the remaining chapters, while more importantly illuminating the relationship between antimodernism and reenactments

and how a deeper understanding of this relationship might inform the history of documentary aesthetics.

While photographic technology began to emerge in the 1820s and 1830s, the ambition, or desire, to photograph occurred earlier. Geoffrey Batchen traces a discursive—in other words metaphoric, not technological—practice of photography beginning around 1790. Drawing from Foucault’s argument about Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon—an architectural design intended for prisons, though applicable to any state-sponsored institution, in which the state can view all of its subjects at any moment, while they are unable to look back, empowering the seer’s gaze and subjugating the seen—Batchen asserts that the early nineteenth century shifted observational modes toward the viewer becoming one who produces what is seen. Photography is therefore invented as an apparatus of “reflection and projection” as well as “activity and passivity.”³ This assumes that vision itself fundamentally changed around this time, becoming simultaneously more subjective and more heavily linked to governance and control, a notion Jonathan Crary addresses:

beginning early in the nineteenth century, a new set of relations between the body on one hand and forms of institutional and discursive power on the other redefined the status of an observing subject... a recognition of the observer occurs in the nineteenth century before the appearance of photography. What takes place from around 1810 to 1840 is an uprooting of vision from the stable and fixed relations incarnated in the camera obscura... what occurs is a new valuation of visual experience: it is given an unprecedented mobility and exchangeability, abstracted from any founding site or referent.⁴

³ Geoffrey Batchen, *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 22.

⁴ Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 3, 14.

The history of art and the history of perception, a notably heterogeneous set of relations, do not necessarily coincide. For Crary, the latter comes first and informs the former. It is an argument against technological determinism, a media theory model that assumes technology to be the sole, or primary, agent of cultural change. As a historical and theoretical foundation, Batchen and Crary's assertions inform my thinking. Formal and generic properties, as well as technologies themselves, derive genealogically, first and foremost, from cultural consciousness, not technology.

This aversion to strict technological determinism aligns with Altman's "crisis historiography." New technologies' identity crises foreground the fact that formal properties and content derive from previous media, not necessarily from functionality innate to the new medium. As previously noted, the first terms used to identify cinema were associated with older media, e.g., "moving pictures," "animated photographs," and "photoplay." Most films throughout the 1890s and 1900s replicated content found in other popular entertainments, such as news stories, theater and vaudeville, as well as cultural sites like fairs and amusement parks. Reproduction illustrates how old media, and the culture that represents that media, are remediated through new media.⁵ Furthermore, the prevalence of media reproduction in early cinema demonstrates a more widespread culture of reproduction present during this period. This chapter attempts to outline the various forms of media that were part of this culture leading up to the development of

⁵ See Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), who define "remediation" as the embedding of several media into one text.

motion picture technology by the end of the nineteenth century. The shift in perception starting a century earlier, as defined by Crary and Batchen, is a cogent starting point.

Such a momentous shift in perception had implications on the meaning of realism. Although the desire to reproduce indexical records more emphatically demarcated likenesses (e.g., painting) from objective documentation, the nineteenth-century shift in perception involved a move toward subjectivity rather than objectivity. As Crary notes,

some of the most pervasive means of producing “realistic” effects in mass visual culture, such as the stereoscope, were in fact based on a radical abstraction and reconstruction of optical experience, thus demanding a reconsideration of what “realism” means in the nineteenth century... the most influential figurations of an observer in the early nineteenth century depended on the priority of models of subjective vision, in contrast to the pervasive suppression of subjectivity in vision in seventeenth and eighteenth century thought.⁶

Both Crary and Batchen contend that, by the turn of the nineteenth century, the vision of artists and poets, as well as the desire to photograph, were distinct from empiricism and positivism. Positivistic assertions about objective reality are in fact absent from proto-photographers’ discourse.⁷ Beginning in the early nineteenth century, industrial capitalism and the rise of urbanization fundamentally revisioned societal infrastructure through new technologies and social institutions, as well as through the revisioning of individual subjects. In a variety of sectors—labor and commerce but also leisure activities and entertainment—individuals became increasingly ensconced in bureaucratized institutions with specific power structures. Crary defines modernization as “a process by which capitalism uproots and makes mobile that which is grounded, clears away or obliterates

⁶ Crary, 9.

⁷ Batchen, 22.

that which impedes circulation, and makes exchangeable what is singular.”⁸ The observing body is implicated in this process. For Batchen, “if photography is a mapping of bodies in time and space, then it is also a production of both those bodies and modernity’s particular conception of the time-space continuum.”⁹ The mapping, and perhaps even commodification, of bodies is linked to the power-knowledge-subject Foucault associates with the panopticon. Modern realism becomes linked with embodied subjectivity, and the visual looking relations and power dynamics that may imply, more so than objective empiricism.

As a form of entertainment media that synthesized visual attraction (Gunning) with the encouragement to contemplate and discern (Musser), motion pictures seem to have conformed to Crary’s modern subjective observer. In this chapter, I argue that the rise in popularity of reenactments throughout the nineteenth century demonstrates how Crary’s shift in perception informed the simulated reality of current and historical events, through the embodied subjectivity of the contemplating, discerning viewer. The rise of positivism later in the nineteenth century, however, complicates the relationship between embodied subjectivity and modern realism. A crucial component in the antimodernism T.J. Jackson Lears observes is a disenchantment with positivistic thinking.¹⁰ I would like to suggest that the rise in popularity of reenactments—the performative act itself as well as the reconstruction of events through various forms of media and popular entertainment

⁸ Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 10.

⁹ Batchen, 23.

¹⁰ T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, originally published, 1983).

—may have been a response to the increasing popularity of positivism, as a way to preserve subjective realism. In other words, simply documenting and archiving an event could not satisfactorily preserve the authentic embodied experience of that event. Reenactments could at least attempt to obtain an authentic historical experience, and they were an important part of late-nineteenth-century culture, both as an activity and in popular entertainment. Notable among the latter is Buffalo Bill's Wild West (1883-1913), a theatrical performance that toured the United States, featuring William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody enacting his own history as a frontiersman. Reenactments of historical and recent events were also frequent in fair and amusement park attractions. Kristen Whissel observes that reenactments served a dual function, to allow audiences to see the original historical event in some way and to manage the trauma associated with that event's memory. Drawing from Freud, she asserts, "The repetition/reenactment of a traumatic event allows the individual to shift from a passive to an active position of 'mastery' that translates unpleasure into pleasure."¹¹ A reenactment may or may not address a traumatic historical moment, but it is always at least an attempt to relinquish the trauma of not being able to access the authentic experience of the past. Of course, not all reenactments presume to represent past events. In the early days of Buffalo Bill's Wild West, it was generally assumed that the events depicted, while often reenactments of specific historical events in the recent past, were genuine reflections of contemporary life in the Western plains. Indeed, it never included the designation "show" in its title. The Wild

¹¹ Whissel, Kristen, *Picturing American Modernity: Traffic, Technology, and the Silent Cinema* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 99.

West served as ostensible reportage, reconceptualizing the present through its illusory reconstructions of the past. The semblance of objectivity conceals the illusion. The films examined in this dissertation performed a similar function, as reconstructions of seemingly present, but already past, events. Film reenactments conflated with the positivistic impulse to visually catalog events for objective posterity. As events became things to be cataloged and archived, reenactments allowed their authenticity to be negotiated. This aesthetic impulse is similarly found earlier in the nineteenth century with the Civil War photography of Mathew Brady and Alexander Gardner.

The Civil War, Photography, and the Culture of Replication

Staging was common in Civil War photography, particularly the repositioning of wounded, presumably dead, bodies in the aftermath of battle. Such images formulated a sensationalized representation of events but nevertheless provided evidence that such events had occurred in the recent past. They dramatized news from the warfront.

According to Alan Trachtenberg, woodcut sketches in the popular press, produced by artists such as Alfred Waud and Winslow Homer, influenced the act of staging in Civil War photographs.¹² Photography indicated its early identity crisis by employing journalistic formulas. The impulse to stage these views was similarly linked to the inadequacy of the unmanipulated view to dramatize an event: “Civil War photographers frequently resorted to stage-craft, arranging scenes of daily life in camp to convey a *look* of informality, posing groups of soldiers on picket duty—perhaps moving corpses into

¹² Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 84.

more advantageous positions for dramatic close-ups of littered battlefields.”¹³

Trachtenberg’s speculation regarding the staging of corpses is corroborated through an analysis of the images, detailed later in this section, as well as the fact that living actors were also often used to create the illusion of the immediate aftermath of battle, when in fact most of these images were produced long after battlefields had been cleared of the deceased. By more forcefully controlling the narrative, these photographers mastered the event and its memory in the American consciousness, overdetermining how the war and its fallen victims *should* be perceived, much like Buffalo Bill’s mastery of the Western mythology.

Mathew Brady was one of the first photographers in the United States, and by the mid-nineteenth century, one of the most renowned. He specialized in portrait photography, specifically of notable public figures, and was generally regarded as the semi-official photographer to the American presidency. Early photographers were initially interested in capturing nobility, not the quotidian, an impulse motion picture pioneers later shared. The first public screenings held by the Edison and Biograph companies in 1896 featured scenes from famous personas like May Irwin and presidential candidate William McKinley. Brady’s legacy, however, would eventually become forever linked with his Civil War photography.

Alexander Gardner managed Brady’s gallery in Washington, D.C. from 1858 to 1863. Gardner’s *Photographic Sketchbook of the Civil War* is perhaps the most accessible photographic record of the Civil War and contains many prominently-viewed images. The

¹³ Trachtenberg, 73.

Sketchbook consists of prints produced under Brady's employ and some autonomously produced by Gardner after leaving Brady in 1863.¹⁴ It amalgamates images with text, explicating the scenes depicted through a specific ideological lens. For example, in "Headquarters *New York Herald*, Army of the Potomac, Bealton, September, 1863," Gardner romanticizes the field reporter by noting in the text that the individuals photographed are knowledgeable in military matters. He further assumes that the *Herald* was the best at war reporting. Trachtenberg considers the book more of a monument to the Union Army, and those that served its cause (such as the *New York Herald*), than a catalog of objective battleground reporting.¹⁵ Indeed, the book concludes with the image "Dedication of Monument on Bull Run Battle-Field, June, 1865," a monument dedicated to deceased union soldiers. Although many of Gardner's images were intentionally staged or re-positioned, the photographer never alludes to forgery. The *Sketchbook* therefore complicates, rather than strictly dichotomizes, the relationship between reportage and reproduction.

While the first half-tone screens, which marked the beginning of photojournalism, were not published until 1885, illustrated weeklies published woodblock engravings derived from battlefield photographs throughout the Civil War.¹⁶ Illustrated weekly Viewers could have seen these images first in illustrated weeklies then in a photo gallery or Gardner's *Sketchbook*. Their institutional alignment would have therefore been

¹⁴ Brady rarely participated in traveling to battlefields, and it is possible that he never photographed any battle scenes himself.

¹⁵ Trachtenberg, 99.

¹⁶ Timothy Sweet, *Traces of War: Poetry, Photography, and the Crisis of the Union* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 84.

perceived as both journalistic and artistic. For example, Brady's Antietam photographs, the public's first glimpse of corpses on a battlefield, were exhibited at Brady's gallery, but journalists also reviewed them, and they were reproduced as wood engravings in illustrated weeklies, thus conflating the institutional settings of art and journalism.¹⁷

Gardner's photographs frequently thematize other forms of media associated with journalism, as evidenced in the aforementioned "Headquarters *New York Herald*." Similarly, in "U.S. Military Telegraph Construction Corps, April, 1864," we see a representation of the cutting-edge technology that made nationwide news dissemination possible. Gardner mentions how essential this technology was for President Lincoln, who would receive telegraphic reports from the battlefield. "President Lincoln on Battle-Field of Antietam, October, 1862" not only reinforces Lincoln's role as Commander-in-Chief but also geographically positions Lincoln at Antietam. "U.S. Military Telegraph Construction Corps" performs a similar function by describing Lincoln's presence on the battlefield through telegraphic technology. James Carey has theorized the telegraph as a technological moment involving "the transition from colonialism, where power and authority rested with the domestic governor, to imperialism, where power and authority were reabsorbed by the imperial capital."¹⁸ The telegraph allowed news to become more centrally disseminated and universalized. Visual technologies like photography and cinematography also participated in this imperial shift. Gardner's "U.S. Military

¹⁷ See Sweet, 116.

¹⁸ James Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 212.

Telegraph Construction Corps” serves as a commentary on the technological and institutional parallels between telegraphy and photography.

It is important to consider that Gardner viewed photography as a representation of presentness, as Timothy Sweet observes: “Texts, according to Gardner, are *re-*presentations; photographs are ‘presentments.’”¹⁹ John Tagg claims that photography leads to the death of memory and the death of the astonishment of the moment.²⁰ Therefore, the moment of viewing and the moment depicted seem to co-exist. Yet Gardner included an abundance of text in his work, perhaps as a way to cope with the shocking erasure of an event’s original presentness; in other words, sustaining its authentic memory. Similarly, Alan Trachtenberg and Susan Sontag discuss the relationship between photography’s presentness and history. Trachtenberg asserts, “Images become history, more than traces of a specific event in the past, when they are used to interpret the present in light of the past, when they are presented and received as explanatory accounts of collective reality. They become history when they are conceived as symbolic events in a shared culture.”²¹ For Sontag,

what photography supplies is not only a record of the past but a new way of dealing with the present... While old photographs fill out our mental image of the past, the photographs being taken now transform what is present into a mental image, like the past. Cameras establish an inferential relation to the present (reality is known by its traces), provide an instantly retroactive view of

¹⁹ Sweet, 120.

²⁰ John Tagg, *The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 230.

²¹ Trachtenberg, 6.

experience. Photographs give mock forms of possession: of the past, present, and even the future.²²

The photograph produces a semblance of presentness despite its inability to actually capture the present. It is worth noting that motion pictures, including actualities, function somewhat differently since presentness is continually fleeting and therefore never foregrounded like the static photograph. Gardner attempted to present the currentness of the event's depicted in his images, not re-present their pastness. In this light, we can distinguish Gardner's fabricated images from the "humbug" associated with P.T. Barnum.²³ Gardner did not intend to intentionally fool his audiences as a game of deception. Rather, he sought the authenticity of the moment, which often required revisions and interventions that the technology itself could not produce.

Staging in these photographs was less a specific strategy than a necessity due to technological limitations. Producing photographic images at this time took approximately twenty minutes and required large equipment that could not be managed safely amid actual battle. The fact that there are no battle scenes in the *Sketchbook* demonstrates this limitation.²⁴ In "Battery D, Second U.S. Artillery, in Action, Fredericksburg, 1863," we see soldiers preparing canons, which is the closest the *Sketchbook* gets to depictions of combat. However, it is significant that battles were never actually staged. It would be shortsighted to assume that technological limitations motivated content entirely, though it is difficult to doubt that this played some role. Nothing here is outright forgery in a

²² Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990, originally published, 1977), 167.

²³ See Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum* (New York: Little Brown, 1973).

²⁴ See Trachtenberg, 72.

malevolent sense. Rather, Gardner's images seem less interested in reporting battle than eliciting the pathos of war's aftermath. They do not attempt to capture the action of death itself but rather retrieve the subjectivity of dead soldiers and their embodied reactions to death. They demonstrate a photographer attempting to unearth truth amid the chaos and confusion of violence and death, something real amid the surreality of war.

Despite this more artistic, non-journalistic interpretation of Gardner's *Sketchbook*, the presentness of the photographs innately encodes the images as reportage. As Trachtenberg observes, "They were received as 'true' because people believed in photographic 'truth'."²⁵ But art and journalism are not opposing aesthetics, and we see their conflation in these images. Objectivity is creatively treated. This is the essential value of the textual accompaniment, which recalls Roland Barthes's claim of photography as a "*message without a code*."²⁶ Barthes distinguishes between denotation (superficial meaning) and connotation (implied meaning). Connotation relates to ideology, which varies in different cultural contexts. Sets of "connotators" are fundamentally rhetorical, the signifying aspect of ideology.²⁷ For Barthes, photographs can only be traumatic if some connotation is applied to them, or they represent a reality for someone, in which case that individual rhetorically codes them.²⁸ In this model, reality is socially constructed, not scientifically objective. In his work on historical discourse, Barthes destabilizes the dichotomy between historical fact-telling and fictional storytelling:

²⁵ Trachtenberg, 83.

²⁶ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Noonday Press, 1988), 17.

²⁷ Barthes, 49.

²⁸ Barthes, 30-31.

For a history to be totally without meaning, its discourse would have to be nothing but an unstructured catalogue of isolated observations... even an anarchic presentation of the facts will at least convey the meaning ‘anarchy’ and suggest a particular philosophy of history of a negative kind... the historian assembles not so much facts as *significants*; and these he connects and organizes in such a way as to replace the vacuousness of the pure catalogue with positive meaning... historical discourse is essentially a product of ideology, or rather of imagination, if we accept the view that it is via the language of imagination that responsibility for an utterance passes from a purely linguistic entity to a psychological or ideological one.²⁹

For example, in “Burnside Bridge, Across Antietam Creek, MD., September, 1862,” there is virtually no way of knowing the subject of the image without the text. We see a bridge crossing a creek in the middle-ground while a long wall in the foreground stretches horizontally across the image and parallel with the body of water. No human subjects are present. The wall shows faint signs of destruction, though the aftermath of war is not visually conspicuous. The text fully contextualizes the image by informing the viewer of a battle that had occurred at Burnside Bridge. Additionally, Gardner’s text asserts that Confederates are buried underground at this site, context that is newsworthy but not visually explicated in the photograph. If we take Barthes at his word, indexical objectivity cannot have meaning and therefore cannot possess any truth value. What we perceive as authentic requires construction, or narrativization, in a way that aligns with social symbolic codes. While we can assume an ideological strategy of communication based on the text, many viewers at the time would have seen these photographs in galleries, not the photo book, and since the 1860s these images have been re-appropriated

²⁹ Roland Barthes, “Historical Discourse,” in *Introduction to Structuralism*, ed. Michael Lane (New York: Basic Books, 1970), 152-53.

in various settings. Despite Gardner's unmistakable Union sympathies, the photographs themselves yield heterogeneous potential readings.

Civil War photographs "aided the construction of an affirmative, nationalist ideological meaning for the war."³⁰ The quest for authenticity was therefore sought at the expense of the soldiers' individuality. According to Sweet,

When the corpses of soldiers were textually or visually represented within the scene of the landscape, they became objects appropriated by the state no less than the land itself over which they fought. The dead soldier—Northerner or Southerner—was the sign of an individual whose autonomy was surrendered to the ideology of the Union... no matter what political beliefs are held by an individual soldier, his death or injury is a referentially unstable sign that is appropriated by the discourse of war to legitimate the ideology of the victor of the state.³¹

The fact that living actors performed as dead soldiers further problematizes the autonomy and bodily sovereignty of the deceased. Moreover, the foregrounding of landscape serves a universalizing function, relinquishing geographical individualization and connecting all land to the prevailing national ideology.³² The evaporation of self and individuality, vis-à-vis Gardner's overarching ideology, is particularly evident in "A Harvest of Death, Gettysburg, July, 1863." The title insinuates a cyclical process in which death leads to rebirth. As Sweet notes, "the political context suggests that the represented Confederate dead are the fruit of the rebellion cut down in the field and left to decompose into the land. The photograph thus becomes the symbol of the death and decay of the Confederacy that fertilizes the new growth of the Union."³³ Deceased Union soldiers are

³⁰ Sweet, 6.

³¹ Sweet, 105.

³² Sweet, 106.

³³ Sweet, 126-27.



Figure 1.1: “A Harvest of Death, Gettysburg, July, 1863,” in Gardner, Alexander, *Gardner’s Photographic Sketchbook of the Civil War* (1866)

not represented in the same way. But the literature on Brady and Gardner’s work seems to focus exclusively on what Stuart Hall would refer to as “dominant” ideological readings. Hall asserts the possibility of media interpretations that either conform to the dominant ideologies represented, negotiate them, or resist them altogether.³⁴ The existing scholarship on Brady and Gardner’s photographs often fails to consider the possibility of negotiated, or even resistant, engagements with these photographs. With regard to “Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter, Gettysburg, July, 1863,” Sweet contends, “only by calculating the improbability of the position of the musket could the viewer conclude that this image

³⁴ Stuart Hall, “Encoding/decoding,” in *Culture, Media, Language*, eds. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Love & Paul Willis (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 128-138.

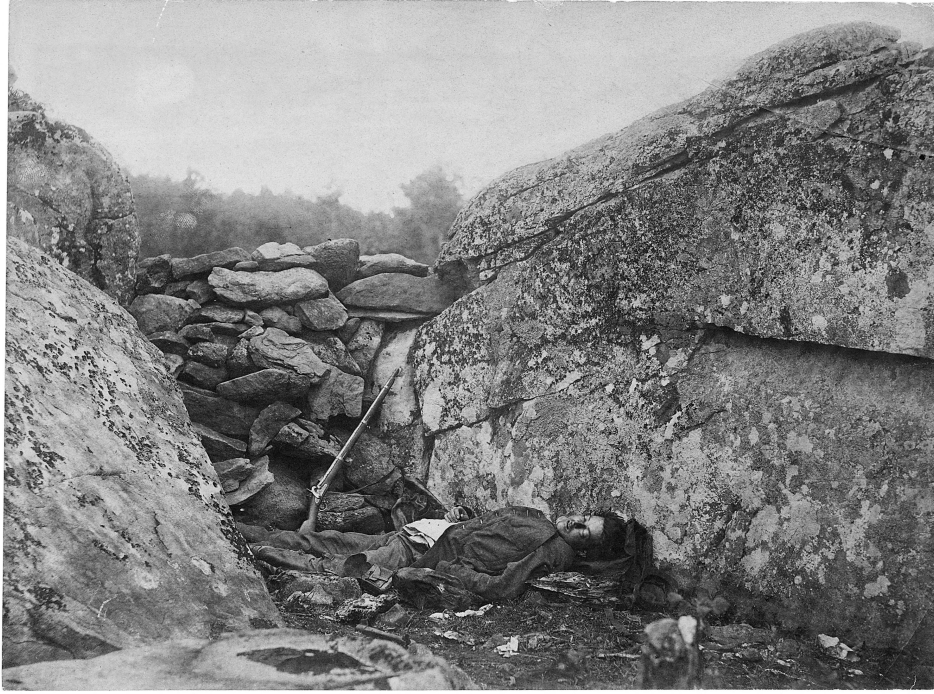


Figure 1.2: "Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter, Gettysburg, July, 1863," in Gardner, Alexander, *Gardner's Photographic Sketchbook of the Civil War* (1866)

was arranged.”³⁵ But this is certainly possible! And the medium accommodates long, contemplative observation. Unlike the fleeting moments of motion pictures, patrons of photography can study images and more easily question verisimilitude. Southerners viewing these images in the immediate aftermath of the war may have resisted Gardner’s ideological underpinnings, or perhaps even inserted their own interpretation of Confederate heroism. Such viewers may have reflexively acknowledged the ideologies being propagated, and in turn easily noticed where fabrications were being performed.

Photography’s perceived ability to provide scientific evidence, arguably a result of the rise of positivistic thought throughout the nineteenth century, is therefore inherently flawed. Developments in science (or pseudo-science), industrialization, and more

³⁵ Sweet, 130.

rationalized structures of everyday life affected the shift toward positivistic ways of thinking. But the photograph raises a debate between its scientific and/or artistic value. More specifically, photos seem to conflate positivism with aestheticism. Kracauer addresses this debate when he identifies photography as something distinct from the arts but also distinct from science. Photographs are “real,” but they are also abstractions of reality, remote from the reality depicted, much like older forms of art.³⁶ Photography involves both a “realistic tendency” and a “formative tendency” because photographs depict objects of the real world and the photographer’s interpretation of them.³⁷ For Kracauer, “the photographer endows his pictures with structure and meaning to the extent to which he makes deliberate choices. His pictures record nature and at the same time reflect his attempt to assimilate and decipher it.”³⁸ The photograph in some ways marks a transition for “art,” a term that Kracauer insists should be used more loosely. Positivism and construction, and we might include replications and reproductions in the latter, not only conflate but become competing aesthetics on the reception end. Does the viewer experience the conflation or simply assume either the image’s objectivity or its construction? This conflation and competition is evident throughout the first decade of cinema with the predominance of actuality films alongside reenactment films, and it becomes particularly salient among films that invoke both aesthetics; for example, the

³⁶ Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960) 9-10.

³⁷ Kracauer, 13.

³⁸ Kracauer, 20.

amalgamation of actuality footage and staged scenes in *Execution of Czolgosz With Panorama of Auburn Prison* (Edison, 1901).

The culture of positivism paralleled a culture of replication that began to take shape later in the nineteenth century. The prevalence of replication in media and popular entertainment would further reinforce universalized constructions of reality. In his discussion regarding the aesthetic of replication, Miles Orvell cites Gardner as an example of playing upon the audience's belief in veracity in order to achieve a rhetorical effect.³⁹ Reality is not only undermined but also reconstructed in a manner that alters our expectations for what constitutes reality. According to Orvell,

The camera was becoming, at the turn of the century, the symbol of a kind of intrusive presence in society: a culture that had been fascinated with spectacles and replications of reality, and that had brought myriad photographic microcosms into the parlor, was itself becoming the spectacle... To look back on the practice of photography in the late nineteenth century from our own perspective is to see a world of artificial realism in harmony with a culture of replications, where what was offered as almost nature was sufficient.⁴⁰

Sontag makes a similar point when she notes that images become less real after repeated exposure.⁴¹ In this light, the quest for authenticity through reconstruction might result in a lack of reality. But it seems misguided to assume that reconstructed scenes are less real. Orvell's point is that the very notion of reality was being reconstructed. Barthes likens the photograph to Lacan's "tuché," an encounter with the real, as opposed to "automaton," a

³⁹ Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 96.

⁴⁰ Orvell, 101.

⁴¹ Sontag, 20.

symbolic source in a network of signifiers.⁴² For Lacan, automaton is linked to repetition and the pleasure principle, while tuché involves a missed moment that produces trauma.⁴³ Reproduction, while a performance of repetition, seems more aligned with tuché; or rather, the reproduction of an event attempts to attain tuché, though it can only ever be automaton. Reproductions elucidate the pastness of a seemingly present moment. They elicit not a sense of being there but of missing being there. They seek to encounter the reality of the missed moment. The viewer then has the prerogative to accept this reality or resist it. As non-time-based media, photographs in particular encourage the viewer to contemplate what strikes them as authentic.

Barthes distinguishes between *studium* and *punctum*.⁴⁴ Studium relates to study, or an enthusiastic commitment, and actively affects the image. Punctum is passive and involuntary. Something that is specifically poignant to the viewer affects them. Not all images have a punctum for everyone. The studium is coded, the punctum is not.⁴⁵ Reproductions are less outright attempts to fabricate events than attempts to elicit something truthful for the viewer. By conflating reportage and performance, Gardner's *Sketchbook* demonstrates a search for punctum, an attempt to represent something authentic, not simply display objective reality.

⁴² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 4.

⁴³ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998, originally published, 1973), 53-55.

⁴⁴ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 26-27.

⁴⁵ Barthes, 51.

Fairs, Amusement Culture, and the Cinema of Attractions

The Civil War's traumatic memories saturated the American social consciousness throughout the latter nineteenth century, and the repetition of these traumatic memories was abundantly performed across various forms of popular entertainment. Painted cycloramas like Paul Philippoteaux's *Panorama of the Battle of Gettysburg* (1884) attempted to reconstruct the battle's veracity as a visual spectacle. It sought to ameliorate the trauma of war, in the Freudian sense, by interpolating the viewer as an eyewitness to the original event while also establishing itself as a uniquely modern form of entertainment. According to Alison Griffiths, "As the panorama form evolved, it prepared spectators for a more fragmented way of seeing the world, a more modern perception, that was influenced by illustrated newspapers."⁴⁶ Griffiths also suggests that panoramas trained audiences to make sense of cinematic reenactments.⁴⁷ This might indicate that spectators familiar with the illusion of panoramas recognized the same thing in motion picture reenactments. But assuming that audiences simply recognized these reenactments as forgeries of the original event, for the purpose of entertainment, does a disservice to the function of reenactment. Ivone Margulies claims, "what is most at stake in reenactments is 'an identity which can recall the original event (through second-degree indexicality) but in so doing can also reform it.'"⁴⁸ Griffiths argues that this reformation was an improvement to the original. The event becomes more corporeally real through

⁴⁶ Alison Griffiths, "'Shivers Down Your Spine': Panoramas and the Origins of the Cinematic Reenactment" *Screen* 44, no. 1 (2003): 15.

⁴⁷ Griffiths, 36-37.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Griffiths, 30-31.

the secondhand indexicality that reenactment provides. There is, however, the inherent risk of ideological narrativization in performing second-degree indexicality. Griffiths's connection between the panorama and cinema is a useful framework for considering the cultural response to reconstructions of events in varying forms of media and entertainment around the turn of the twentieth century, particularly in terms of this problematic oscillation between seeking the reality of an event through reconstruction but also potentially reconstructing its meaning.

Civil War reenactments would also become popular amusement park attractions. Lauren Rabinovitz observes that amusement parks and cinema seemed to emerge simultaneously between 1894 and 1896.⁴⁹ Amusement parks descended from world's fairs. The World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, held in Chicago, led to Chutes Park, which opened one block away from the site of the Exposition and mimicked its style.⁵⁰ Expositions like the one in Chicago in 1893 were globally prevalent beginning around mid-century. According to Paul Greenhalgh, "The British inaugurated the tradition in 1851, the French embellished its form and became the acknowledged masters of it, the Americans pushed its size and expense to a final extreme."⁵¹ World's fairs were attempts to contain the global world in one space through a first-world gaze. They epitomized the transition from colonialism to imperialism. Colonized cultures could now be uprooted and relocated to centralized imperial locations for the visual pleasure of first-world

⁴⁹ Lauren Rabinovitz, *Electric Dreamland: Amusement Parks, Movies, and American Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 2.

⁵⁰ See Rabinovitz, 2-3.

⁵¹ Paul Greenhalgh, *Ephemeral Vistas: The Expositions Universelles, Great Exhibitions, and World's Fairs, 1851-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 2.

citizens. The overarching goal of world's fairs was to demonstrate modern economic progress. As Robert Rydell asserts, "World's fairs performed a hegemonic function precisely because they propagated the ideas and values of the country's political, financial, corporate, and intellectual leaders and offered these ideas as the proper interpretation of social and political reality."⁵² The progress of modern Western capitalism was reinforced by comparing this ostensible progress with what was perceived as primitive.

According to Fatima Tobing Rony, ethnographic fairs, similar to later ethnographic films, were like a "time machine" for traveling back in evolutionary time, though in a manner that would construct Native bodies as hieroglyphs, or taxidermic archetypes.⁵³ Throughout the nineteenth century, "race" became a Western-constructed term used to classify and differentiate various Indigenous and Diasporic peoples around the globe. Moreover, as the etymologically linked terms "race" and "nation" coincided in the late eighteenth century, discourses of race became inevitably tied to ideologies of nationalism and imperialism, which were present in a variety of fair exhibits, along with broader narratives of technological and industrial progress.⁵⁴ Yet it would be misguided to assume race and nation as purely modern appellations, as antimodern polemics might seem compelled to do.⁵⁵ These premodern ideas simply took on new forms in the modern

⁵² Robert Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at the American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 3.

⁵³ Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 43.

⁵⁴ See Rony, 26.

⁵⁵ See, for example, Peter King, *The Antimodern Condition: An Argument Against Progress* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 110.

world. It is also important to consider how nineteenth-century ethnographic fairs may have involved some degree of connecting with, not alienating outright, so-called primitive cultures. While functioning to dichotomize civilized Western society from primitive indigeneity, these exhibits also suggest a fear of becoming too modern. What was perceived as antithetical to modernity was also nostalgically fetishized. Therefore, nineteenth-century fairs illustrate that an antimodern ideology was in fact part of the modern experience. Furthermore, attractions and reenactment culture were connected. While performing reenactments in their own right, namely through ethnographic exhibitions, fairs also served as predecessors to popular attractions that invoked historical reenactments, such as amusement parks and, perhaps most famously, Buffalo Bill's Wild West.

Buffalo Bill's Wild West toured throughout the United States and Europe from 1883 to 1913 and featured reenactments of battles from the Civil War and the American Indian Wars, notably the Battle of the Little Bighorn. The Wild West's star, William Cody (Buffalo Bill), was a Union soldier and United States Army veteran. The Wild West also featured Indigenous actors performing battles from the Indian Wars, though White actors frequently played these roles. Joy Kasson observes that the Wild West performed at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, and although it was separate from the ethnographic spectacles seen in the "White City" exhibits, it could have been perceived as an extension of that exhibit, as a similar form of imperialistic visual spectacle.⁵⁶ The

⁵⁶ Joy S. Kasson, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West: Celebrity, Memory, and Popular History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), 217.

links between the Wild West and early cinema are numerous. Wild West performers reenacted their performances at Edison's Black Maria studio in West Orange, NJ in the mid-1890s, and many such performers subsequently continued working in motion pictures. For example, Luther Standing Bear starred in Hollywood westerns in the 1920s and 1930s. Cody himself tried his hand in the movie business with the films *The Life of Buffalo Bill* (Pawnee Bill Film Co., 1912) and *The Indian Wars* (Essanay, 1914) in the twilight of his career. Therefore, the mythology of the West that Buffalo Bill initiated informed the motion picture industry and the western genre in particular.

The cultural fascination with the Wild West may have involved some degree of antimodern agrarian revivalism, which, as Lears notes, "envisioned rural life as a path to moral regeneration."⁵⁷ In the face of modern industrial civilization and potential racial integration, the Wild West also catered to violent impulses directed toward racial Others. In the context of the post-Civil War Reconstruction period, the manifestation of racial violence may have served a reconciliatory social function for a primarily White audience. Joy Kasson notes its popularity in the South, despite Cody's alliance with the Union. White audiences in the North and South could identify with Cody as a western hero and the "Indian" as a common antagonist. By inverting the reality of colonialism through the portrayal of Natives as aggressors, Buffalo Bill's Wild West may have helped heal the divide between North and South in the postbellum years through the commonality of whiteness against a perceivably greater threat. A similar form of White supremacy and Indigenous erasure through battle reenactment occurred in later iterations of the Wild

⁵⁷ Lears, 75.

West during the Spanish-American War in 1898, “uniting the country behind its military forces and allowing the White South to vindicate its honor and emotionally rejoin the Union.”⁵⁸ Cody was an active supporter of the Spanish-American War and even proposed that Natives join the United States and fight in Havana. Theodore Roosevelt, who presumably took the name “Rough Riders” directly from the Wild West, became a Cody-esque war hero and cultural icon.

While healing the wounds of war through reenactment and repetition, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West paradoxically romanticized violence. Spectators delighted in the visual and aural spectacle of the Wild West’s action-packed, often violent, content. The violent nature of the Wild West was part of a broader American culture of violence present in various amusement sites. In particular, amusement park pyrodramas were extravagant performances, featuring pyrotechnic spectacles, set in outdoor amphitheaters. These pyrodramas were almost always reenactments of either historical events in the distant past—*The Last Days of Pompeii*, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*—or events from recent memory—*Johnstown Flood*, *Galveston Flood*, *Battle of Manila*, *The Destruction of San Francisco by Earthquake*. In the concluding pages of this chapter, I will discuss how many of these disastrous events were later reenacted on film, but it is first necessary to outline how violence, disaster and spectacle functioned collaboratively within amusement culture.

Coney Island epitomized turn-of-the-century amusement culture. In fact, numerous amusement sites throughout the United States named their parks after Coney

⁵⁸ Joy S. Kasson, 243.

Island or one of its properties: Dreamland, Luna Park, and Steeplechase Park. John Kasson examines Coney Island as representative of a cultural transition from Victorian gentility to modernity through its carnivalesque nature, upending and defamiliarizing social conventions through absurd playfulness, similar to the humbug of P.T. Barnum. Kasson argues that Coney Island represented an actual melting pot, as opposed to the rest of urban America, which was diverse but segregated, though he seems to be referring to an exclusively White demographic. Amusement culture was a primarily White activity. Rabinovitz notes that Jim Crow laws prohibited Black attendance at amusement parks in the South, and this practice was often adopted in the North. “Jim Crow Days” allowed Black audiences to attend amusement parks at segregated times, and certain amenities were restricted.⁵⁹ Kasson does not account for the fact that amusement park audiences, while heterogeneous in terms of class, were racially prohibitive. One year after Buffalo Bill’s Wild West had an extensive run at Ambrose Park in Brooklyn, *Black America* was featured at the same site in 1895. The show featured a reconstruction of plantation life in the South. Like ethnographic reconstructions at world’s fairs, *Black America* patrons were encouraged to identify with whiteness. The notion that Coney Island, and similar amusement sites, served as a carnivalesque social transgression is somewhat problematic when one considers how many attractions encouraged Othering. Amusement patrons fetishized and looked at the exotic, as opposed to actively participating in it.

Kasson does, however, contend that the carnivalesque function of amusement culture became paradoxically institutionalized:

⁵⁹ Rabinovitz, 27-28.

Coney Island did not lead to true cultural revolt, but served to affirm the existing culture. Rather than suggesting alternatives to the prevailing economic and social order, as carnivals have often done in other cultures, Coney acted as a safety valve, a mechanism of social release and control that ultimately protected existing society. Its fantasy led not to a new apprehension of social possibilities, but toward passive acceptance of the cycle of production and consumption. The egalitarian spirit it fostered paradoxically served to reconcile visitors to the inequalities of society at large.⁶⁰

I might add that part of this reconciliation was due to the spectacle of amusements.

Pleasure was derived less from action and more from looking, immersing oneself in the mass crowd, and identifying with the attractions' ideological underpinnings. Spectacle functioned to relieve trauma, the trauma of recent events such as wars and natural disasters, but also the trauma associated with individual subjectivity in the modern world. Georg Simmel contemporaneously defined the modern metropolis as "conflict" between objective rationality and individual subjectivity, not that the former necessarily prevailed but rather the latter became more essential to compensate for modern objectivity.⁶¹ While carnivalesque in the sense that they resisted modernity's objective rationality to some degree, amusement parks also relinquished individual subjectivity, and for many White immigrants they encouraged assimilation.

Gunning's seminal work on the cinema of attractions aligns the experience of pre-narrative cinema (1894-1907) with the cultural attraction of urban amusement parks like Coney Island. Gunning assumes this form as fundamental to the avant-garde; or more

⁶⁰ John Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 109.

⁶¹ Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in *Georg Simmel: On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. Levine (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971, originally published, 1903), 339.

accurately, he argues that the cinema of attractions persisted throughout the twentieth century in avant-garde practices. However, like amusement culture, it could be argued that early motion pictures, despite their propensity toward the carnivalesque, generally failed to be transgressive in the same way later avant-garde filmmakers would be. In fact, what defines the cinema of attractions is a conflation between the spectacular and the quotidian; in other words, the pleasure derived from looking at everyday reality in motion on screen. Musser compellingly illustrates how the spectatorial experience of early cinema amalgamated attraction with contemplation and discernment. The impulse to document is innately tied to the impulses to both visually stimulate and challenge viewers, which might explain why newsworthy content, as both visually stimulating and intellectually engaging, was so prevalent in early cinema. The paradoxical balance between objectivity and sensationalism collided to produce a form situated somewhere in between actuality and fiction.

Objectivity and Sensationalism

While these seemingly polarized aesthetics fused in certain forms of media, they also competed, particularly in journalism. The oscillation between the professional standards of objectivity and sensationalism was evident as American journalism developed between the 1830s and 1890s. And although the cinema of attractions maintained a symbiotic relationship between attraction and objectivity, these aesthetic impulses may have competed in a manner similar to journalism's objective/sensational polarity.

Beginning in the 1830s in the United States, “penny press” included newspapers mass-produced cheaply and targeted toward middle-class, specifically the urban professional middle-class that was emerging amid the dawn of industrialization, and literate working-class audiences. Perhaps most notable among these newspapers was the *New York Herald*, founded by James Gordon Bennett in 1835, who Michael Schudson claims was “the most original figure in American Journalism, at least until Joseph Pulitzer.”⁶² Technology played an important role in this revolution in American journalism. The penny press revolution, and the universalization of information that telegraphic technologies created, consequently necessitated more objective, less narrativized news. Throughout the early to mid-nineteenth century, the telegraph continually effaced regional difference, thus universalizing American culture and language while also increasing objectivity in the news. Schudson uses the term “objectivity” in a professional sense, not empirically. Objectivity is less something that innately exists in the world than an industry-constructed professional standard. For Schudson, “objectivity... means that a person’s statements about the world can be trusted if they are submitted to established rules deemed legitimate by a professional community. Facts here are not aspects of the world, but consensually validated statements about it.”⁶³ This revolution intersected with the development of photographic technology and, more specifically, constitutes the reconstructions of power and vision outlined at the beginning of this chapter.

⁶² Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978, originally published, 1967), 50.

⁶³ Schudson, 7.

The colonization of the Western United States corroborates that shifting perceptions regarding time and space were part of the cultural consciousness, not necessarily determined by telegraphic technology. The tools developed throughout the nineteenth century only aided manifest destiny, the impulse to bridge the distant spaces of the continent and efface anything in between. Part of this impulse, as Walter Benjamin argues, involved the elimination of uniqueness in favor of ubiquity, as well as the acceptance of reproduction over reality.⁶⁴ The emergence of tourism functioned as a consumerist prelude to the disintegration of uniqueness and aura, which telegraphic, photographic, and railway technologies supported. Drawing from Benjamin, Wolfgang Schivelbusch asserts that film form itself would participate in this disintegration: “In the filmic perception—i.e., the perception of *montage*, the juxtaposition of the most disparate images into one unit—the new reality of annihilated in-between spaces finds its clearest expression: the film brings things closer to the viewer as well as closer together.”⁶⁵ Consequently, social life would become increasingly more external and spectacular throughout the nineteenth century, much like the experience of attending amusement parks. It is therefore not coincidental that many journalists negotiated between objectivity and entertainment. By the 1890s sensationalized, and in some cases entirely fake, news became a journalistic paradigm that co-existed with staunchly objective institutions like the *New York Times*. This shift elucidates a broader cultural transition throughout the nineteenth century. Like trends in photography, live performance, and eventually motion

⁶⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), 220-22.

⁶⁵ Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 42.

pictures, journalists in the nineteenth century narratively reconstructed events. Moreover, sensationalization in the press may have been an inevitable effect of ambivalent relationships with modern reality.

The trend toward sensationalized press in the latter part of the nineteenth century paralleled with the increasingly visual nature of news during this period. The *New York Daily Graphic* began printing illustrations as early as 1873, and by the early 1880s Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* included portrait art and cartoons.⁶⁶ By the 1890s two seemingly dichotomous forms of journalism were the professional standard; objective reporting associated with papers like the *New York Times*, and the sensationalized "yellow journalism," similar to contemporary tabloids, associated with the papers of Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst. Yellow journalism consisted of fabricated and/or fake stories, and generally lacked political objectivity, but also included accurate reporting. Their commercial impulse and desire to sell stories more effectively than their respective competitors were their defining attributes. *Times* owner Adolph Ochs once claimed that people read Pulitzer's *World* and Hearst's *New York Journal* because they were cheap, not because they desired sensationalized news.⁶⁷ But such an assertion underestimates the value that most readers placed on print news, as their primary source for information about the world. Richard Abel offers a useful framework for contextualizing newspaper readership at this time. For Abel, the primary function of turn-of-the-century newspapers was to offer menus for readers to navigate the chaotic social sphere of modern urban life,

⁶⁶ See Schudson, 95-96.

⁶⁷ See Schudson, 115.

similar to department store categories of goods for sale, restaurant menus, and eventually the various genres of motion pictures.⁶⁸ With this idea in mind, it seems misguided to assume audiences consumed yellow journalism simply due to its affordability. Rather, readers of these papers likely sought an alternative to the *Times*' banal objective reportage. At the risk of appearing too apologetic, it is important to demystify the notion that yellow journalism was nothing more than fake news. Indeed, it was at times, but it should more accurately be described as dramatized reality, not utter fabrication. Hearst hired fiction writers like Stephen Crane not to make up stories but to add a dramatic element to nonfictional events.⁶⁹ Additionally, purely fictional short stories were often published in these newspapers. Narrativizing the modern world may have alleviated its shocking impact.

The synthesis of sensationalism and reportage was present in various forms of media throughout the nineteenth century. For example, Vanessa Schwartz examines three popular visual attractions in fin de siècle Paris—the Paris Morgue, wax museums, and panoramas—arguing that the popular press inflicted a public taste for sensationalized reality. Most striking in her assessment is the connection to journalism, particularly with regard to the Musée Grévin, whose founders “promised that their display would ‘represent the principal current events with scrupulous fidelity and striking precision,’

⁶⁸ Richard Abel, *Menus for Movieland: Newspapers and the Emergence of American Film Culture, 1913-1916* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 2, 10.

⁶⁹ See Louis Pizzitola, *Hearst Over Hollywood: Power, Passion, and Propaganda in the Movies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 17.

serving as ‘a living newspaper.’”⁷⁰ The scenes, or tableaux, depicted were almost exclusively newsworthy events or famous personas, not scenes of everyday reality, and blended spectacle with reportage: “their taste for the real was posited on the blurring of life and art... the reality-effect also resided in spectators’ abilities to make connections between the spectacles they saw and the familiar press narratives they already knew.”⁷¹ Such attractions did not necessarily serve as proto-cinema but rather constructed a particular audience that would ultimately attend the movies. Much like Parisian wax museums and panoramas, a majority of early motion pictures captured newsworthy reality in a sensationalized manner. It is, however, interesting to underscore the fact that this sensibility emerged in France when we generally associate the work of the Lumière Brothers with everyday actuality, not newsworthy events, the latter of which were far more prevalent in the United States in the 1890s. These French, proto-cinematic, newsworthy attractions illustrate how there were no specific national sensibilities per se, and the impulses to report news, record the quotidian, and produce fiction all converged and competed in various ways and across national borders.

There are conspicuous parallels between the nascent motion picture medium and the more established medium of print journalism. The impulse to document newsworthy occurrences as visual spectacles for commercial entertainment demonstrates a nuanced negotiation between verisimilitude and sensationalism. Despite the abundance of

⁷⁰ Vanessa R. Schwartz, “Cinematic Spectatorship Before the Apparatus: The Public Taste for Reality in Fin-de-Siècle Paris,” in *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, eds. Leo Charney & Vanessa R. Schwartz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 304.

⁷¹ Schwartz, 316.

actualities in the 1890s, fictional films were certainly not absent during this period. While the narrative fiction film would become the dominant paradigm starting around 1903, this historiography could erroneously assume that fiction was not present prior to this moment, when in fact comic and dramatic subjects were just as prevalent as actualities. More importantly, even at its most quotidian, early cinema was a cinema of attractions. Fiction and nonfiction co-existed much like contemporaneous newspapers. By the 1910s motion pictures were more pervasively adapting models of realism and naturalism from literary trends of the latter nineteenth century, and nonfictional content was not always clearly distinguishable. While journalism shifted toward objectivity as an institutional paradigm in the early decades of the twentieth century, the development of the documentary film by the 1920s and 1930s conversely further sensationalized reality. In fact, Grierson praised Hearst for his dramatic approach to nonfictional content.⁷²

The term sensation is linked to bodily experience, and it is not coincidental that modernity can be described in terms of ontological, embodied transitions. Schivelbusch outlines the etymology of the term “shock,” which is derived from the word “collide.” By the eighteenth century, shock would come to be associated with both the event of a collision but also the pathological state that collision causes in its victims.⁷³ Schivelbusch is primarily interested in the shock caused by modern transportation technologies, specifically the collision of trains with persons, but this notion of collision correlates to the shock caused by the collision of visual spectacles in entertainment media, including

⁷² See Pizzitola, 38.

⁷³ Schivelbusch, *Railway Journey*, 151, 156.

the collision of edited images in cinema. Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein has famously theorized motion pictures, particularly their juxtaposition through editing, as a collision that produces conflict, and this is “the basis of every art.”⁷⁴ Popular culture in the nineteenth century was fascinated with the dangers of modern life. Disasters such as fires and train collisions were prevalent film subjects, as I shall outline later in this chapter, which developed from established representational strategies in illustrated newspapers. Ben Singer observes that this fascination elicited a hyperstimulus that may have subdued anxieties regarding such dangers. To achieve this subduing of the dangers associated with modern life, the illustrated press would frequently juxtapose premodern nostalgia with modern fascination, or in Singer’s words, “paradoxically, both a form of social critique and, at the same time, a form of commercialized sensationalism.”⁷⁵ This is precisely how Kasson identifies amusement culture and is indicative of urban American society at this time. Similarly, Eisenstein defines art as the intersection, or collision, of nature (organic) and industry (rational).⁷⁶ Early film actualities, however, seem far less sensationalized than the illustrated examples Singer provides. It would seem, superficially at least, that actualities are more aligned with Singer’s description of modernity’s intellectual framework as “instrumental rationality.”⁷⁷ But actualities were intended to be visual spectacle, and their sensationalization is evidenced by films that

⁷⁴ Sergei Eisenstein, *The Film Form*, trans. & ed. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, 1949), 38.

⁷⁵ Ben Singer, “Modernity, Hyperstimulus, and the Rise of Popular Sensationalism,” in *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, eds. Leo Charney & Vanessa R. Schwartz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 87.

⁷⁶ Eisenstein, *Film Form*, 46.

⁷⁷ Singer, “Modernity, Hyperstimulus, and the Rise of Popular Sensationalism,” 72.

underscore this property. For example, *Demolishing and Building Up the Star Theatre* (Biograph, 1901) uses time-lapse photography to visualize the reversal of the Star Theatre's destruction. In other words, it demonstrates cinema's ability to reverse time, only to repeat and relive the reality of the Star Theatre's destruction. The visual spectacle lies in the film's reflexivity, its awareness of visual spectatorship. This is what commonly defines avant-garde works, hence the appropriateness of Gunning's connection between the cinema of attractions and later avant-garde practices. More importantly, *Demolishing and Building Up the Star Theatre* provides the viewer with a certain degree of temporal mastery over modernity's inevitable progress. Ironically, the film elicits wonder at the modern process of building demolition, and the allusion to new construction, while likewise literally undoing the action and returning to a former state that no longer seemed possible.

Both visual attraction and shock served as antimodern resistance to rational modernity while also perpetuating feelings of anxiety and uncertainty related to the modern experience. The prevalence of early motion picture actualities might indicate that the cinema mostly resisted sensationalist impulses in favor of the indexical medium's presumed authenticity. I would like to suggest the opposite. As previously noted, objective reality was itself a visual attraction. Moreover, the actuality co-existed with fictional genres, and although the former may have been more prolific, there is no historical evidence to indicate that actualities were the more dominantly popular genre. Additionally, actualities became increasingly less common by the first decade of the twentieth century, at which point fiction came to dominate the industry, and nonfictional

content generally jettisoned actuality aesthetics in favor of some form of narrativization. Representations of events were more frequently reconstructed. And even apparent actualities like *Demolishing and Building Up the Star Theatre* demonstrate an attempt to reconstruct modern urban reality; in this case, more radically reconstructing temporal reality. The relationship between late nineteenth-century journalism and early cinema elucidates not only how fictional formulas imbued seemingly nonfictional content, but also suggests that some degree of antimodernism informed these reconstructions of reality, as coping mechanisms that concomitantly circumscribed a definitive aspect of the modern experience.

Programming and Narrating the Present

Motion pictures participate in a compulsion to represent, and archive, the present. Early cinema represented a global catalog of information. Gunning analogizes this system of representation to an encyclopedia:

The ‘global’ as I am using the concept represents a system of knowledge, not simply an infinite expanse of space: a broad and varied accumulation of data certainly, but one subject to inventory, hierarchy, and use... The commercial catalogue of the turn of the century (and this would be true of the great merchandizing publications of Sears and Roebuck, and Montgomery Ward, as well as film catalogues) performed the function of systematic gathering and presentation of information that could best be compared to the first great global projects of the Encyclopedia of Diderot and d’Alembert.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Tom Gunning, “Early Cinema as Global Cinema: The Encyclopedic Ambition,” in *Early Cinema and the “National”*, eds. Richard Abel, Giorgio Bertellini & Rob King (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2016), 12-13.

Early film programming perhaps sought to fill in the gaps of incomplete knowledge, and the archive of footage could always be expanded upon. Greenhalgh notes how ethnographic reconstructions at world's fairs likewise participated in the cataloging of colonial groups in a manner similar to an encyclopedia, as a quest toward "empirical totality."⁷⁹ Edward S. Curtis aspired toward the same scientific aesthetic in his work, particularly his exhaustive photographic project *The North American Indian*. This encyclopedic ambition aligns with Michael Renov's classification of documentary as "pleasurable learning" and parallels with the work of many documentarians.⁸⁰ But encyclopedic knowledge is inevitably incomplete and fragmentary, not all-encompassing. The idea of cataloging as a scientific aspiration was fundamentally flawed. The Library of Congress's paper print collection, one of the most thorough and accessible archives of early motion pictures, was established in order to copyright film content and deter competition, a fundamentally commercial, not encyclopedic, impulse.

Items in the paper print collection, as in many early film archives, lack rigid categorization. The original paper prints were not archived by genre, even though the current catalog separates the films as either Advertising, Cartoons, Comedy, Documentary, Drama, Medical, Newsreels, Peep Shows, Religious, Reproductions, or Vaudeville. Kemp Niver added these categories during the restoration process in the 1960s. Original motion picture catalogs, however, did often specify genre, and it is possible that Niver drew from primary sources, but the inconsistency of these categories

⁷⁹ Greenhalgh, 87.

⁸⁰ Michael Renov, "Toward a Poetics of Documentary," in *The Documentary Film Reader*, ed. Kahana (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016, originally published, 1993), 755.

illustrates how there were no universal genre categories during this period.⁸¹

Furthermore, Niver invokes contemporary genre categories that were not part of the popular lexicon in the 1890s and 1900s, most notably “newsreel” and “documentary.”

Additionally, films often overlap between two or more genres. For example, many dramas are listed as “reproductions” or even “newsreels” (a term that did not become popular until later in the century). Niver’s distinction between reproduction and newsreel is unclear. Many reproductions were in fact news of current, or recent, events. Some reproductions reenacted events in the distant past, which by contemporary standards would be considered historical fiction. Others are speculative, not necessarily real historical events, but related to current events, more like topical fictional narratives than news or historical fiction. This classificatory ambivalence demonstrates a lack of concern with situating events at their appropriate historical moment. Historical events were viewed in the present but possessed no formal qualities discerning them from representations of events in the present. Of course, representations of real present moments are deceptive because these moments are always already past.

Georg Lukács’s differentiation between description and narration offers a useful lens for unpacking the incongruity of this relationship. In examining new literary styles of the nineteenth century, Lukács assumes that they were historically and culturally determined. Both description and narration respond to capitalism. Description conforms

⁸¹ It is also worth noting that the discourse in original motion picture catalogs was often sensationalized. These catalogs functioned as selling tools for exhibitors, and we cannot assume that their descriptions always accurately represented the films.

to the banality of capitalism.⁸² Narration emerges due to modernity and capitalism.⁸³ But narration moves beyond description; or, perhaps more accurately, performs an alternative function. Description is from the standpoint of an observer, present in the literature of Emile Zola, whereas narration is the point of view of a participant, associated with Tolstoy and Balzac.⁸⁴ Narration is past tense, description present: “Description contemporizes everything. Narration recounts the past... The best modern narrative has been able to infuse the dramatic element into the novel by transferring events into the past.”⁸⁵ Narration is a fantasmatic account of the past. It oscillates between its inherent biases and its potential to be more real than a descriptive. Truth is present but also elusive in both cases. As Lukács observes, “the opposition between the individual and the objective world is so stark and crude that no dynamic interaction is possible... Paradoxically, extreme subjectivism approximates the inert reification of pseudo-objectivism.”⁸⁶ How then do motion pictures relate to this literary model? The contrast between narration and description seems to parallel with the documentary characteristics of rhetoric and observation. But observational cinema can be rhetorical and vice versa. Motion pictures, as a medium which may record present moments or reenact past events, but in either case possesses a quality of presentness, tends to deconstruct this binary.

⁸² Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?” in *Writer and Critic, and Other Essays*, trans. Arthur Kahn (London: Merlin Press, 1970, originally published, 1936), 127.

⁸³ Lukács, 119.

⁸⁴ Lukács, 111.

⁸⁵ Lukács, 130.

⁸⁶ Lukács, 144.

Drawing from Lukàcs, and in relation to film specifically, Mary Anne Doane demonstrates how description is aligned with the contingent. Images describe, and their meaning is uncontrollable, whereas narration is fixed in its pastness.⁸⁷ This recalls Barthes's notion that the photograph is a message without a code, a message that simply presents and is contingent upon the interpolation of textual/verbal codes. The actuality elicits a lure of the present through its archivization. More specifically, what is archived is "the experience of presence."⁸⁸ Cinema participates in the compulsion to represent and archive the present. Michael Chanan asserts that this quality is fundamentally unique and conflates present and past: "film turned the present into a kind of immediate history; it made history out of the present. Film was therefore an entirely new mode of production of human perception."⁸⁹ The presentness of film may have necessitated many of the institutional overlaps between cinema and journalism in the 1890s. Print news, like cinema, presumes immediacy and currency. As Pizzitola claims, "The journalism-film pairing had clearly demonstrated that film, like yellow journalism, could be in the present tense: active and sensational."⁹⁰ If presentness and activity are part of a narrational formula, then film seems to deconstruct Lukàcs's dichotomy by complicating the relationship between description and narration, past and present, to the point where presentness loses its value, and the viewer potentially disavows it entirely.

⁸⁷ Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 12.

⁸⁸ Doane, 23.

⁸⁹ Quoted in Doane, 104.

⁹⁰ Pizzitola, 84.

This approach to early cinema diverges from Noel Burch's "primitive." Burch describes cinema in its first decade rather reductively, as

autarky and *unicity*... Any given tableau will remain unchanged in its framing throughout its passage on the screen and from one appearance to the next... it is complete unto itself and never "communicates" with any other... the successive spaces depicted are presumed to occupy a common diegetic framework, but that is all: their spatio-temporal connections remain fundamentally unspecified.⁹¹

Three additional traits of primitive cinema include camera distance (nearly always medium long shot), an overall feeling of *exteriority*, and nonclosure.⁹² On the one hand, exteriority does appropriately align with a common component of modern life—observing rather than interacting—but by distinguishing primitive cinema from later "institutional" cinema, Burch produces an unwarranted dichotomy that inherently marginalizes the former. Furthermore, the notion of nonclosure fails to consider the context of reception. Image arrangements were never formalized, and various forms of sound accompaniment could have provided narrative closure where the images seem to provide none. This model assumes early cinema to be purely descriptive, not narrational. What I am suggesting is that early cinema did in fact employ narrational strategies, which destabilized the idea of presentness.

According to Benjamin, "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place

⁹¹ Noel Burch, "Primitivism and the Avant-Gardes: A Dialectical Approach," in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, ed. Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 486.

⁹² Burch, 487-88.

where it happens to be.”⁹³ We might analogize an original work of art with an original event if we assume art to be an experience, not simply an object. Benjamin’s theorization of the reproduction of an object is interchangeable with the reproduction of an event. Both are experiences that reproduction dilutes. For Benjamin, the loss of an original object/experience’s “aura” is linked to the universalization of things, a common trend throughout the nineteenth century.⁹⁴ There is a causal relationship between the loss of aura brought on by mechanical reproduction and the impulse to reproduce events through various forms of media. The loss of the original event’s aura is similar to the loss of a sense of presentness. Edited images create a shock effect, which the viewer can cushion “by heightened presence of mind.”⁹⁵ Although Benjamin may be more concerned with a distracted mass audience of twentieth-century media consumption, he opens up a space for inquisitive, analytical spectatorship. It is through this lens that I shall proceed in analyzing early motion pictures that reproduced current events. Through a convoluted amalgam of visual attraction, reportage, and temporal disorder, these films serve as examples of, and forms of resistance to, modern progress.

⁹³ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, Fifth Edition, eds. Leo Braudy & Marshall Cohen (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, originally published, 1935), 733.

⁹⁴ Benjamin, 734.

⁹⁵ Benjamin, 748.

Edison's Black Maria Reenactments

Films produced in the 1890s suggest that motion picture producers and audiences were interested in nonfictional subjects, particularly current events, sometimes through live actualities but also through reenactments that either the original personalities or actors performed. Although renowned for his fantasy-fiction trick films, Georges Méliès produced reenactments of several international, newsworthy events, including the sinking of the USS Maine, the coronation of Edward VII, and a whole series of films involving the Alfred Dreyfus trial. Before theatrical exhibitions of motion pictures were technologically possible, the medium was available to the public for a short period from 1894 to 1895 through the kinetoscope, a device that restricted participation to a single individual at a time viewing images through a peephole. During the kinetoscope era, Edison films quite frequently represented well-known celebrities in what could arguably be referred to as reenactments. These films featured notable performers like Eugen Sandow, Buffalo Bill and Annie Oakley, Bertholdi the Contortionist, and dancer Ruth St. Denis reenacting performances with which contemporaneous viewers would have already been familiar. Such performances were gesturally demonstrative, thus serving to enhance the spectacle of the moving images, and at the time would have provided publicity for the entertainer. These films may have been viewed less as adaptations from other media than documentary reenactments of performances.

Erik Barnouw asserts that a documentary aesthetic is present throughout late nineteenth-century motion picture experiments. Eadweard Muybridge's stop-motion work in the 1870s and 1880s aligns with a key component of the documentary: "its ability to

open our eyes to worlds available to us but, for one reason or another, not perceived.”⁹⁶

Muybridge’s well-known photographic study determined that all four of a horse’s hooves become airborne at a full gallop. It is impossible to perceive this in real time with the naked eye but can be evidenced through photographic technology—in Muybridge’s case, a nascent form of motion pictures—which suspends reality in order to uncover some hidden truth. Although Barnouw assumes the Lumières to be the first documentarians—since they filmed the world, whereas Edison had the world come to him⁹⁷—Edison’s earliest films produced in his Black Maria studio also possess documentary qualities. The practice of inviting real-life subjects to a studio to reenact something from their lives is aligned with a standard practice in contemporary documentary film production. Subjects are invited to a studio to be interviewed, the interview serving as a verbal reenactment of past experiences. Of course, there are differences between verbal recollection and active, performative reenactment, but both forms are premised by an impulse to recall and re-present something from the past, something that has been missed by the motion picture camera. Admittedly, there are exceptions to this paradigm—for example, observational filmmakers like Frederick Wiseman, who typically do not ask their subjects to repeat anything for the camera—but these do not necessarily define the genre in its dominant form. I would therefore argue that Edison’s reenactments of performances share greater similarities with contemporary documentaries than the Lumières’ actualités.

⁹⁶ Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*, Second Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, originally published, 1974), 3.

⁹⁷ Barnouw, 5.

I will outline and analyze two films produced at Edison's Black Maria studio: *Annie Oakley* (1894) and *The Kiss* (1896), also known as *The May Irwin John C. Rice Kiss*. At the risk of digressing from my primary goals, I choose these films because they serve as an interesting case study of early female stardom on screen. Contemporaneous viewers experienced each film differently. *Annie Oakley* would have been consumed through the more nascent kinetoscope device, while *The Kiss* coincided with the birth of theatrical motion picture exhibition.⁹⁸ *Annie Oakley* is perhaps the first motion picture to have appealed to a large demographic of female viewers. By 1894, performing in Buffalo Bill's Wild West, sharpshooting Oakley was at the height of her fame, a publicly recognized celebrity, and her skills were being exhibited beyond the Wild West. For example, in early 1894 she performed with a circus in Nutley, NJ.⁹⁹ And at the end of the 1894 season, presumably after performing for Edison, Oakley traveled to England to star as an actress in the play *Miss Roarer*.¹⁰⁰ Her persona as a female shooting expert sparked quite a bit of public dialogue. Gun connoisseurs debated the types of firearms and bullets she used in her performances.¹⁰¹ Oakley herself was publicly outspoken regarding the benefits of women shooting guns and staying physically fit. In one interview, she asserted the benefits of physical fitness for women but insisted that it be distinct from men. More

⁹⁸ See Charles Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 42. Musser notes that the expense of the initial kinetoscopes (5¢) encouraged a middle-class crowd but likely drew both male and female audiences.

⁹⁹ H.C. Bunner, "Amateur Circus in Nutley," *New York World* (New York, NY), March 5, 1894, 3.

¹⁰⁰ "As to the Passing Show: All Sorts of Things in the Town's Theatricals," *New York Sun*, September 26, 1894, 10.

¹⁰¹ Ralph Greenwood, "Ignorant of Firearms," *New York Times*, September, 15, 1894.

specifically, women's activities should not include boxing because such an act would "not only be painful but disfiguring."¹⁰² Newspapers quoted Oakley under columns like "The Gossip for the Fair Sex."¹⁰³ While endorsing a version of women's rights that was common among prominent first wave feminists at the time, the fight for equity alongside a commitment to biological and cultural gender difference demonstrates a negotiated form of women's progress that was not entirely resistant to patriarchy. In one *New York Sun* article, Oakley proposed the benefits of women using guns, primarily as a means for practicing what she considered life skills, and protecting oneself, but also to promote a healthy home life:

I do not wish to be understood to mean by this that woman should sacrifice home and family duties merely for outside pleasure, but that, feeling how true it is that health goes a great way toward making home life happy, no opportunity should be lost by my sex of indulging in outdoor sports, pastimes and recreations, which are at once healthy in their tone and results and womanly in their character.¹⁰⁴

Two antimodern ideologies were reified in this statement. The fascination with guns is a phenomenon, embedded in American culture, associated with a premodern lifestyle. The rugged primitiveness of the West, and consequently the representation of the West by Annie Oakley, Bill Cody, et al., perhaps best personifies gun culture in America. Furthermore, Oakley was discernibly promoting patriarchy and normative gender roles, despite perceivably traversing these roles in her ostensibly feminist rhetoric and masculine profession. Andreas Huyssen observes how discourse around the turn of the

¹⁰² Quoted in "Physical Culture of Woman," *The Daily Independent* (Helena, MT), December 21, 1894, 4.

¹⁰³ See "Physical Culture of Woman."

¹⁰⁴ Annie Oakley, "Women With Guns: Annie Oakley Gives Some Reasons and Hints for Practice." *The Times* (Owosso, MI), August 31, 1894.

twentieth century involved feminizing modern mass culture and masculinizing high culture's resistance to modernity.¹⁰⁵ Additionally, according to Huyssen, there is an irony in the fact that what is perceived as feminized mass culture has historically been controlled by men and is more of a threat to women.¹⁰⁶ Lears observes how, throughout this period, middle-class and affluent women's overwhelming acceptance of masculinity, resisting the increasing over-feminization of modern mass culture, ultimately reinforced a hegemonic culture that defined masculinity as favorable.¹⁰⁷ Oakley exemplified these contradictions by participating in the masculine sphere while also espousing that women should maintain traditional roles and duties associated with beauty and domesticity. The amalgam of premodern nostalgia (gun violence) and patriarchal obedience, particularly in the midst of first wave feminism, were complimentary to the extent that they aligned with antimodern sensibilities.

Oakley visited the Black Maria studio in West Orange on October 19, 1894.¹⁰⁸

The Wild West remained in Ambrose Park, Brooklyn after the summer season, until at least late September, so Oakley would have been in the New York area at the time.¹⁰⁹ In the film, Oakley begins by shooting at several stationary targets. Then, her assistant—this is likely Frank E. Butler, Oakley's longtime spouse and assistant in the Wild West—

¹⁰⁵ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 47.

¹⁰⁶ Huyssen, 62.

¹⁰⁷ Lears, 128.

¹⁰⁸ "Shot for the Kinetograph," *New York World*, October 19, 1894, 3.

¹⁰⁹ See "Buffalo Bill's Wild West," *Jersey City News* (Jersey City, NJ), September 24, 1894 and "As to the Passing Show: All Sorts of Things in the Town's Theatricals," *New York Sun*, September 26, 1894, 10.



Figure 1.3: *Annie Oakley* (Edison, 1894)

tosses moving targets in the air. She hits them all, and the film concludes. Like most films from this period, motion and spectacle are emphasized. The act mimics similar performances offered by Oakley and Butler in the Wild West. However, the setting is conspicuously different, a stage and black background commonly seen in Edison's Black Maria films. While nascent motion picture audiences may have recognized the performance itself, the mise-en-scène indicates that this is not an actuality of Buffalo Bill's Wild West but rather a staged reenactment. Yet the action is likely similar to that performed in the Wild West, with which audiences would have been familiar.

Kinetoscope films often reconstructed popular entertainment events as a method for dealing with the medium's initial identity crisis, catering to the audience's knowledge, not shocking them entirely with something utterly new. Additionally, the film has no editing,

an element of film language that would not begin to develop until later in the decade, but kinetoscopes allowed viewers to easily repeat the short 30-second films. *Annie Oakley* could have been quickly consumed and disposed of, but the unique formal properties of the kinetoscope provided the possibility to continually repeat the scene, enabling viewers to participate in the act of memorizing Oakley's act, becoming masters of the gun play depicted, perhaps even attempting to discern minute details like the actors' costumes, Oakley's choice of rifle, etc.

When Edison began exhibiting his first projection system, the vitascope, starting on April 23, 1896 at Koster and Bial's Music Hall in New York City, the most popular film throughout the spring was *The Kiss*, starring John C. Rice and May Irwin in a reenactment of the kiss performed in their play *The Widow Jones*.¹¹⁰ The play was considered a farce comedy musical. Irwin received top billing while Rice was considered her supporting cast. She was predominantly reviewed in a positive light. The *San Francisco Call* asserted her as "Everybody's Favorite Comedienne."¹¹¹ According to the *New York Sun*,

May Irwin is a genuine comedian, if ever there was one. "The Widow Jones," in which she is the principal at the Bijou, is only vaudeville farce, with the merest semblance of dramatic action, lapsing frequently into irrelevant song and dance: but the actress is a complete mistress of good humor, quite as entertaining to those who come to the theatre in carriages as to those who come afoot, for she is both broad and decorous.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ For a closer look at *The Kiss* and *The Widow Jones* see Charles Musser, *Politicking and Emergent Media: U.S. Presidential Elections of the 1890s* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

¹¹¹ "California Theatre," *San Francisco Call*, December 29, 1895, 22.

¹¹² "This Week on the Stage: Three Stage Plays and A-Plenty of Familiar Ones," *New York Sun*, November 3, 1895, 3.

The Kiss was also a hit.¹¹³ There are, however, two notable differences in the motion picture representation of the play. As Musser notes, early film screenings often attracted exclusively elite demographics, not the class diversity that the *Sun* alluded to.¹¹⁴ Additionally, in *The Kiss*, Irwin and Rice equally occupy the frame, and Irwin is therefore not necessarily identifiable as the star. They whisper and giggle with their lips near each other's for several moments. The mood is clearly light, and contemporaneous accounts indicate that audiences laughed.¹¹⁵ Then, for the dénouement, Rice fixes his mustache and proceeds with the kiss, presumably after receiving Irwin's permission. It is at this moment that Rice steals the show. He is the active pursuer of the kiss, which the gestural motion of grabbing Irwin's cheeks further emphasizes, while Irwin passively, though compliantly, accepts. Indeed, this film augmented his status as both star and kissing expert.¹¹⁶ Like *Annie Oakley*, the scene depicted in *The Kiss* would have been familiar to many viewers. For audiences not familiar with *The Widow Jones*, the film could have been read as news of, and publicity/advertising for, the play.¹¹⁷ By reenacting their performances on film, Rice and Irwin, as well as Oakley, inform the audience about their

¹¹³ See "Plays and Players," *Los Angeles Herald*, July 5, 1896, 14, which asserts that *The Kiss* was the most popular film being shown on the vitascope. The film did, however, attract some criticism. One Oregon newspaper labelled Irwin as not a kissable woman, which along with its misogyny also misses the point of the humor from the original farce comedy. See "The May Irwin Kiss: It Lacks Beauty, Grace, Selene, Art, Skill—Everything but Mouth," *The Dalles Weekly Chronicle* (The Dalles, OR), May 8, 1897, 3.

¹¹⁴ Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907*. (New York: Scribner, 1990), 184.

¹¹⁵ "At the Orpheum," *San Francisco Call*, June 30, 1896, 5.

¹¹⁶ See Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon*, 65.

¹¹⁷ It is unclear when the play stopped running, presumably some time in 1896, but it was revived for a short period at the Bijou Theater from 1901 to 1902.

respective shows, much like television advertisements and theatrical trailers today. However, *The Kiss* is more noticeably recontextualized by a predominantly male-produced medium. While Rice is more effete than rugged, and therefore certainly not antimodern by any means, there is a noticeable shift toward hierarchizing the male role in this cinematic reconstruction. While most Edison films produced during the Black Maria period were reconstructions of popular performances, actualities of real-world events would soon become more dominant. But these early reconstructions serve as ancestors to the reenactment films that would become increasingly more prevalent after the actuality's brief moment of popularity in the late 1890s.

The reenactment form would solidify more concretely by the first decade of the twentieth century, most evidently in prizefight and war films. While often providing live views of real prizefights, many actors, and in some cases the actual boxers, reenacted fights.¹¹⁸ Vitagraph is perhaps best known for its fakery of war footage in *Battle of Santiago* (1899), which was not authentically filmed in Cuba during the Spanish-American War but rather reenacted in Vitagraph's New York City studio with a tub of water and a painted background. It is important to underscore that this fakery was produced through a medium that could not yet adequately document war reality in a satisfactory way. Short reels and wide focal lengths limited the quality of authentic footage, particularly in the case of warfronts where filmmakers could only safely record

¹¹⁸ See Raymond Fielding, *The American Newsreel: A Complete History, 1911-1967* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2006, originally published, 1972). Also see Dan Streible, *Fight Pictures: A History of Boxing and Early Cinema* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008).

from a distance. The recognition of the entertainment value of reenactment seems common among the many war films covering several world conflicts between 1898 and 1905. Authentic on-location attempts—for example, W.K.L. Dickson's stint covering the South African (Second Boer) War—often failed to attract audiences.¹¹⁹ Therefore, the drive to repeat or reproduce events was, to some extent, a commercial necessity, one in which attracting audiences was the primary goal. In addition to the desire for commercial attractions, technological and logistical restrictions aside, the political orientation of many early motion pictures suggests that producers also sought to elicit contemplation.

The Biograph Reconstructing McKinley

Part of Edison's vitascope premiere on April 23, 1896 at Koster and Bial's Music Hall included *The Monroe Doctrine*. The film was a political spoof on the then recent U.S. intervention into Great Britain's involvement in Venezuela. Unfortunately this film is currently non-extant, but its presence as part of our cultural history demonstrates that motion picture pioneers were interested in politics and the promotion of American imperialism. From the earliest incarnations of the medium, there seems to be an interest in inciting political dialogue among theatrical audiences.¹²⁰ This was also the case when Biograph held its premiere screening less than six months later.

Major McKinley at Home, Canton, Ohio (Biograph) premiered at Hammerstein's

Olympia Vaudeville Theater in New York City on October 12, 1896. This was the first

¹¹⁹ See W.K.L. Dickson, *The Biograph in Battle: Its Story in the South African War* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1901). Also see Fielding and Musser, *Politicking and Emergent Media*.

¹²⁰ Musser alludes to this in *Politicking and Emergent Media*, 69.



Figure 1.4: *Major McKinley at Home, Canton, Ohio* (Biograph, 1896)

heavily publicized exhibition of the “biograph” projection system. W.K.L. Dickson and his assistant Billy Bitzer (who would establish a long career with the Biograph Company and would go on to work with D.W. Griffith) filmed the scene in mid-September, two months prior to the 1896 election. It was intended to reenact the moment earlier in the summer when McKinley received his party’s nomination. In his autobiography, Bitzer identifies the film as Biograph’s “first newsreel, or documentary” and describes it as “a reenactment of the notification for the benefit of the people who wished to see the new Republican nominee.”¹²¹ The film shows McKinley receiving a telegram from a colleague on his front lawn in Canton, Ohio. While most accounts, including Bitzer’s, assume this to be McKinley’s personal secretary, George Cortelyou, Paul Spehr observes that Cortelyou was not working for McKinley at this time, and it is more likely Joseph

¹²¹ G.W. Bitzer, *Billy Bitzer: His Story* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1973), 11.

Smith, his assistant during the campaign.¹²² McKinley approaches the yard with his assistant, maintaining direct eye contact with the audience. The two men pause while McKinley reads a telegram. He then removes his hat and readdresses the audience, maintaining eye contact for several seconds before exiting out of frame. According to the *New York Tribune*, the McKinley film was the highlight of the evening:

The biggest part of enthusiasm began when a view of a McKinley and Hobart parade in Canton was shown. The cheering was incessant as long as the line was passing across the screen, and it grew much greater when the title of the next picture appeared: "Major McKinley at home." Major McKinley was seen to come down the steps of his house with his secretary. The secretary handed him a paper, which he opened and read. Then he took off his hat and advanced to meet a visiting delegation.¹²³

Newspaper accounts often failed to mention films screened earlier in the set—*Stable on Fire*, *Niagara Upper Rapids*, scenes from *Trilby* and *Rip Van Winkle*, *Hard Wash*, and an additional shot of Niagara Falls—focusing instead on the popularity of the final three films: *Empire State Express*, *McKinley and Hobart Parade at Canton, Ohio*, and *McKinley at Home*. There seems to be some ambivalence, however, as to the actual order of these final three films. Drawing from Gordon Hendricks's history of Biograph, Jonathan Auerbach asserts that *Empire State Express* was positioned before the McKinley films in order to energize the crowd for the latter.¹²⁴ Musser notes that the original playbill listed the films in this order, but a pre-screening event likely resulted in last

¹²² Paul Spehr, *The Man Who Made Movies: W.K.L. Dickson* (New Barnet, U.K.: John Libbey, 2008), 443.

¹²³ Quoted in Kemp R. Niver, *Biograph Bulletins, 1896-1908* (Los Angeles, Locare Research Group, 1971), 12.

¹²⁴ Jonathan Auerbach, "McKinley at Home: How Early American Cinema Made News," *American Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (1999): 809.

minute changes, with *Empire State Express* concluding the show. According to Musser, the enthralling view of an onrushing train would have overpowered the final two McKinley films.¹²⁵ Bitzer, who not only shot the film but also was responsible for operating the nascent projector system at the Hammerstein's screening, recalls *Empire State Express* as the final film.¹²⁶ Based on Niver's primary sources, I can only conclude that, in all likelihood, the order was continually rearranged during subsequent screenings. The biograph remained at Hammerstein's for several weeks, but the initial screening event on October 12 could have positioned *McKinley at Home* as the conclusion.¹²⁷ The order is important as it changes the context of seeing the McKinley images. In either arrangement, however, McKinley is juxtaposed with a popular visual attraction, the onrushing Empire State Express train. The news of McKinley's party nomination is conflated with, and placed in the context of, visual entertainment (the spectacle of the train's motion) and technological progress (modern transportation), thus producing an image of the presidential candidate that is aligned with both celebrity and modernity.

It is essential to contextualize *McKinley at Home* as part of a sequence of films that would have included *Empire State Express* and in most cases juxtaposed the two films—with the parade film somewhere before, after, or in between—as the dénouement of the show. Like the Lumières' *L'Arrivée d'un Train en Gare de La Ciotat*, which was publicly exhibited for the first time earlier in 1896, *Empire State Express* exemplifies the popular mythology of early train films frightening audiences to the point of physical

¹²⁵ Musser, *Politicking and Emergent Media*, 93.

¹²⁶ Bitzer, 18.

¹²⁷ See Niver, *Biograph Bulletins*, 12-22.

disturbance and perhaps even mobility. One account noted, “persons who see it scramble to get out of its way and faint from fright.”¹²⁸ The same source asserted that women were far more frightened than men: “Two ladies who were in a box last night screamed and fainted.”¹²⁹ This may be an example of the sensational press’s propensity for exaggeration. Another account of the same event indicated that two ladies “screamed and *nearly fainted*” (my emphasis).¹³⁰ Despite their sensationalism, these accounts are probably valid evidence that men did not exclusively attend these screenings.

Railroad travel, as a relatively new modern experience, paralleled with cinematic spectatorship in a variety of ways. Lynne Kirby argues that these parallels went beyond the mere representation of trains in motion pictures:

Like film’s illusion of movement, the experience of the railroad is based on a fundamental paradox: simultaneous motion and stillness. In both cases, passengers sit still as they rush through space and time, whether physically and visually, as on the train, or merely visually, as in the cinema. The train would then be cinema’s mirror image in the sequential unfolding of a chain of essentially still images and the rapid shifts of point of view that the train and cinema experiences entail... In cinema, instability is built into the basis of the filmgoing experience: the perceptual illusion of movement is tied to the physical immobility of the spectator and to the sequential unfolding of a chain of still images that constitute the basis of every film.¹³¹

Both train travel and cinematic spectatorship epitomized the inherent shock and anxiety associated with modern life, so it is not surprising that when amalgamated in films like *L’Arrivée d’un Train* and *Empire State Express*, fear is produced, perhaps through the real

¹²⁸ *New York Telegram*, October 15, 1896, quoted in Niver.

¹²⁹ *New York Telegram*, quoted in Niver.

¹³⁰ *New York Mail and Express*, October 17, 1896, quoted in Niver.

¹³¹ Lynne Kirby, *Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and Silent Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 2-3.

experience, but at the very least by reporters and historians who reconstructed the experience. It is interesting how fear, induced by high-speed transportations technologies and motion pictures, transitioned to amusement by the early twentieth century, with rail disaster films (discussed later in this chapter) and attractions like Hale's Tours. Hale's Tours were a popular interactive motion picture experience in which images taken from train cars were projected and, along with other illusions (physical motion, sound effects, etc.), replicated—or, for most working-class audiences, produced for the first time—the sensation of train travel. The production of the mythology of the fearful 1896 audience indicates that audiences may have screamed, fainted, fled the theater, or reacted in other ways that seem ridiculous to contemporary movie-goers, though they may have not, but in either case the reality of the *feelings* associated with that experience involved anxiety and fear. By then shifting the program to the safe image of McKinley, audiences could have counterbalanced their fears and associated this reassurance with the presidential candidate. Alternatively, when *Empire State Express* was screened after the McKinley films, a concluding thought among viewers may have been one of fear, but one could also speculate that the transition from McKinley to the train recontextualized the latter as not only safe but as a symbol of McKinley's modern progress, that the agrarianism of McKinley's home in Canton can be synthesized with the modernity of rail travel.

There were also live performances before the films, including a European impersonator, "The Great Amann," who performed a favorable impersonation of McKinley and a not so favorable impersonation of his opponent, William Jennings

Bryan.¹³² Such as performance naturally would have primed the already pro-McKinley crowd for a political rally type of event. As subsequent screenings at Hammerstein's persisted throughout October, and the 1896 presidential election drew near, audiences responded exuberantly to McKinley's presence on screen. According to the *New York Advertiser* on October 21, nine days after the initial premiere, "When the biograph come [*sic*] and Major McKinley stepped onto his front lawn, the whole house went wild. Men cheered, the ladies waved flags and a scene resembling that in the convention hall at St. Louis was re-enacted."¹³³ The *New York Herald* noted, "He was received with tremendous cheering, and there were loud calls for a speech."¹³⁴ It is difficult to determine the extent in which audiences actively and/or verbally engaged with these early motion pictures, but we do know that the context of reception was significantly varied between each performance/screening.

Film historians have cited the importance of the lecturer/exhibitor during the first two decades of the medium. Rick Altman calls for a "performer-oriented" approach to studying early cinema, meaning the films themselves should not be viewed as autonomous texts but rather as the lecturer's theatrical props. In reference to the travel film, Altman notes a transition in the 1910s from theatrical props to industrial products:

Travel and war films had been severed from the live stage, turned instead into commodities expected to stand by themselves. With information previously provided by a lecturer now built into the intertitles, these films were able to enter

¹³² See Spehr, 446.

¹³³ *New York Advertiser*, October 21, 1896, quoted in Niver, *Biograph Bulletins*, 14.

¹³⁴ *New York Herald*, November 1, 1896, quoted in Niver, 14. Also see Spehr, 450, who likens the event to both a political rally and a sporting event.

into a new type of commercial configuration, where the films would do the traveling, without the need for a lecturer to accompany them.¹³⁵

The shift from motion picture exhibition as a unique experience to films as stand-alone commodities seems partly due to the industrialization of Hollywood in the 1910s.

Narrative integration and the development of newsreels associated with major studios served to eliminate independent performances and standardize all exhibitions of the same text, thus jettisoning the role of the lecturer altogether. It is unclear whether *McKinley at Home* was ever exhibited with a lecturer explaining the circumstances of the reenacted event. According to Spehr, the initial screening on October 12 included the Music Hall Orchestra's musical accompaniment, and sound effects were added to compliment the images.¹³⁶ On October 21 *The New York Times* reported, "During the scene one of the tenors from the 'Santa Maria' opera company sang 'I Want You McKinley; Yes I do.'"¹³⁷ Such a conspicuous political bias might have contextualized the film in a positive light. And the presence of an opera singer conflated art with politics and popular entertainment.

McKinley at Home produces a more conspicuous narrative than the films that were screened with it. The film depicts the news of then candidate McKinley receiving news at home, enlisting an established and recognizable medium, thematizing the telegram's dissemination of news, while also demonstrating that the new motion picture medium can also produce news. There is the news itself and the newsworthy event of

¹³⁵ Rick Altman, "From Lecturer's Prop to Industrial Product: The Early History of Travel Films," in *The Documentary Film Reader: History, Theory, Criticism*, ed. Kahana (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, originally published, 2006), 25.

¹³⁶ Spehr, 454.

¹³⁷ *New York Times*, October 21, 1896, quoted in Niver, *Biograph Bulletins*, 14.

McKinley receiving the news. But the film also demonstrates the inability to properly contextualize news through motion pictures. Audiences perceived the news to be something different when screened at different moments during the campaign. As Auerbach indicates,

According to Billy Bitzer, McKinley's reading was intended to reenact the moment he received notification of his party's convention nomination, an event that took place in the summer, some months before the actual filming in September. But audiences who first saw the movie in October assumed McKinley was receiving "a hopeful message from New York headquarters" describing his campaign's progress, while those who subsequently saw the film in November after the election thought he was reading a telegram announcing his presidential victory.¹³⁸

While this confusion provides an interesting example of the relativity of historical representations on film, it also indicates that audiences may have viewed the film as a source of information, albeit an incomplete source, one that would require textual or verbal corroboration for accuracy. Of course, the scene itself was staged and therefore does not represent any particular moment of history. The reenactment creates a gap between the past and the present, reconstructing the reality of the original event by reinterpreting its historicity at a later moment in time. This is essential for *McKinley at Home*, which is less concerned with representing an actual event than with positing an ideological narrative. Although the camera is stationary, and there is no editing, the explicated view is directly connected to the broader narrative of McKinley's "front porch" campaign strategy, a strategy that the pro-McKinley press augmented. Rather than vigorously campaigning throughout the country, McKinley frequently remained in

¹³⁸ Auerbach, 808.

Canton, gave speeches from his front porch, and relied on technology to reach voters, first through newspapers then film, promoting the candidate's down-to-earth image. While there is no evidence to support this, it is conceivable that the original event the film was intended to reenact—McKinley receiving his party nomination—did not even occur on McKinley's front lawn, as it does in film. The scene could have been reenacted at this location in order to align with the campaign strategy, namely associating the candidate with American front porches and their connotations; patriarchal domesticity, stability in a rapidly urbanizing world, and perhaps even a semblance of premodern agrarianism.¹³⁹

McKinley's front porch campaign counterpointed the whistle-stop campaign of William Jennings Bryan. In this sense, Bryan was the more modern candidate, although the media generally represented him unfavorably. Both candidates were highly skilled orators, but it became clear that Bryan would need to take particular advantage of his oratory skills in order to sidestep his poor representation in the press, which increasingly favored McKinley. Although historically Democrat-leaning, newspapers almost exclusively sided with McKinley due to Bryan's support for the Free Silver movement. The debate over silver lasted nearly a century, from the 1870s to the 1960s, and was a key economic policy issue in both the 1896 and 1900 presidential elections as Bryan,

¹³⁹ A figure can be seen sitting in a rocking chair on McKinley's front porch in the background. One Internet Movie Database user credits McKinley's wife, Ida, as this figure, and Bitzer recalls her seated on the porch, though it is possible this was someone else. See http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0203681/?ref=fn_al_tt_1 and Bitzer, 12. The figure is not clearly discernible in currently available prints, though it is conceivable that Ida was intentionally staged in this position.

McKinley's opponent in both elections, was one of the most adamant proponents of Free Silver, which sought the unlimited coinage of silver to alleviate the burdens of an economy adhering strictly to the Gold Standard.¹⁴⁰ One notable exception was William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal*, who supported Bryan, perhaps to some degree to rival Joseph Pulitzer's support for McKinley and the Gold Standard, but no doubt due to a large extent to Hearst's vested interests in silver mines.

Motion pictures adopted a similar political bent as the majority of newspapers in supporting McKinley over Bryan. Auerbach notes that McKinley's campaign "suggested how the media in particular could be enlisted to help make winning less a matter of substance accumulated over space and time (the whistle-stop campaign speeches of Bryan) than synchronic national perception."¹⁴¹ The motion picture medium served to augment the rhetorical strategy of a front porch campaign by providing an indexical representation of McKinley's private domestic space for a public audience at Hammerstein's, thus abolishing the geographical distance between the spectator in New York and the candidate's front porch in Canton. Yet unlike Hearst's deviation from other journalists' expressions of political allegiance, motion picture producers may have exclusively sided with McKinley. Bryan took advantage of the new medium by enlisting Edison cinematographer William Heise to film his speech when the campaign arrived in Orange, NJ. But the resulting film, *Bryan Train Scene at Orange* (1896), was far less successful than *McKinley at Home*. Musser suggests that *Bryan Train Scene* could have

¹⁴⁰ See Musser, *Politicking and Emergent Media*, 83-86.

¹⁴¹ Auerbach, 803-04.

been exhibited ambiguously, for audiences to express support or disdain.¹⁴² However, when the film was first screened on October 19, one week after the initial *McKinley at Home* screening, the program included humorous visual attractions, like a woman washing clothes and a girl feeding chickens, which, as Musser speculates, lacked the “orchestrated enthusiasm” of the earlier McKinley screening and “discreetly deflated Bryan.”¹⁴³ Edison films were generally Republican-leaning. It would make sense that the Edison Company, as a media institution allied with McKinley, intentionally produced a banal, unstaged view of Bryan to undermine his campaign. If this is true, then both Biograph and Edison, the primary motion picture producers at the time, used the medium, albeit in different ways, to promote the antimodern front porch politics of the McKinley campaign.

Additionally, *Bryan Train Scene at Orange* does not represent a staged reenactment of a particular event but instead captures a live view of Bryan’s speech without sound. *McKinley at Home* is constructed to represent McKinley in a particular light, and his silence is an important component in this rhetorical strategy, aligning with the specific nature of the motion picture medium and its inability to produce synchronized sound. As Musser notes,

The mute motion picture of McKinley, with its virtual but disembodied presence, had a vision-like quality that made him seem momentarily transcendent. Properly contextualized—which was Biograph’s achievement—it provided a powerful icon that could be endowed with sincerity and power.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon*, 69.

¹⁴³ Musser, *Politicking and Emergent Media*, 107.

¹⁴⁴ Musser, 131.

Like a carefully crafted documentary, *McKinley at Home* silently produces the rhetorical statement associated with McKinley's front porch campaign through the creative means of framing the scene within the visual purview of McKinley's actual front porch, staging the historical act, not capturing it live. The ideological connection to a less-urbanized America resists a modern world that many voters may have associated with Bryan. The front porch recollects a premodern way of life; or, perhaps more accurately, a current way of life for many Americans that modernity, perhaps represented by Bryan and the Democratic Party for many voters, was threatening to extinguish.

By the 1900 election, Bryan attempted two more film appearances amid his second presidential run, *W.J. Bryan* (Biograph) and *Bryan at Home* (Selig), both filmed at his home in Lincoln, NE, much like McKinley's film four years earlier.¹⁴⁵ Bryan, who once again lost the election, either failed to capture the initial excitement surrounding the new medium that McKinley had, or perhaps motion pictures were simply not as politically powerful as the earlier McKinley film might suggest.

Throughout the first decade of motion pictures, powerful political figures were often filmed in staged actualities. In 1898 William Dickson, working for Biograph, filmed Pope Leo XIII in Vatican City, which resulted in several films, such as *Pope in His Carriage* and *Pope Passing Through Upper Loggia*.¹⁴⁶ These films premiered at Carnegie

¹⁴⁵ It is possible that these are the same film, and either Biograph or Selig reappropriated it from the other. See Charles Musser, *Motion Picture Catalogs by American Producers and Distributors, 1894-1908* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1984-1985).

¹⁴⁶ These films were not copyrighted until 1903.

Hall on December 14, 1898, and audiences responded enthusiastically.¹⁴⁷ Other notable films featuring political figures include *Dick Croker Leaving Tammany Hall* (Edison, 1900), who had a contract with Edison to produce several films as part of his mayoral re-election campaign, *Theodore Roosevelt Leaving the White House* (Biograph, 1903), and *Judge Parker Receiving the Notification of His Nomination for the Presidency* (Edison, 1904).¹⁴⁸ Like McKinley, Alton B. Parker staged his notification acquisition at “Rosemount,” his country home in Esopus, NY.¹⁴⁹ The scarce records of these films suggests that they may not have been popular. We might therefore assume that attempts to mimic the success of *McKinley at Home* failed to excite audiences by the twentieth century.

In 1902 Georges Méliès staged a reproduction of the coronation of Edward VII. The UK-based Warwick Trading Company distributed the resulting film, *Coronation of Edward VII* (Star), also known as *Reproduction, Coronation Ceremonies—King Edward VII*, which Biograph reappropriated for distribution in the United States as *A Representation of a Rehearsal of the Coronation of Their Majesties King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra*. This may be the first cinematic example of a pre-enactment. Méliès shot the film before the actual coronation in order to exhibit it in France on August 9, 1902, the day of the coronation. It is therefore interesting that Biograph promoted the representation as a “rehearsal.” The pre-enactment suggests that audiences desired a

¹⁴⁷ “Biograph Views of the Pope: Archbishop Corrigan Attends a Descriptive Lecture in Carnegie Hall,” *New York Times*, December 15, 1898. Also see Musser, *Emergence of Cinema*, 220.

¹⁴⁸ See Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon*, 191.

¹⁴⁹ Musser, *Motion Picture Catalogs*.

sense of liveness. But it seems unlikely that the majority of viewers interpreted the film as a live actuality. Fielding differentiates between four forms of re-creation: “Theatrically Staged,” “Realistically Staged,” “Rough Re-Creations,” and “Outright Manufacture.”¹⁵⁰ Theatrically staged re-creations are the only form that is not intended to fool audiences.¹⁵⁰ Méliès’s films almost always fall into this category. However, audiences did not know Fielding’s categories in 1902. Without these genres present in the cultural consciousness, how could audiences have genuinely made this distinction? Méliès may be the exception. Audiences would have likely been familiar with his slogan, “Artificially Arranged Scenes,” which provided a sense of transparency regarding his fabrications while also aligning his films with something like theatrically staged productions, whether audiences used this specific language or not.¹⁵¹ The Biograph catalog asserted that the subjects depicted in *Coronation of Edward VII* were impersonators.¹⁵² Whether this information was publicized to viewers would have been the prerogative of individual exhibitors, but this at least indicates that there were no attempts to conceal the staging on the part of the producers and distributors. Furthermore, *Coronation* is rather long and lacks editing. By 1902 Méliès had not only produced multi-shot films but also regularly experimented with stop motion edits within the camera. Notable among these films are *Cendrillon* (Star, 1899) and *Le Voyage Dans la Lune* (Star, 1902), the latter released only two months after *Coronation*. The lack of editing in *Coronation* therefore seems to be an aesthetic choice. This choice encourages the spectator to spend time examining the frame, discerning,

¹⁵⁰ Fielding, 37.

¹⁵¹ Quoted in Fielding, 38.

¹⁵² Musser, *Motion Picture Catalogs*.

contemplating, and perhaps ultimately recognizing the unreality of the set pieces. There are no trick edits and no attempt to hide the fake set, quite the opposite.

The appeal of royal coronations suggests a certain degree of fascination with premodern, feudal modalities. Indeed, the *New York Times* reported, “it was a bit of the Middle Ages transported into our twentieth century... possibly the like of it will never again be seen in this changing modern world.”¹⁵³ Part of the event’s attraction was its deviation from modern actuality. And the immediacy of the pre-enactment might suggest that 1902 audiences sought more unique attractions than could be provided by earlier actualities. Musser’s history contends that the cinema of attractions really only lasted one theatrical season, from late 1895 to early 1897.¹⁵⁴ While attractions have continued to draw audiences to the movies for over a century, the “cinema of attractions,” as the medium’s dominant form, was rather short-lived. The initial novelty of actuality as spectacle waned soon after the premiere of the biograph and *McKinley at Home*. Cinema’s transition away from actualities as attractions does not assume that, by 1897, audiences no longer sought reality, quite the contrary. Actualities had simply become mundane realities.

Disaster Films

Biograph relocated from Hammerstein’s theater to Koster & Bial’s Music Hall on the eve of the 1896 election. The following week, after the Republican victory, *McKinley at*

¹⁵³ “Coronation of King Edward VII,” *New York Times*, August 10, 1902.

¹⁵⁴ Charles Musser, “Rethinking Early Cinema: Cinema of Attractions and Narrativity,” in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 400.

Home screened with *New York Fire Department* (Biograph, 1896). Musser observes that, by juxtaposing these two films, Biograph synonymized McKinley with a firefighter coming to the rescue.¹⁵⁵ Fire rescue scenes were common plot points in plays during this period, often serving as the dénouement. It was also common for local fire departments to perform live staged scenes of fire rescues for the public.¹⁵⁶ At Coney Island and other amusement sites, fire spectacles featured real professional firefighters to augment the illusion of realism, though the fires were not real, and were typically the most successful attractions.¹⁵⁷ Fires naturally became prevalent cinematic subjects beginning in 1894 and continuing into the early twentieth century. Rabinovitz observes the relationship between firefighting and modernity: “Unlike local policemen who were generally viewed as corrupt bullies, firefighters of this era received considerable publicity as true American heroes, and the dramatically employed modern technology to solve problems generally wrought by modern urban living conditions.”¹⁵⁸ Cinematic rescue scenes were almost always staged, and fire rescue films in particular served to demonstrate that rugged masculinity could save one from the inherent dangers of modernity.

One of Edison’s earliest Black Maria films, *Fire Rescue Scene* (1894), was exhibited along with *The Kiss*, et al., during the spring run of the vitascope in 1896.¹⁵⁹ In *Fire Rescue Scene*, the Black Maria stage is filled with smoke while a firefighter climbs

¹⁵⁵ Musser, *Emergence of Cinema*, 152.

¹⁵⁶ “Fire! Fire! Fire!” *Portland Daily Press* (Portland, ME), November 26, 1894, 4.

¹⁵⁷ See Andrea Stulman Dennett & Nina Warnke, “Disaster Spectacles at the Turn of the Century,” *Film History* 4, no. 2 (1990): 104-05.

¹⁵⁸ Rabinovitz, 58.

¹⁵⁹ “The Work of Wizards,” *New Haven Morning Journal and Courier* (New Haven, CT), May 30, 1896, 7.

up and down a ladder extending offscreen—creating the illusion, through tight framing, that the ladder has been perched upon a burning building—where he rescues a young girl and a young boy. Early filmmakers also captured actualities of real fires, where no heroic rescue is depicted. *Burning of Durland's Riding Academy* (Edison, 1902) presents real New York City firefighters and their effort to battle the flames as the riding academy, located at Columbus Circle, actually burned to the ground. The Edison Company erroneously re-distributed the film as *Firemen Fighting the Flames at Paterson*, since they were unable to film the actual Paterson fire.¹⁶⁰ *Academy of Music Fire* (Biograph, 1903), however, is an actuality of the burning of the original Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM). The fire scene/fire rescue scene sub-genre serves as a potent example of early cinema often conflating actuality with performative staging, which *Life of an American Fireman* (Edison, 1903), a film that the Library of Congress catalog describes as a “documentary-drama,” epitomizes.¹⁶¹ There are distinguishable formal differences between actualities and staged scenes in these films. As noted above, *Fire Rescue Scene* is framed tightly, in what we might today consider a medium wide shot, though at the time this proximity was quite close compared to most actualities. In *Academy of Music Fire*, we see a group of firefighters atop the roof of BAM from an obscure, somewhat canted angle at street level. It is an extreme wide shot that proximally insinuates the camera operator's inability to access the event any closer. There is a second image at the

¹⁶⁰ See Doane, 156. Also see Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon*, 193.

¹⁶¹ Kemp R. Niver, *Motion Pictures From the Library of Congress Paper Print Collection 1894-1912*, ed. Bebe Bergsten (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), 144.



Figure 1.5: *Fire Rescue Scene* (Edison, 1894), staged in the Black Maria



Figure 1.6: *Academy of Music Fire* (Biograph, 1903), filmed on location during an actual fire

end of the film. Here we see a quick pan left at street level. At the time, camera pans were a technique used almost exclusively in actualities. Presumably, staged scenes could rarely accommodate the space required for panning shots. By 1902 seasoned cinema audiences may have easily discerned this nonfiction genre formula. *Burning of Durland's Riding Academy* includes three images, all of which are extreme wide shots that include camera pans. The second shot begins on a group of firefighters at work then pans away to focus on the destruction of the building. The human subjects are emphasized less than the disaster itself. This representation is strikingly antithetical to the fictional rescue scene in which the individual heroism of the firefighter is underscored.

Additionally, if we compare these actualities to *Life of an American Fireman* in terms of editorial strategy, there are perceivable distinctions. In *Academy of Music Fire* and *Burning of Durland's Riding Academy*, editing is employed sequentially and can therefore be interpreted as chronological. Although the scenes may not have occurred chronologically, situating them in a particular order, along with their spatial and temporal relationship to each other (i.e., they are occurring at approximately the same time and place), creates the diegetic illusion of continuity. The editing in *Life of an American Fireman* is also chronologically sequential during the outdoor scenes, which were filmed with authentic firefighters from Newark and Orange, NJ.¹⁶² But the dénouement includes indoor scenes that were filmed in Edison's Manhattan studio, and the editing takes on an unusual, albeit common for the time, temporal pattern in which the event of the rescue is repeated, once from the outdoor view and a second time from the indoor view (a view

¹⁶² See Niver.

that, I might add, would be nearly impossible to film from the inside of an actual burning building!).¹⁶³ Like framing/proximity, camera panning, and the emphasis on space over subjects, editing functions to differentiate actuality from fiction. While it may be problematic to assume contemporary audiences always noted these distinctions, there is little evidence to suggest otherwise. In fact, the *Newark Evening News* reported that James White arranged and acted in *Life of an American Fireman*, so it was perhaps no secret that these films were not actualities.¹⁶⁴

Stephen Bottomore suggests that the origins of film editing can be found in pre-1900 nonfiction where views from the same events were intended to be shown consecutively: “this is not just a case of separate films being shown together, as in the ‘programmes’ of films and slides. Here, rather, we have several shots covering one time period and adjacent spaces.”¹⁶⁵ An exhibition program is editorial in the sense that it invokes montage, but these pre-edited nonfiction scenes demonstrate something closer to continuity than montage. A comparison between *Life of an American Fireman* and nonfictional fire films illustrates how nonfiction seemed to have a better grasp on how to use editing to tell stories; or, perhaps more accurately, nonfiction films used editing in a manner more aligned with what would become standard continuity. *Life of an American Fireman* is nevertheless a complicated example because it conflates news actuality

¹⁶³ At one point in the 1930s or 1940s the film was re-edited using more common Hollywood cross-cutting techniques. The interior and exterior scenes are intercut rather than shown consecutively as in the original copyright version.

¹⁶⁴ See Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon*, 213-14.

¹⁶⁵ Stephen Bottomore, “Shots in the Dark—The Real Origins of Film Editing,” in *Early Cinema: Space Frame Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (London: BFI, 1990), 106.

(nonfiction) with theatrical spectacle (fiction). Such a conflation between fiction and nonfiction was no uncommon at the time. Biograph's 1904 film *Fighting the Flames*, *Dreamland* is an actuality of fire rescue attraction at Coney Island, which Andrea Dennett and Nina Warnke refer to as a "documentary of the theatrical event."¹⁶⁶ Films like *Capture of the Biddle Brothers* (Edison, 1902), *The Black Hand* (Biograph, 1906), and *Tenderloin Tragedy* (Biograph, 1907) all represent real events through a fictional guise. Like *Life of an American Fireman*, we ultimately consider them fiction, or at the very least historical fiction. But are they purely fiction or something more aligned with documentary? The answer, I would suggest, is neither exclusively. They are more accurately predecessors to *both* historical fiction and documentary.

The fire rescue sub-genre demonstrates how modern technology, both firefighting technology and the motion picture itself, was used to reify antimodernism and cope with the threats posed by modern urban development. Rugged masculinity also served as an antidote to the dangers of modern life. The antimodern/modern paradox was also evident in other disaster films produced throughout this era, particularly train collision films, which underscored the dangers of modern transportation technology. *A Railroad Wreck* (Paul, 1900) and *Railroad Smashup* (Edison, 1904) demonstrate that the initial attraction of films like *L'Arrivée d'un Train en Gare de La Ciotat* and *Empire State Express* did not persist beyond 1896. In these train collision films, spectacle is produced through staged disasters, not simply the illusion of motion. In *A Railroad Wreck*, a train approaches a tunnel, then after several moments reverses course, but to no avail. The oncoming train

¹⁶⁶ Dennett & Warnke, 108.

collides, and both abruptly plummet down an adjacent cliff. To contemporary viewers, the set is conspicuously fake. There is no evidence to indicate that the producer of the film, Robert Paul, intended to fool audiences. In fact, the catalog description explicitly categorizes the film as an “imitation.”¹⁶⁷ Unlike *L’Arrivée d’un Train* and *Empire State Express*, the actuality of trains in motion is not the highlight of the film. The dénouement is the trains colliding with each other, not the illusion of a train passing by the spectator. Like Paul, by the early 1900s Edison felt compelled to construct a train collision to augment the spectacle of trains in motion. *Railroad Smashup* depicts a real train collision, albeit one that was specifically staged for the purpose of Edison’s camera. The Pennsylvania Railroad donated their outdated train cars to Edison for this production. According to Musser, the film was released as its own separate subject but also as the climax to the bank robbery film *Capture of “Yegg” Bank Burglars* (Edison, 1904).¹⁶⁸ Two trains collide in the distance, then an edit brings us to a closer view of the collision’s aftermath, as a crowd of spectators gathers to assess the destruction. The realism of the staged scene may have encouraged viewers to assume the event’s verisimilitude, though contemplation of the logistical organization involved in filming such a scene naturally draws skepticism. One can assume that the camera crew knew where to be and when to be there.

In both train collision films, the staging of disaster jettisons actuality. But they also situate the viewer in more of a passive role than earlier films like *L’Arrivée d’un*

¹⁶⁷ Musser, *Motion Picture Catalogs*.

¹⁶⁸ Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon*, 286-87.

Train and *Empire State Express*, in which the train's visual proximity to the viewer produces a more interactive experience. In *A Railroad Wreck*, the camera is positioned from a high angle at a distance, and the train literally travels away from the spectator, unlike the onrushing trains in *L'Arrivée d'un Train* and *Empire State Express*. Similarly, in *Railroad Smashup*, the first view of the actual collision is an extreme long shot, augmenting the separation between the viewer and the action on screen. The spectacle of disaster provides an authentic, hyperreal experience but one that does not implicate the spectator, who remains at a safe distance. Perhaps this was also the appeal of disaster spectacles at amusement parks. Audiences knew that what they were experiencing was not real. Disaster as an attraction allowed audiences to experience something similar to the authenticity of a tragedy without actually experiencing tragedy. Dennett and Warnke argue that audiences viewed disaster spectacles as "attractive and repulsive at the same time."¹⁶⁹ Rabinovitz argues that cinematic suspension of disbelief may have concomitantly ameliorated anxieties regarding the potential dangers, such as train accidents, of a rapidly urbanizing society, eliciting pleasure in the disavowal of both motion picture verisimilitude and modern reality.¹⁷⁰ Early train representations exemplify a shift that was also antimodern. The staging of train scenes designed to represent their inherent danger eclipsed fascination with the actuality of modern transportation, i.e., the simple visual pleasure derived from trains in motion. But these desires were celebrated with technology! In the case of amusement park attractions, this included visual electric

¹⁶⁹ Dennett & Warnke, 106.

¹⁷⁰ Rabinovitz, 56-57.

light shows, and in the case of motion pictures, it was the new medium itself, the projection apparatus serving as its own form of light show. Resistance to modern development consequently fueled new technology.

The threat of natural disasters was also frequently thematized throughout late nineteenth-century amusement culture. Nearly every motion picture production company covered or reconstructed the eruption of Mount Pelée in Martinique in 1902 and the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake. Both events were serious disasters with extremely high death tolls numbering in the thousands. Méliès's *The Eruption of Mount Pelée* (Star, 1902) is listed as a “Re-production” in Star’s catalog.¹⁷¹ The film has a noticeably unrealistic mise-en-scène. The water floating in the foreground is not scaled well with the scene on land. The middle-ground consists of a conspicuously constructed set piece intended to represent the town of Saint-Pierre, while Mount Pelée billows fake smoke in the background. *The Terrible Eruption of Mt. Pelée and Destruction of St. Pierre, Martinique* (Star, 1902) is even less realistic. Here Méliès seems to intentionally create an otherworldly mise-en-scène, through set design and color tinting, one that recalls *La Voyage Dans la Lune* (Star, 1902). Edison’s three films depicting the event—*Burning of St. Pierre* (1902), *Mt. Pelée in Eruption and Destruction of St. Pierre* (1902), and *Mt. Pelée Smoking Before Eruption* (1902)—are all listed as “imitation” in the Edison catalog.¹⁷² The Library of Congress catalog notes that the mountain in *Burning of St.*

¹⁷¹ Musser, *Motion Picture Catalogs*.

¹⁷² Musser.

Pierre is constructed, and the two other films are listed as “miniatures.”¹⁷³ Siegmund Lubin’s film *Eruption of Mt. Pelée* (1902), however, was cataloged as an actuality with a panorama of Saint-Pierre taken, purportedly, right before the eruption.¹⁷⁴ Edison also produced a panoramic film, *Panoramic View of St. Pierre, Martinique* (1903), presumably in the aftermath of the eruption. Although these films are non-extant, we might assume that they were actualities, or at least attempted to present themselves as such, if they did in fact contain panning camera shots.

It was claimed that Lubin’s *The San Francisco Earthquake* (1906) was “taken at the scene of the great disaster.”¹⁷⁵ However, David Levy asserts that this film was a fake made from cardboard.¹⁷⁶ Biograph’s extant film, *San Francisco Disaster* (1906), is rather noticeably fake, almost to the extent of Méliès’s films, and the Library of Congress catalog describes the set as a miniature of the city.¹⁷⁷ The Edison Company produced a series of actualities of the fires and recovery efforts after the earthquake, but a large portion of the extant actuality footage of this event lacks a definitive author. The Library of Congress possesses a film titled *San Francisco Earthquake and Fire, April 18, 1906*, by an unknown producer, which might be Vitagraph’s scenes of the event’s aftermath,

¹⁷³ Niver, *Motion Pictures From the Library of Congress Paper Print Collection 1894-1912*, 240, 253.

¹⁷⁴ Musser, *Motion Picture Catalogs*.

¹⁷⁵ Musser.

¹⁷⁶ David Levy, “Reconstituted Newsreels, Reenactments and the American Narrative Film,” in *Cinema 1900/1906: An Analytical Study by the National Film Archive (London) and the International Federation of Film Archives*, ed. Roger Holman (Brussels: Fédération Internationale des Archives du Film, 1982), 243.

¹⁷⁷ Niver, *Motion Pictures From the Library of Congress Paper Print Collection 1894-1912*, 155.

cataloged as *The San Francisco Earthquake* (1906). The actuality in the Edison and (possibly) Vitagraph scenes is formulaically recognizable by the abundance of panoramas and other moving camera angles. But while distinguishable formulas may have been recognized, and films were often cataloged according to certain genres, these boundaries were precarious. As Levy notes, “The categories Newsreel, Documentary, Drama, and Reproduction do not appear to have been very firmly fixed as production models by early film producers. And because the methods employed in one needed to cross no very strong boundaries to be used in another, there was a lot of two-way traffic across a weak ontological frontier.”¹⁷⁸ As previously noted, Niver and others cataloging these films many decades later created those genre categories. Levy argues that the early reenactment film served as a proto-narrative, and the development of narrative cinema in the 1900s drew from aesthetic formulas aligned with the reconstruction of actuality: the “shameful sham” became “the dominant mode of screen realism.”¹⁷⁹ I agree, but it is important to be mindful of the fact that there were narrative forms, primarily comic scenes but also dramas, in the 1890s. The “shameful sham” may have influenced the transition to narrative as the dominant form, but this influence overlapped with other early fictions. Furthermore, producers saw a value in reconstructing events for the sake of both narrative and historical documentation. Despite the fact that audiences may have recognized reconstructions, they nevertheless sought to provide some semblance of verisimilitude regarding real historical events. Even the otherworldliness of Méliès’s *The Terrible*

¹⁷⁸ Levy, 249.

¹⁷⁹ Levy, 256.

Eruption of Mt. Pelée and Destruction of St. Pierre, Martinique captures something real; the surreality of a catastrophic natural disaster.

Like the disaster spectacles prevalent at turn-of-the-century amusement parks, reconstructions of disasters on film may have served to ameliorate any trauma associated with the memory of these events. Rabinovitz observes that the foregrounding of mechanical technology was an important part of the spectacle: “the spectacle was always a ‘double pleasure’: a vision of Armageddon in which a spectator felt safely immersed and experienced the ‘moral satisfaction’ of witnessing triumph over adversity, a triumph itself that frequently celebrated the politics of industrial and technological expansion.”¹⁸⁰ But the fascination with disaster also suggests, perhaps paradoxically, a sense of disapproval with modern progress. The theme in these films is, after all, that nature destroys the modern world. Such destruction, and our culture’s desire to dwell on and repeat it, elicits pause amid the quotidian day-to-day. The sensibility to dwell on disaster has persisted throughout human history, though around the turn of the twentieth century it occurred amid rapid industrial and technological changes. Disaster films represent the power of nature over technological advancement. Yet to some degree disaster films invoke modern technology, the motion picture, not necessarily to physically combat natural disasters but at the very least to mitigate their psychological effects.

¹⁸⁰ Rabinovitz, 58.

Conclusion

Elizabeth Cowie argues that documentary images participate in the spectacle of the act of looking itself while also eliciting a desire for knowledge of real-world information.

Drawing from Lacan's distinction between "real," "imaginary," and "symbolic," Cowie asserts the impossibility of reality insofar as our everyday reality can only be situated in the symbolic. A film based solely on constructed reality (symbolic) cannot be real: "The world shown in the actuality of documentary film is presented as knowable, and the terms of its knowability are organized by the film, not by reality."¹⁸¹ Documentaries elicit a desire for the real by positing a potential knowable reality through what is claimed to be objective recording, but this merely constitutes a symbolical, not "real," construction of the world. We only recognize the knowable world in documentaries based on our socially constructed sense of what we already know. In other words, we are not experiencing reality in the documentary image but simply recognizing known objects.¹⁸² Early film actualities lack the rhetorical commentary present in most documentaries produced later in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but despite this lack, there is a desire to reconstruct the symbolic world to achieve something closer to realism than symbolism. This desire was stronger in the case of films that reconstructed historical and current events.

I began this chapter by outlining a documentary tradition that inaugurated much earlier than Grierson, while also aligning this tradition with a shift in perception

¹⁸¹ Elizabeth Cowie, "The Spectacle of Actuality," in *Collecting Visible Evidence*, eds. Jane M. Gaines & Michael Renov (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 27.

¹⁸² Cowie, 30.

beginning in the late eighteenth century. In *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*, Crary examines the consequences of the shift outlined in *Techniques of the Observer*: “attention, as an indispensable part of an expanding terrain of modern spectacle, becomes both a simulation of and compensation for a chimerical ‘real’ experience. As attention is posed as fundamentally constitutive of subjectivity, ‘experience’ is increasingly resituated outside of collective, lived historical time.”¹⁸³

Early cinema, which provided visual attractions as well as the encouragement to contemplate and discern, relates to Crary’s modern observer as less fixed and more mobile, though notably more exchangeable in a capitalist economy. The rise in popularity of reenactments throughout the nineteenth century demonstrates how the shift from objective to subjective perception informed the simulated reality of current and historical events, through the embodied subjectivity of the contemplating, discerning viewer.

Reenactments served to continually recontextualize events while preserving the subjectivity of modern realism that positivism threatened. Throughout this transition, the very notion of an event’s realism transformed. Events became things to be cataloged and archived, but in a manner in which their verisimilitude could be negotiated. The positivistic impulse to visually catalog events for objective posterity conflated with representational strategies, like the reenactment formula, that encouraged subjective interpretations. Through the reconstruction of events, media producers resisted modern positivism by seeking something more experientially real than superficial reality could provide.

¹⁸³ Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 361-62.

The search for subjective authenticity was produced by and generated an antimodern sensibility. As I have argued throughout this chapter, this sensibility was prevalent in a variety of cultural sectors from the Civil War through the first decade of motion picture technology, particularly in relation to the practice of reenacting historical and current events. Reenacting and resisting modernity stemmed from similar impulses that ultimately informed how certain cinematic formulas developed. The traces of antimodern reenactment in the aforementioned films shall serve as a contextual foundation for its more conspicuous and pervasive presence in the three thematic categories that comprise this dissertation's remaining chapters. In the following chapter, I will discuss the execution film as a genre that almost always staged or reconstructed real events. The turn-of-the-century fascination with death, and public executions in particular, illustrates a cultural obsession with premodern modalities. Reenactments of executions functioned to resist the modern reality that capital punishment was becoming an increasingly less common legal action, while also seeking an authentic experience associated with death, the most vexing of embodied realities.

CHAPTER TWO

RECONSTRUCTING CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault outlines a shift in the French penal system around the turn of the nineteenth century, one in which an increasingly private, scientific, and disciplinary order replaced public executions. Penal reform at this time, and throughout the shift to modernity more generally, ultimately sought a more systemic way of asserting power. For Foucault, writing in the 1970s, the “truth-power relation remains at the heart of all mechanisms of punishment and that is still to be found in contemporary penal practice—but in a quite different form and with very different effects.”¹ Yet in the United States around the turn of the twentieth century, as progressive reformers like Jane Addams were sympathizing with those involved in prostitution and other forms of modern criminality, perceived as symptoms of industrialization, the state was arguably softening its treatment of criminals, at least insofar as capital punishment was increasingly being revised and/or outright abolished.² While progressives resisted modernity through reform, there persisted a nostalgic sensibility for older forms of punishment, often enacted through vigilantism. Both groups attempted to cope with modernity in very different ways.

In this chapter, I will draw from Foucault while illustrating how forms of punishment sustained premodern sensibilities into the twentieth century, particularly in

¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995, originally published, 1975), 55.

² See Kahlil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 117-18.

the United States. The reproduction of executions on film between roughly 1895 and 1907 demonstrates an impulse to indulge in the spectacle of death. In most of these films, modern progress in the penal sector—where capital punishment is viewed privately, not as a public spectacle, and this practice was increasingly being perceived by the state as inhumane—is eschewed in favor of public executions and archaic vigilante justice.

However, there are examples of films from this period that conformed to modern power relations but in a manner that normalized dominant hierarchies, criminalizing individuals and groups that were considered Other, particularly African American men, as well as Asian Americans and Indigenous peoples. Cinematic reconstructions of executions throughout the medium's first decade illustrate the complex symbiosis between modern resistance, figured through premodern forms of violence, and cultural hegemony, particularly regarding capitalism and racial supremacy.

Local municipalities increasingly perceived capital punishment as a barbaric practice throughout this period in the United States. Concomitantly, it was more frequently abolished over time. When performed legally, executions were steadily becoming private affairs. Support for harsher punishment was nevertheless prevalent, particularly among upper-class moralists.³ Additionally, public executions and lynchings, whether sanctioned legally or in many cases extralegally, remained widespread. In the Library of Congress's Chronicling America newspaper database, a search for "public execution" between the years 1895 and 1907 produces 885 results. The phrase "capital

³ See T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, originally published, 1983), 111.

punishment” produces 12,059 results. By comparison, the most recent 12-year period available in the database, 1951-1963, produces 37 results for “capital punishment” and only 5 for “public execution,” of which only one source actually refers to a public execution, and even then it is a historical reference.⁴ It is worth noting that articles containing “public execution” primarily cited real events, while articles containing “capital punishment” generally referred to the ongoing debate regarding its abolition. Executions were so pervasive that they were often reenacted, much like the reenactments of the murders of George Floyd and Elijah McClain in 2020. In 1901 one child accidentally killed himself for attempting to imitate an execution he witnessed.⁵

Motion picture producers also reenacted executions, allowing audiences to participate in the fetishization of perceivably primitive impulses through the guise of law and order. As outlined in previous chapters, reconstructions in early cinema paralleled with the antimodern quest for authenticity, so it makes sense that reconstructions of historical, and quasi-historical, executions were a recurring genre during this period. For example, several motion picture producers represented the execution of Joan of Arc.⁶ Joan of Arc epitomized antimodern ideology, not only as a historical figure from the medieval period but as a maverick transgressor during a period of transition from medievalism to the renaissance, one who reaffirmed Christian piety.⁷ Her execution on screen could have therefore served one of two antimodern functions for viewers. As

⁴ See chroniclingamerica.loc.gov

⁵ “Hanged Himself at Play,” *New York Times*, July 31, 1901.

⁶ See Charles Musser, *Motion Picture Catalogs by American Producers and Distributors, 1894-1908* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1984-1985), Microform.

⁷ See Lears, 113.

representative of the end of medievalism, these films could have been viewed with pathos. Audiences may have also triumphed justice served through a medieval form of capital punishment. Contemporaneously, around the turn of the twentieth century, the prevalence of lynchings in the United States suggests that such forms of medieval justice were not only consumed as visual spectacles of history but also practiced. Motion picture producers captured, and made public, the currency of such acts.

While drawing from antimodern impulses, the practice of lynching, and the films that depicted this practice, were part of the modern experience. Amy Louise Wood discusses how filmed versions of lynchings paradoxically appropriated modern technology for antimodern purposes:

audiences also enjoyed these pictures because they represented practices of popular justice that in many ways were at odds with the process of modernization. These films deployed modern visual technology and its sensationalistic and objectifying capacity in order to uphold antimodern forms of social power. In a sense, they enabled people to use modernity against itself.⁸

This inversion of modernity also contributed to the defining features of modern culture. Jacqueline Goldsby observes how “lynching calls into question how we define modernity in the first place, not in terms of chronology, or when periods begin and end, but why we presume modernity necessarily means ‘progress’ that promotes human liberty and happiness.”⁹ Modernity came to be defined, at least to some degree, by the forms of social power perceived as antimodern, which were represented in popular media. The cultural fascination with executions was, on the one hand, and perhaps superficially,

⁸ Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 118.

⁹ Jacqueline Denise Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 286.

based on a need to uphold civil law and order; but on the other hand, it demonstrates a fascination with the cinematic spectacle of violence and death as well as a more specific pathology of racism, one that sought to perpetuate pre-Civil War racial hierarchies. Racial superiority is affirmed for the viewer by witnessing the criminalization and execution of a racial Other.

Encounters with death reaffirm not only racial hierarchies but also, more broadly, our own embodied, living authenticity. There is an innate link between death and reenactment: both point to the impossibility of properly (re)experiencing a past event. As Jennifer Malkowski argues, attempts to represent death in photography and film “form a collective and enduring fantasy for documentarians and their audiences, one that cannot be fully realized because cameras cannot make visible a definitive ‘moment’ within an opaque, durational process of dying.”¹⁰ Film reenactments, both historical and present-day, predominantly reconstruct events where gaps in historical knowledge are abundant. For example, television shows like *America’s Most Wanted* (Fox, 1988-2012) invoke the reenactment formula as an investigative tool for making sense of a crime. Death is often thematized in reenactments, as a mystery that may be solved through the performative act of reconstructing the event. But there is a peculiar paradox involved in the relationship between reenactment and death. Reenactments embody death by explicating a particular event as past, while at the same time they deny death by sustaining the event’s presentness.

¹⁰ Jennifer Malkowski, *Dying in Full Detail: Mortality and Digital Documentary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 20.

This chapter will begin with an in-depth review of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, in conjunction with a brief history of capital punishment in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, focusing primarily on the United States. I will then outline how the idea of execution as a form of law and order has, historically, transgressed legal boundaries. Non-sanctioned public lynchings, prevalent in the postbellum period but persisting into the twentieth century, were and are a phenomenon ingrained in the American cultural consciousness. This chapter attempts to place that history in the context of early cinema, where depictions of executions, both legal and non-legal, were abundant enough to warrant their own genre. I will examine chronologically the genre of execution films, which includes reenactments of real executions and fictionalized accounts based loosely on contemporaneous events. These films provide evidence for the conflicting sensibilities between civility and barbarity, especially noteworthy in the execution of Leon Czolgosz—whose assassination of the president of the United States and self-proclaimed anarchism threatened the ethos of American capitalism—as well as in the case of lynchings and foreign executions, which represent the Othering of both foreign and domestic enemies through capital punishment. These films also demonstrate how barbarity fundamentally informed modern power structures and forms of punishment that Foucault identifies as more psychological than their physical predecessors. By archiving punishment through motion picture technology, early filmmakers effaced the physicality of traditional methods of torture and replaced this with an abstract simulated reality, a modern form of disciplining that sustained premodern barbarity representationally. An analysis of early film reenactments of executions shall throw light

on the notion that the reconstruction of events helped cope with a rapidly shifting, increasingly urbanized world. Modernity, particularly new developments in science and technology, were often romanticized but nevertheless recast gruesomely violent impulses. While in some cases violent representations served to resist modernity, it would be a generalization to categorize all execution films as outrightly antimodern. However, the guise of modernity through the novelty of motion picture technology functioned to sustain premodern modalities associated with capital punishment as a defining feature of modern culture.

Discipline and Punish

The physical inability to record real live executions and the concomitant inclination to reproduce them as cinematic spectacles suggests a desire to satisfy the impulse for premodern modalities and served to ideologically/politically support older forms of punishment that were less frequently practiced in the modern world. According to Foucault, between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, “the entire economy of punishment was redistributed,” from the public execution to a more scientific disciplinary system in which “the body as the major target of penal repression disappeared.”¹¹ This transition involved two essential processes: “the disappearance of punishment as a spectacle,”¹² and “a slackening of the hold on the body.”¹³ Foucault focuses this history primarily in France where, despite public executions not being entirely abolished until the

¹¹ Foucault, 7-8.

¹² Foucault, 8.

¹³ Foucault, 10.

twentieth century, the practice had shifted from one of ceremony to one of legal administration. In fact, French law required executions to be public affairs into the twentieth century.¹⁴ While encountering resistance, this shift from ceremonial and public to legal and private executions has occurred throughout Western civilization. The last public execution in England was conducted in 1868. In France, by the turn of the nineteenth century, and continuing throughout the twentieth century, the guillotine was the primary tool for conducting executions, which presented a slightly different form of visual staging than hangings. Hanging remained the preferred method for capital punishment in the United States until the electric chair was implemented in the 1890s. Additionally, the “slackening of the hold on the body” that Foucault references points to the diminishment of corporal punishment. Physical torture was a crucial component in the ceremonial nature of premodern public executions. The disappearance of the public execution as a spectacle, however, did not efface its popularity, particularly in the United States. Although executions in the United States became less accessible to the public throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, public executions and lynchings remained relatively common in many parts of the country well into the twentieth century.

Written in 1919, Raymond Bye’s history of capital punishment asserts that, in England up until the nineteenth century, “Execution was the universal panacea for all crime, and it was applied with vigor on murderers, thieves, and petty delinquents without

¹⁴ See “Legislation in France,” *New York Times*, March 25, 1900. Also see “Thirst for Blood Among the French,” *New York Times*, January 17, 1909.

discrimination.”¹⁵ Burning alive was often performed in particularly heinous cases. Prefiguring Foucault, Bye observes that the introduction of the scientific method in applied sociology—a common Progressive Era ethos, I might add—led to capital punishment reform over time across the United States.¹⁶ By 1835 public executions had been abolished in the state of New York. Michigan was the first state to abolish the death penalty in 1847. Rhode Island (1852) and Wisconsin (1853) soon followed. Leading up to the twentieth century, eight states had abolished capital punishment. But there was a decline in this trend around 1900. In fact, two states restored the death penalty—Iowa in 1878 and Colorado in 1901—and notably both were western states where increased lynchings may have revealed to lawmakers that the people demanded capital punishment. Not until 1910 would this trend resume, with seven states abolishing capital punishment between 1910 and 1919. Additionally, while New York set the stage for other states to eliminate public executions, many did not do so until well into the twentieth century. Therefore, the cultural consciousness in which execution films were produced and exhibited in the United States between 1895 and 1907 was ripe for efforts to resist the transition away from premodern forms of punishment.

Cinema catered to the desire to witness executions, whether real or reproduced. At the very least, if the enthusiasm for publicly viewable executions had faded by the twentieth century, motion picture producers re-cultivated this interest. However, punishment itself may have become less tangible and more abstract, as Foucault argues:

¹⁵ Raymond Taylor Bye, *Capital Punishment in the United States* (Philadelphia: The Committee on Philanthropic Labor of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of Friends, 1919), 2.

¹⁶ Bye, 5.

“Punishment... leaves the domain of more or less everyday perception and enters that of abstract consciousness; its effectiveness is seen as resulting from its inevitability, not from its visible intensity.”¹⁷ The concept of “punishment” would have to be perceived through a mediated lens—for example, through language, illustrated or photographic images, or motion picture reenactments—not viscerally. The absence of a visceral attachment to punishment is consistent with Foucault’s assertion that the emphasis on the body shifted to an emphasis on the soul, not a religious soul but one “born out of methods of punishment, supervision and constraint... The soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body.”¹⁸ Capital punishment is a greater threat when viewed as a state-constructed abstract concept because it affects the soul, or psyche, more so than the body. The power to punish and/or execute is removed from the public sphere, and a select few control it in secret.¹⁹ While the idea of torture remains in the penal system, the non-corporal, non-visible, bureaucratic nature of the modern penal system increasingly enveloped the idea of punishment: “The whole penal operation has taken on extra-judicial elements and personnel.”²⁰

Angela Davis has criticized Foucault’s model for neglecting the Black experience in America, particularly in relation to slavery, which continued to persist throughout this shift as a form of modern incarceration.²¹ Indeed, the Reconstruction era (1865-1877) can

¹⁷ Foucault, 9.

¹⁸ Foucault, 29-30.

¹⁹ See Foucault, 9-10.

²⁰ Foucault, 22.

²¹ See Dennis Childs, *Slaves of the State: Black Incarceration From the Chain Gang to the Penitentiary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 1-2.

appropriately be described as a period in which antebellum slavery was not abolished but rather reconstructed.²² One method of postbellum neoslavery was the chain gang, which persisted for nearly a century following the Civil War. Dennis Childs observes how Jim Crow laws allowed “criminally branded black people” to become commodities in “the public profiteering venues of the chain gang, the levee camp, and the state prison plantation,” a process that elucidates “the gothic presence of chattel slavery at the material substratum of U.S. modernity—a presence that embodies not a ‘premodern’ or ‘precapitalist’ mode of production, but an undead source of modern social reproduction.”²³ While performing public service, chain gangs were also put on display as spectacles for the public to engage with the process of punishment, much like public executions prior to the nineteenth century.²⁴ In the United States, chain gangs were a form of visual communication, or one might say commodified entertainment, that persisted into the twentieth century. The visual spectacle of criminality through chain gangs and, more popularly, entertainment media reinforced traditional modalities of archaic law and order in the midst of modern capital punishment reform. The nationwide popularity of capital punishment—opposed by affluent moralists though evidenced by extreme violence against alleged criminals, violence sanctioned both legally and extralegally, throughout many rural parts of the United States—demonstrates one way in which Americans coped with the rapidly expanding culture of urbane modernity, and this coping

²² See Childs, 9.

²³ Childs, 8-11.

²⁴ See Foucault, 45 & 55.

mechanism became part of the broader culture of American modernity as early film producers reified and spectacularized this resistant attitude.

What Foucault refers to as a normalization of penalty lends itself to racial hierarchization.²⁵ Jacqueline Goldsby argues for “anti-black mob murders as a networked, systemic phenomenon indicative of trends in national culture.”²⁶ For example, constitutional law, which protected states’ rights, normalized lynching as not necessarily extralegal.²⁷ The advent of motion picture technology in the 1890s contributed to the normalization of racial hierarchies. The technology of the gaze has historically functioned as a racist mechanism, evidenced by early motion pictures of executions in the United States, which elucidate narratives of disciplining, and in turn Othering, supposed domestic enemies. These films demonstrate how modernity (discipline, panopticism) and antimodernity (executions, lynchings) both functioned collaboratively toward racist ends, reinforcing the idea of Black criminality.

Execution Films

The execution film was a prevalent and popular genre throughout cinema’s first decade, beginning in 1895 with *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots* (Edison). After the 1906 film *A Desperate Crime* (Star), execution films became less prevalent, though themes of capital punishment remained integral to American cinema for several decades. The earliest execution films generally represent, or purport to represent, the death of real

²⁵ See Foucault, 183.

²⁶ Jacqueline Denise Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 5.

²⁷ See Goldsby, 18.

historical figures who were executed. Assassination films were also popular during this period and functioned similarly. There is a fine line, however, between reproductions of real executions and fictional representations. The latter were often only loosely based on real events, with the intention to be viewed as historical reconstructions. In this section, I will outline and briefly analyze several of these films, examples that serve to contextualize and inform the more elaborate case studies I address later in this chapter.

I begin with *The Execution of Mary Queen of Scots*, a film that, in contrast with many execution films, represents events in the distant past. The film is also unique in that it would have first been seen through the kinetoscope, not exhibited theatrically.

Contemporaneous newspaper accounts refer to the film as “the first of the Chamber of Horror series to be seen on the kinetoscope. The scene is blood-curdling in the extreme. The beautiful queen is seen to walk toward the headsman’s block, to lay her head upon it, and immediately the headsman’s ax falls upon the block and her head is seen to roll off the floor, dripping with blood.”²⁸ It is unclear whether this author was referring to a specific series advertised by the Edison Company, but it is likely that the “Chamber of Horror” is a reference to the “Chamber Horrors” waxworks exhibit at Madame Tussauds in London, which opened in the early nineteenth century. The “Chamber” included waxworks of historical figures that had been murdered or executed, a form of taxidermic reenactment that predated cinema. Mary Stuart was the Queen of Scotland from 1542 to 1567. In 1586 she was accused of plotting to assassinate Queen Elizabeth I of England

²⁸ “The Execution of ‘Mary Queen of Scots,’” *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), October 21, 1895, 16.

and sentenced to death the following year. The film contains a single view reenactment of this historical execution. Mary, the executioner, and several noblemen gather atop the scaffold. The camera is at eye-level rather than below the scaffold. In 1895 experimenting with any camera angle other than an eye-level view was extremely rare, and the camera here is positioned for theatrical staging purposes, not an attempt to replicate the public spectators' point of view. The action of Mary's decapitation is quick and methodical, historically accurate to some degree, though presumably the real execution took much longer. There is an edit just before the executioner launches his ax, replacing the actress playing Mary with a dummy. Such stop motion trick edits, or substitution splices, would become common, particularly in the work of Georges Méliès, but in 1895 this was quite innovative. Scott Combs observes that substitution splices were not always performed through stop motion in the camera but actually required an editor to match the actions in post-production.²⁹ This seems to be the case in *Execution of Mary* as the splice occurs in the middle of the executioner's action. It is therefore one of the earliest examples of motion picture editing performed after initial production.

Audiences probably recognized *Execution of Mary* as a historical depiction. Mary's story was commonly taught in grammar school at the time, and students often performed it as a play.³⁰ The justness of her execution was a frequent discussion in high school debates.³¹ Yet it is worth considering that some viewers—particularly uneducated

²⁹ Scott Combs, "Cut: Execution, Editing, and Instant Death," *The Spectator* 28, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 36.

³⁰ See "Excellent Entertainment," *Jersey City News* (Jersey City, NJ), February 26, 1897.

³¹ See "All Over Missouri," *Kansas City Journal*, March 3, 1895, 2 and "Bright Young Minds," *Evening Star* (Ocala, FL), March 19, 1900, 1.

individuals and immigrants, though these demographics were not yet frequent moviegoers in the mid-1890s—may have considered the possibility that this was a live, or recent, execution. The film was released in the summer of 1895, nearly a year prior to the introduction of theatrical motion picture exhibition and well after the kinetoscope's popularity had dwindled. Upon its initial release, audiences would have had to view the film at a kinetoscope parlor, which were still available but not as well-attended as they had been in 1894. Therefore, we might assume that this film was not widely disseminated. However, there is evidence to suggest that the film not only continued screening after the vitascope's premiere in 1896, but it was also a hit.³² The presence of this particular film, at a moment when the future of the motion picture as a sustainable entertainment medium was questionable, suggests an attempt to titillate the disinterested public. The contemporaneous account quoted above illustrates how the film was marketed as spectacularly gruesome, to satiate an audience bent on celebrating violence. If we consider early cinema as one of attractions (Gunning), then it is likely that the film served to celebrate premodern modalities of violence exemplified by the public execution. But if we also consider early cinema as one of contemplation (Musser), then it is possible that audiences considered the violence as an archaic form of the past, and the film could have conceivably been used as an argument against capital punishment. Both modern and antimodern perspectives are possible.

³² See "Amusements," *Omaha Daily Bee* (Omaha, NE), December 14, 1896, 8 and "Vitascope in the Schools," *Kansas City Journal*, April 16, 1897, 6.

Additional execution films from the 1890s include *Execution of a Spy* (Star, 1897)—one of four Méliès reconstructions of events from the Greco-Turkish War, and not to be confused with Biograph’s 1902 film of the same name—and *Execution of the Spanish Spy* (Lubin, 1898). All of these films are, to my knowledge, non-extant. Because the motion picture medium presented executions at a distance, they may have been regarded as acceptable, perhaps even respectable, viewing.³³ However, *The Hanging of William Carr* (Edison, 1897) seriously challenged the acceptability of these films. Despite being non-extant, it is probably the only execution film from this period that we can almost definitely assume was filmed live. Carr had confessed to killing his three-year-old daughter and was sentenced to the gallows before a public audience. Frank Guth, an employee for the Kansas City branch of the American Phonographic Company, was allowed access to film the execution. According to Wood, “Guth secured permission to set up a camera just outside the enclosure, protected by a ‘little house.’ He cut a hole in the fence and recorded Carr’s execution from the moment preparations began to the moment he was hanged.”³⁴ But it is unclear how much of the scene was recorded and what, from the footage obtained, would have been included in the final film. When the hanging was complete, reports indicate that approximately 600 spectators, including photographers and camera crews, simultaneously “rushed forward, calling out, crying, shrieking and laughing as they surged under the gallows and packed close around the

³³ See Wood, 125.

³⁴ Wood, 129.

dangling corpse for a close view.”³⁵ The *Kansas City Journal* reported that Guth captured it all:

Views of the hanging were taken by a kinetoscope, which was rigged up in an angle of the gallows inclosure. The operators of it said they examined the films after it was over, and they were perfect. They gave consecutive views of the procession to the gallows from the moment it appeared coming out of the court house door till the body was cut down. It shows the wild rush of the crowd into the stockade... It is the intention of the kinetoscope owners to show the pictures at opera houses in country towns if the authorities will permit it, which they probably will not do.”³⁶

The Phonoscope magazine similarly reported the presence of the cameraman, though unlike the aforementioned source, they condemned the crowd’s actions: “The vitascope man stood ready to photograph the thrilling capture of the stockade by the lawless mob.”³⁷ Based on these accounts, we have to assume that Guth did capture most of the action, and when the film was released through the Edison Company, they likely intended to show as much as possible, possibly to shock viewers but also potentially allow them to comply with, and cheer for, the mob’s mentality.

Wood claims that the film was supposed to premiere at the Academy of Music in Kansas City but ended up screening at a local phonograph shop, thus radically changing the context of the film’s reception, potentially diminishing its perceived quality.³⁸ The film ultimately did not circulate. It may have been too controversial to screen an execution actuality; on the one hand, due to the utter gruesomeness that would have appalled many opponents of capital punishment, but also, on the other hand, in the

³⁵ “Mob of Demons,” *Topeka State Journal* (Topeka, KS), December 17, 1897, 1.

³⁶ “His Neck Broken,” *Kansas City Journal*, December 18, 1897, 2.

³⁷ “Vitascope Mob at the Hanging,” *The Phonoscope* 1, no. 11 (1897), 8.

³⁸ Wood, 130.

aftermath of the mob activities at the execution, the public exhibition of the film risked refueling that behavior.

The mob mentality in this particular instance may have been a symptom of making sense of, or coping with, the heinous killing of a young child. Foucault observes how the desire to bear witness to physical torture and/or death inflicted on a criminal stems from a desire to investigate and obtain truth:

The search for truth through judicial torture was certainly a way of obtaining evidence, the most serious of all - the confession of the guilty person; but it was also the battle, and this victory of one adversary over the other, that 'produced' truth according to a ritual. In torture employed to extract a confession, there was an element of the investigation; there also was an element of the duel.³⁹

Carr's actions may have incited a degree of disbelief and, in turn, a search for truth. The impulse toward violence as a truth-seeking coping mechanism also resembles the desire to identify an Other as the enemy and physically defeat them, which has motivated violence on various scales throughout human history. The hundreds of spectators present for William Carr's hanging—as well as cameraman Frank Guth, producer Edison, and the audience that viewed this film, all complicit in the mob's actions to a degree—shared this impulse. But Foucault notes that premodern torture, despite being cruel, was not necessarily savage. It was regulated and procedural, and torture victims were often referred to as “patients.”⁴⁰ Part of the penal shift from premodern torture to modern rationality simply involved the augmentation and bureaucratization of regulations and procedures already set in place. Penal discourses and psychiatric discourses increasingly

³⁹ Foucault, 41.

⁴⁰ Foucault, 40.

overlapped throughout the nineteenth century. Punishment was not eliminated but became viewed as a form of mental rehabilitation. Newer models merely rejected corporal punishment while more effectively disciplining the subject psychologically, as Foucault outlines:

It is said that the prison fabricated delinquents; it is true that it brings back, almost inevitably, before the courts those who have been sent there. But it also fabricates them in the sense that it has introduced into the operation of the law and the offence [*sic*], the judge and the offender, the condemned man and the executioner, the non-corporal reality of the delinquency that links them together and, for a century and a half, has caught them in the same trap... They appeared together, the one extending from the other, as a technological ensemble that forms and fragments the object to which it applies its instruments.⁴¹

“Discipline” involves the control of the body and its docility.⁴² It is “an art of rank, a technique for the transformation of arrangements,” and is linked to evolutionary progress, a popular nineteenth-century idea.⁴³ The fact that 600 spectators mobbed the gallows upon Carr’s death may be a sign of disenchantment with the modern disciplinary apparatus. In the absence of traditional forms of torture, a simple hanging may have seemed too benign and insufficient for justice. Yet the documentation of a real death on film disciplined the body of the condemned criminal through a process of archival bureaucratization. It was a violent spectacle for the visual pleasure of audiences but one that also effaced the physicality of traditional torture methods for an abstract mechanical reproduction; a procedural, and virtual, record of the execution.

⁴¹ Foucault, 255.

⁴² Foucault, 137.

⁴³ Foucault, 146. Also see 160.

In this sense, reenacted executions on film were less about representing the actual moment of death than they were designed to produce archival proof that disciplinary law and order had been upheld. One film that is not explicitly a representation of a public execution but nevertheless follows this model is *The Capture of the Biddle Brothers* (Edison, 1902). The story of the Biddle Brothers, who were accused of murder and escaped from jail, was popular in the press. After they were captured, their story was quickly adapted into a play called “A Break for Liberty,” and the Edison Company did not wait long to reconstruct their capture on film.⁴⁴ *The Capture of the Biddle Brothers* contains one shot depicting a caravan of captors approaching in the distance. The Biddle Brothers, Ed and John, and their accomplice, Mrs. Soffel, spouse to the warden of the Pittsburg prison they escaped from, emerge in the foreground to meet their eventual captors. They do not attempt to escape but rather draw their weapons first. They are the aggressors, and their captors are portrayed as the heroic defenders of law and order. Whether this is how the event actually occurred is unknown, and indeed the facts of the case were openly debated at the time. In fact, there was an ongoing dispute between Pittsburgh Police and local law enforcement in Butler, PA, where the capture took place, regarding who should receive the \$5,000 reward.⁴⁵ The representation of the event in Edison’s reconstruction promulgates a specific ideological narrative. The structure of this film is somewhat unique in that the dénouement, the capture itself, occurs at the midpoint, not the conclusion. The film takes its time concluding, as we see the captured

⁴⁴ “Amusements” *Richmond Daily Palladium* (Richmond, VA), December 10, 1904, 7.

⁴⁵ “Row Over Reward,” *Daily Republican* (Wilmington, DE), February 25, 1902.

Biddles carted off, and the remainder of the party of captors retrieve their horses in the distance and exit slowly offscreen. With this structure, the captors' triumph, not the actual death of the criminals, is underscored. Reportedly, both Ed and John had attempted suicide as their captors drew near. Although both eventually died several days later in jail, only Ed's death was presumed to be a result of an initial suicide attempt. But we do not see this in the film. Both men continue to shoot back until they are finally captured. And in a bizarre feat of overzealous heroism, the captors continue marching forward as they are being shot at, never once hit! It seems reasonable, therefore, to surmise that the Edison Company reconstructed this event to portray, and idealize, swift and heroic justice. Suicide attempts would have made the capture too easy. Furthermore, if the Biddles attempted suicide in the film, it would disassociate the film from the popular execution genre. In keeping with the genre's evolving ideology, it was essential that those on the side of law and order execute the criminals so that the power of the state to discipline and punish could be affirmed.

A similar narrative involving the execution of criminals without trial is present in the immensely popular 1903 film *The Great Train Robbery*, and subsequent years saw a plethora of execution-oriented content on screen. *Capture and Execution of Spies, by Russians* (Paul, 1904) reconstructs events from the Russo-Japanese War. As the title indicates, Russians capture and execute two Japanese spies. *Reading the Death Sentence* (Biograph, 1905) and *An Execution by Hanging* (Biograph, 1905) were intended to dramatize the hanging of Mary Rogers, who was convicted of murdering her husband in that same year. The scenes are set in the actual death chamber but reproduced with actors.

They were filmed a week before the execution, and Biograph created an alternate version, *Reprieve from the Scaffold*, prepared for either scenario as Rogers's fate was still undetermined.⁴⁶ It is interesting to consider that exhibitors had the prerogative to screen the alternate version after she was in fact hanged, and conceivably some did this. Screening *Reprieve* rather than *An Execution by Hanging* may have been a more palatable option for exhibitors, and audiences, seeking less violent content, as well as those who opposed the death penalty. In a more lighthearted vein, Lubin advertised a film titled *Decapitation* (1904) among "comic films."⁴⁷ This was most likely a re-distribution of Méliès's *The Terrible Turkish Executioner* (Star, 1904), alternatively titled *Decapitation in Turkey*. In this film, we see the Turkish executioner's hyperbolically massive sword take out four criminals, presumably Armenians, in one swipec. After the severed heads are placed in a barrel, they are somehow reanimated, and after one reattaches itself to its body, it proceeds to do the same for the other three victims. They then capture the executioner and sever him in half, though he is likewise able to reattach himself and pursue the criminals offscreen. In typical Méliès trick film fashion, the set pieces are fantastical, and based on the content, the film was likely not intended to be interpreted as an authentic execution, though it was probably based loosely on the real-life Turko-Armenian conflict occurring contemporaneously.

⁴⁶ See Wood, 131. There was an effort to commute Rogers' sentence to life imprisonment. It is also worth noting here that Rogers was the last woman legally executed in the state of Vermont.

⁴⁷ "S. Lubin," *New York Clipper*, April 2, 1904, 140.

Star Films also produced *The Execution (Beheading) of One of the Hunchuses (Chinese Bandits) Outside the Walls of Mukden* in 1904. Although the film is non-extant, one might readily assume this to be another Méliès trick film. Star did, however, produce more realistic pictures later in the decade as competition with other production companies increased. One example is *A Desperate Crime* (1906). Gaston Méliès, elder brother of Georges, began distributing Star's films in the United States in 1902. According to the American distribution catalog, the film was based on a real event.⁴⁸ Only a fragment of the film survives, approximately seven minutes out of the original twenty-minute runtime; the remainder of the film is presumed lost. In the opening scene, we see burglars torching a farm. Then the police catch one of the burglars in his hideout after an epic battle in which an ax to the head kills one co-conspirator, performed through a substitution splice that Méliès accomplishes quite brilliantly and realistically. Next we see three exterior shots (rare for Méliès) as the burglar is ultimately captured. In prison, the criminal has nightmares of the guillotine, presented in typical Méliès fashion with a painted backdrop and a superimposed image. But the execution itself is presented realistically. It is long, almost scientific, capturing every meticulous detail as the guillotine is set up, the execution is performed, and the guillotine cleaned after the severed body is removed. It sympathizes with the presumably rational and scientific criminal justice practices of the state.

Beginning with *Spy's Execution* in 1904, French studio Pathé produced numerous execution films (all to my knowledge non-extant) culminating in a series cataloged as

⁴⁸ Musser, *Motion Picture Catalogs*.

Capital Executions in 1906, which included films based in China, America, France, England, Germany, and Spain.⁴⁹ This generally marks the endpoint of the early execution film, roughly concurrent with the transition point Gunning marks to distinguish the cinema of attractions from the cinema of narrative integration. The shift to narrative as cinema's dominant paradigm did not necessarily sever interest in the topic of capital punishment, but as motion pictures became increasingly longer, they consequently focused less on one specific event. The theme of capital punishment persisted in *A New Death Penalty* (Star, 1907), a comedy in which a criminal is executed by "inhaling the fumes" from a smelly shoe.⁵⁰ In 1906 Harry Kendall Thaw was accused of murdering Stanford White, and the two subsequent trials, which were immensely popularized in the press, inspired at least two film reconstructions: *Thaw-White Tragedy* (Biograph, 1906) and *The Unwritten Law* (Lubin, 1907). The popularity of witnessing law and order on film continued into the 1910s, perhaps most notably in the presumed lynching of Gus in D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). However, some audiences were averse to such violence, and in fact, protests over the graphic nature of the lynching scene in *Birth*, which had been filmed, forced its removal.⁵¹ Capital punishment was treated more critically in subsequent years, notably in the execution scene that serves as the dénouement in Griffith's *Intolerance* (Triangle, 1916), as well as Oscar Micheaux's lynching scene in *Within Our Gates* (1920). Similar themes of law and order and the

⁴⁹ Musser.

⁵⁰ Musser.

⁵¹ See Alice Maurice, *The Cinema and Its Shadow: Race and Technology in Early Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 110.

death of a criminal were particularly prevalent in the 1930s and 1940s through crime films, prison films, and later film noirs. The pervasiveness of reconstructions of real-life executions during the period from 1895 to 1906 was therefore somewhat unique but nevertheless demonstrates a fascination with antimodern violence that continues to persist in American culture.

How do early execution films factor into Foucault's disciplinary model? Were they visual spectacles intended to replicate the premodern experience of witnessing the death of a criminal? Or were they designed to function as an ancillary component to the state surveillance apparatus? An argument could be made from both perspectives.

Foucault asserts modern looking relations as premised by surveillance, not spectacle:

In a society in which the principal elements are no longer the community and public life, but, on the one hand, private individuals and, on the other, the state, relations can be regulated only in a form that is the exact reverse of the spectacle... Our society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance... We are neither in the amphitheatre, nor on the stage, but in the panoptic machine, invested by its effects of power, which we bring to ourselves since we are part of its mechanism.⁵²

Cinema, however, complicates the reversal of spectacle inherent in Foucault's model of surveillance. Cinematic representations of punishment, in particular, reinforce the abstract culturally encoded notion that law and order exists and can be recorded by a surveillance apparatus, but they also function as visual pleasure. Spectacle and surveillance are not necessarily dichotomous. For Guy Debord, spectacle and power are interconnected:

⁵² Foucault, 216-17.

In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation... The root of the spectacle is that oldest of all social specializations, the specialization of power. The spectacle plays the specialized role of speaking in the name of all the other activities. It is hierarchical society's ambassador to itself, delivering its messages at a court where no one else is allowed to speak. The most modern aspect of the spectacle is thus also the most archaic.⁵³

If modernity can be described as a system of spectacles that consist in simulated representational ideas, and if spectacle reasserts hierarchical power structures, then there is something fundamentally undemocratic, in fact archaic, about modern culture.

The spectacle of the motion picture conceals its function as a surveillance apparatus.

Cinema invests the spectator with the power to look at it while rarely acknowledging its own power to look back at the spectator, which is particularly evident in early cinema where extraordinary newsworthy events and personas are the primary subjects. These films reinforce who is in a position of power—to be looked at, or in other words looked up to—as well as who to condemn in the case of the execution film.

There was also a subgenre of execution films that could be labeled “assassination films,” in which recent assassinations of major political figures were reconstructed.

Examples include *Assassination of President McKinley* (Pathé, 1901), *Assassination of the King of Serbia* (Gaumont, 1903), *Assassination of the Russian Minister Plehve* (Pathé, 1904), and *Assassination of Grand Duke Sergius* (Pathé, 1905). None were actualities.

While representing a different form of execution, these films shared a similar fascination with deaths that were popular newsworthy events. For a minority constituency, they may

⁵³ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014, originally published, 1967), 2, 7, 115.

have served as a form of anti-state justice, but for the most part their intention was to fuel the desire for justice against traitors. It therefore makes sense that *Assassination of President McKinley* was frequently screened before *Execution of Czolgosz*. The audience would first witness death at the hands of the criminal, then witness the death of the criminal. The fascination with death, and the ideological support for law and order, aligns across both films.

Anarchy, Electricity, Death

On September 6, 1901 Leon Czolgosz assassinated President McKinley at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, NY. Czolgosz, a self-identified anarchist, claimed that the work of Emma Goldman influenced his act. According to Goldman, anarchism, which often has a negative connotation, simply involves the non-existence of God, the state, and all of society and its institutions, as they involve subordination, in favor of empowering the individual.⁵⁴ Despite a proclivity for hyperbole regarding all institutions, Goldman claimed the state as the “greatest foe of all social equality,” and argued that that state was “necessary *only* to maintain or protect property and monopoly.”⁵⁵ This, as well as Goldman’s contention that anarchism stands for “direct action, the open defiance of, and resistance to, all laws and restrictions, economic, social, and moral,” may have been what influenced Czolgosz to harm the leader of the state.⁵⁶ But the connection between

⁵⁴ Emma Goldman, “Anarchy: What It Really Stands For,” in *Anarchism*, ed. Robert Hoffman (New York: Atherton Press, 1970), 38.

⁵⁵ Goldman, 41-42.

⁵⁶ Goldman, 47.

Goldman and Czolgosz is a bit unclear. In all likelihood, the two met at some point, but Czolgosz was not actually affiliated with the movement. Max Beginski suggests that the press may have sensationalized the connection between Czolgosz and Goldman.⁵⁷

Furthermore, it is likely that McKinley was not a target for anarchists, as the movement was much more concerned with corrupt economic leaders than politicians. Nearly a decade earlier, in 1892, Alexander Berkman, another leading figure in the anarchist movement, unsuccessfully attempted to assassinate rail and steel magnate Henry Clay Frick. According to Berkman, “In modern capitalism economic exploitation rather than political oppression is the real enemy of the people... I regard my own act as far more significant and educational than Leon’s.”⁵⁸ Many anarchists, including Goldman, supported Czolgosz while sympathizing with McKinley and acknowledging that they did not want him killed. According to Goldman, “Judging by the press, I was sure that the people of the United States and not Czolgosz had gone mad... the people are asleep; they remain indifferent. They forge their own chains and do the bidding of their masters to crucify their Christ.”⁵⁹ A. Wesley Johns claims that anarchists were divided in their sympathies for Czolgosz. Most American and Jewish anarchists were against Czolgosz, while Italian, Spanish, and French anarchists were generally for him. And the Right to Existence party, an anarchist faction based in Paterson, NJ, claimed not to know Czolgosz

⁵⁷ Max Beginski, “Leon Czolgosz,” in *Anarchy! An Anthology of Emma Goldman’s Mother Earth*, ed. Peter Glassgold (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2001), 20.

⁵⁸ Quoted in A. Wesley Johns, *The Man Who Shot McKinley* (South Brunswick, N.J.: A.S. Barnes, 1970), 274.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Johns, 251.

but nevertheless supported his actions.⁶⁰ Whether this interpretation is accurate or not, it is clear that there was at least some favorable sentiment toward Czolgosz's actions within the anarchist community, and however misguided Czolgosz may have been, there are certainly ideological connections that could be made between anarchism and the act of assassinating the president of the United States.

Despite the fact that McKinley was not a common enemy of anarchism, Johns suggests that, for Czolgosz, McKinley represented American imperialism and was also soft on workers' rights.⁶¹ The latter was a major concern for Czolgosz throughout his life. He claimed to be against all rulers, including McKinley, and was quoted as saying, "I killed President McKinley because I done my duty. I didn't believe one man should have so much service and another man should have none."⁶² His last words purportedly included the claim that he "did this for the working people."⁶³ It is also possible that Czolgosz staunchly opposed McKinley's foreign policies. Indeed, the Pan-American Exposition would have been an appropriate location for outwardly opposing American imperialism. If so, the assassination of McKinley ultimately had the opposite effect. It fueled a sense of enraged patriotism that opposed anarchy, socialism and potentially nativism. As a first-generation descendent of Polish immigrants with a recognizably foreign surname, Czolgosz would have been an easy target for those prejudiced against the new wave of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. The assassination's occurrence at the Exposition reified the ethos of American exceptionalism that defined

⁶⁰ Johns, 128, 254.

⁶¹ Johns, 153.

⁶² Quoted in Johns, 221.

⁶³ Quoted in Johns, 248.

the Exposition. This event also incited mob mentality violence. Johns notes how the tone of the Exposition quickly changed to one of hostility toward Czolgosz as an angry mob began calling for a lynching. The mob continued throughout the evening in downtown Buffalo near police headquarters. A crowd of 1,500 angry citizens awaited Czolgosz when he arrived at Auburn prison, and it was a hostile, and often physically violent, reception.⁶⁴

As a result of these events, anarchism came to be associated with antimodernism in the public's eye. In an article in *The Atlantic* published shortly after McKinley's assassination, Bliss Perry wrote:

In witnessing the slaying of our Chief Magistrate by an anarchist, we are sharing in the evil inheritance of Old World tyranny and absolutism, without being able to utilize those defensive measures which absolutism makes possible. The only permanently effective weapon against anarchy, in a self-governing republic, is respect for law. Fortunately, this weapon is within the reach of every citizen of the American commonwealth; and we believe that the untimely death of the President has already resulted in a profound popular reaction against lawlessness in every form.⁶⁵

The press construed anarchy as a primitive modality antithetical to the evolved forms of law and order essential to modern society. However, although the assassination motivated a reaffirmation of modern progress, it nevertheless mobilized antimodern acts, such as the lawlessness of violent mobs and, ultimately, the execution of Czolgosz.

An important component in the anarchist ethos is an opposition to incarceration of any form. It is somewhat ironic then that Czolgosz's fate was the ultimate form of state-sponsored punishment. In a rather speedy trial, Czolgosz was sentenced to death by the

⁶⁴ See Johns, 101, 119, 245.

⁶⁵ Bliss Perry, "The Death of the President," *The Atlantic*, September, 1901.

relatively new method of electrocution. Johns asserts that Czolgosz was not treated like a normal defendant. Judges who publicly defamed his actions oversaw the case, and the insanity argument, not given enough investigation, was probably warranted.⁶⁶ Czolgosz's execution took place as early as October 29 at Auburn Prison, one of only three prisons in the state (along with Sing Sing and Dannemore) that possessed an electric chair. Upon its inception in 1817, Auburn prison was the model for a new penal methodology that was panoptic in its power structure and ultimately sought to disintegrate the prisoners' sense of self in favor of the state-prescribed common good. Prisoners within this model were relegated to their individual cells at night while performing assembly line labor during the day. Silence was required during work and meals, and looking directly at the guards was generally forbidden. According to Foucault, such a practice was seen as an "operation of isolation" that would lead to rehabilitation.⁶⁷ This approach was distinguishable from the Philadelphia model, which practiced total isolation of the prisoner from other inmates. While the Auburn model attempted to rehabilitate the incarcerated individual through productive societal functioning, the Philadelphia model sought to rehabilitate prisoners by forcing them inward, to internalize and thus reveal their conscience. Auburn prison had taken on a panoptic-attraction form by the twentieth century. Like Bentham's panopticon, guards viewed prisoners at Auburn, but also willing tourists visiting the prison viewed them.⁶⁸ The fascination with viewing discipline and

⁶⁶ Johns, 242-43.

⁶⁷ Foucault, 238.

⁶⁸ See Thom Metzger, *Blood and Volts: Edison, Tesla, and the Electric Chair* (New York: Autonomedia, 1996), 120.

punishment as a form of visual pleasure, and perhaps the possibility of identifying with the all-powerful panoptic gaze, sustained the attraction of premodern public executions and simply transformed it into a commodity. Motion pictures would participate in the commodification of visual punishment through the representation of Leon Czolgosz's electrocution.

New York was the first state to introduce electrocution as a method for capital punishment in 1888. Since the device was only available at select prisons, the institution of the electric chair aligned with the process of increasingly privatized executions, and the chambers generally only contained enough space for several individuals. According to Bye, the electric chair “was introduced with the idea of making the execution more instantaneous, more merciful and less spectacular than hanging upon the gallows, and may be taken as another evidence of the growing humaneness of the criminal law.”⁶⁹ In *The North American Review*, Harold Brown described the process as “Respiration and heart-action instantly cease.... There is a stiffening of the muscles, which gradually relax after five seconds have passed; but there is no struggle and no sound. The majesty of the law has been vindicated, but no physical pain has been caused.”⁷⁰ But many firsthand accounts claim that electrocution was extremely terrifying, which may be why this method was kept private. The first electrocution was performed on William Kemmler at Auburn in 1890. This was a macabre experiment of trial and error. Kemmler did not die right away, after receiving seventeen seconds of voltage. The executioners then turned the

⁶⁹ Bye, 7.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Metzger, 108.

switch for another two-and-a-half minutes, at which point smoke billowed from his hair.⁷¹ Kemmler's execution was controversial in the press, but purportedly the process was perfected by 1893, and six states—Ohio, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Virginia, North Carolina, and Kentucky—later adopted the electric chair.⁷² But it is possible, even likely, that electrocution remained an unperfected, and therefore gruesome, method for many years. Certainly the nearly three-minute long execution of Kemmler could not be considered a more humane method of execution than hanging. Edison's film of Czolgosz's execution represents the procedure as swift and benign, a false reproduction intended to promulgate the antimodern death machine, the development of which was financed by Edison, as modern.

Edison employees James White and Edwin S. Porter were present in Auburn on the day Czolgosz was sentenced to the electric chair but were unable to gain entry to the execution chamber. Instead, Porter filmed panoramas of the prison's exterior then re-created the execution using actors in Edison's new studio in the Bronx. The Edison catalog described the film as "a detailed reproduction of the execution of the assassin of President McKinley faithfully carried out from the description of an eyewitness."⁷³ The film, *Execution of Czolgosz with Panorama of Auburn Prison* (1901), contains four images: two exteriors of the prison, one establishing shot as Czolgosz appears in the execution chamber, and a final shot in which the assassin is bound to the chair, the machine electrocutes him, then a doctor confirms his death. The last shot is nearly

⁷¹ See Metzger, 157-58.

⁷² See Metzger, 173.

⁷³ <https://www.loc.gov/item/00694362/>



Figure 2.1: *Execution of Czolgosz with Panorama of Auburn Prison* (Edison, 1901), exterior actuality of Auburn Prison, Auburn, NY



Figure 2.2: *Execution of Czolgosz with Panorama of Auburn Prison* (Edison, 1901), staged interior of the execution, Bronx, NY

symmetrical, the chair centrally framed, and the blocking by the actors playing the prison personnel seems motivated by maintaining this sense of symmetry. They move about as if only to keep the frame evenly spaced, with the view of the chair non-obstructed. Thom Metzger equates the symbol of the electric chair with that of the king's throne, drawing on Foucault's notion that the condemned is the symmetrical inversion of the king.⁷⁴ The same symbolism is visually present in *Execution of Czolgosz*. The reproduction allows a degree of constructedness that conforms to the ideological (un)reality the Edison company wanted to convey. In this example, the practical inaccessibility of filming the actual execution necessitates reenacting history. But this practical inaccessibility allowed White, Porter and Edison to depict the act of execution in a positive light. The dramatic nature of this particular reenactment is precisely its anti-drama. Czolgosz's actor performs the electric chair's impact minimally in order to promote the practice as ethical. The prisoner is administered three different blasts of voltage, each only lasting roughly two to four seconds. His body tenses slightly, but the voltage does not appear particularly painful. Then, after only about twenty seconds (recall that it took nearly three minutes to kill Kemmler!), Czolgosz is dead. The real execution of Czolgosz was not as humane as it is depicted in *Execution of Czolgosz*. According to Johns, "The full current was maintained for 45 seconds, then slowly reduced. Upon lessening the current the body collapsed."⁷⁵ Witnesses claimed that he screamed and foamed at the mouth. Others claimed that he ground his teeth and cursed loudly. There were cracking sounds from the

⁷⁴ Metzger, 117.

⁷⁵ Johns, 248.

tension of Czolgosz's writhing body confined to the electric chair's leather straps. Some reports even indicate that witnesses fled the scene in horror.⁷⁶ The doctor claimed to detect no pulse but ordered additional voltage for a few seconds. Then the warden pronounced him dead. The alleged faithfulness to eyewitness accounts, which the Edison Company claimed to have maintained, was in fact quite false. Combs argues that early motion pictures sought the moment of death but failed to do so, resulting in "the impression of death as instantaneous."⁷⁷ The reconstruction of death as more of an instantaneous science than an embodied experience aligns with overarching themes of aggrandizing electricity and light as powerful modern tools.

Part of the cultural shift to modernity involved a fascination, arguably an obsession, with light. A popular expression in the nineteenth century was that more light could turn night into day.⁷⁸ Motion pictures require light, so part of their appeal is related to this fascination with electric light. Edison's films often position electricity and/or light as the subject matter. Jonathan Auerbach notes the connection to Edison, father of both modern electricity and motion pictures:

In a single unbroken circuit, the power of the state to punish President McKinley's killer by electrocution merges with the power of the genius inventor Edison to harness electricity, which in turn merges with the power of his corporation's filmmakers to represent such spectacles... This doubling between chair and camera carries all the more import when we consider how in the late 1880s Edison, overcoming some initial reluctance, helped pioneer the use of electrocution for criminals.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ See Wood, 132.

⁷⁷ Combs, 32.

⁷⁸ See Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 3.

⁷⁹ Auerbach, 825.

Electricity and modern technology are equated with power, seemingly the power of the state, but also the power of Edison himself; more specifically, in *Execution of Czolgosz*, the power to discipline the body humanely. The ongoing battle between Edison's direct current (DC) system and Nikolai Tesla's alternating current (AC) system may have fueled Edison's personal, egoistic desire for aggrandizement. But there are also deeper cultural ideologies at play here. The vengeance of McKinley's death affirms a sense of patriotism, and the film depicting the execution of his assassin asserts the power of both Edison's technology and the state to discipline and punish.

Other contemporaneous Edison films elicit the power of electricity through spectacle. In *Pan-American Exposition by Night* (Edison, 1901), a panoramic image of the Exposition transitions at the midpoint from day to night, the night scene highlighting the spectacle of the Exposition's light display. Attractions at the Pan-American Exposition mirrored those of urban amusement parks like Coney Island as both presented electrical spectacles at night. *Coney Island at Night* (Edison, 1905) depicts an aerial panorama of the entirety of Coney Island at night, with additional images of the electric signs for "Dreamland" and "Thompson & Dundy's Luna Park," followed by closer panning shots of each of those respective locales. Similarly, Buffalo Bill's Wild West performed at night using dazzling electrical illumination.⁸⁰ *Electrocuting an Elephant* (Edison, 1903) is a live actuality of an electrical execution. Topsy, a circus performing elephant, was sentenced to death after killing a man who fed her cigarettes. She was the

⁸⁰ "Shots By Flash: Electric-Light Shooting at the Wild West," *Omaha Daily Bee* (Omaha, NE), June 9, 1894, 10.

first baby elephant to perform in the Forepaugh circus several decades earlier. By 1903 she was thirty-five years old and would have been well-known. Topsy was given 200 grains of potassium cyanide in a carrot then received an unknown amount of voltage. The Edison catalog claims she received 6,600 volts, but many accounts specify far less. It was also claimed that the cyanide never took effect and the cause of death was electrocution.⁸¹ Topsy was electrocuted under the supervision of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and the electrician claimed it was the most scientifically exact execution he ever witnessed.⁸² But the circumstances seem odd. The spectacle of the event, which took place in front of 1,500 spectators at Luna Park, was itself macabre. Additionally, it is unclear why Topsy was administered cyanide. Presumably, the expectation was that the electrocution would not be enough, which questions the accuracy of the claim that the cyanide did nothing. Perhaps it seemed necessary to maintain the symbolic potency of electrical power when in fact it was a faulty execution method. Furthermore, there is an edit in the film that compromises its verisimilitude. After Topsy is initially struck with voltage, she quickly collapses but appears to remain alive, then a cut omits an unknown amount of time, though even in the final frames of the film it is not entirely clear whether she is still alive or not. One might surmise that the intervening footage, possibly no more than a few frames, simply went missing at some point, and the original film was not intended to fool audiences through temporal ellipsis. Either way, it seems likely that,

⁸¹ "Murderous Elephant Pays the Death Penalty," *San Francisco Call*, January 5, 1903, 3.

⁸² See "Electrocution for Elephant," *Omaha Daily Bee* (Omaha, NE), January 5, 1903, 1 and "Topsy, the Rogue Elephant, was Electrocuted, Poisoned and Hanged," *St. Louis Republic*, January 11, 1903, 12.

while the initial blow severely injured Topsy, it did not kill her right away. It is also possible that the cyanide had a stronger effect than the press reported. The aesthetic of electric spectacles is linked to science and the rational understanding of the scientific process of electricity. *Execution of Czolgosz* and *Electrocuting an Elephant* participate in further promulgating this ideology by depicting electrical executions as rational spectacles. However, while celebrating modern progress, these films remain invested in inhumane practices.

Execution of Czolgosz is an example of a proto-documentary reenactment that is conscious of both its authentic indexicality (the exteriors of the prison) and false indexicality (the staged interior scenes). Based on the catalog description, exhibitors were made aware that the interiors were re-creations, though it was ultimately their prerogative to inform or deceive their patrons. In either case, the conflation of actuality and reproduction nevertheless imbues the reenacted execution with greater verisimilitude. While reporting the news of Czolgosz's execution in a manner that is both nonfictional and dramatized, albeit dramatically subdued, to contemporary viewers, *Execution* reads more like a documentary with *one* reenacted scene than a docudrama consisting entirely of a fictional diegesis with actors playing real historical figures. The inclusion of actuality footage at the beginning insinuates that the final two images should be read as nonfiction. There are, however, notable stylistic distinctions to be drawn between the real and reproduced images, and it is certainly possible that 1901 viewers spotted these distinctions. During this period, exterior images were more commonly used in actualities, or in some cases originally filmed as actualities then inserted into fictional narratives. By

the 1900s viewers likely noticed these differences. In her discussion of the early western film, Nanna Verhoeff notes that the conflation of real western landscapes and interior studio stagings may have at first seemed strange as the former would have been associated with authenticity, the latter with forgery.⁸³ Moreover, the panoramic camera movement was a style that early filmmakers used almost exclusively for actualities. Interiors filmed in studios could not spatially accommodate such panoramas. The stylistic aesthetic of panning shots would have been a generic cue for experienced moviegoers to interpret the film as actuality.

It is important to keep in mind that the film was viewed in a variety of contexts. It was frequently referred to as *Electrocution of Czolgosz*, and David Levy notes that there were alternate versions copyrighted.⁸⁴ The Pathé catalog lists a film titled “The Electrocution of Anarchist Czolgosz, Murderer of President McKinley” (1901), which may have been an original reenactment but was quite possibly a reappropriation of the Edison film. According to the Edison catalog, the *Panoramic View of Auburn State Prison* was sold separately from *The Electrocution of Czolgosz* and was more expensive, \$24 as opposed to only \$15 for the reconstructed scenes, suggesting that actuality footage was perceived as more valuable than fiction. Additionally, the film was often screened alongside reconstructions of relevant events, as a compilation of the events surrounding

⁸³ Nanna Verhoeff, *The West in Early Cinema: After the Beginning* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 202.

⁸⁴ David Levy, “Reconstituted Newsreels, Reenactments and the American Narrative Film,” in *Cinema 1900/1906: An Analytical Study by the National Film Archive (London) and the International Federation of Film Archives*, ed. Holman (Brussels: Fédération Internationale des Archives du Film, 1982), 252.

McKinley's assassination. The attempt by exhibitors to serialize these films—and it was exclusively the role of exhibitors to create this narrative since different companies produced these films—demonstrates an attempt to produce a larger, more elaborate narrative than the individual films themselves could provide. Generally, the films were screened in such a way as to depict the historical events chronologically. Pathé produced a reconstruction of McKinley's assassination—*Assassination of President McKinley* (Pathé, 1901), which is non-extant; *Funeral of President McKinley* (Biograph, 1901) would follow, then finally *Execution of Czolgosz*. In at least one case, however, the electrocution was screened before the funeral, even though the funeral occurred on September 17, and the electrocution on October 29.⁸⁵ This interruption of the assumed temporal logic changes the narrative. The dénouement is not justice by the state but rather the memorialization of President McKinley. It offers McKinley the last word, not Czolgosz. It is also worth noting that these films were, in all likelihood, extremely popular and not simply current news, disseminated and then forgotten. These films continued to screen until at least December of the following year.⁸⁶

As continuity editing was in the process of being fully developed throughout the 1900s, *Execution of Czolgosz* demonstrates an early example of a film conforming to what would later be regarded as continuity standards, while at the same time disrupting them to some extent. The exterior panoramas serve as establishing shots that flow seamlessly into the interior execution scene. The viewer can assume a certain degree of

⁸⁵ "Coming!" *Kinsley Graphic* (Kinsley, KS), June 27, 1902.

⁸⁶ "The Carnival in Union" *Union Times* (Union, SC), December, 26 1902, 7.

chronology and geographical/spatial recognition. The exterior images seem to occur before the execution, though they may not have, and the viewer is made aware of the location of the scene at Auburn prison through the editorial strategy of establishing shots. In the case of an exhibitor screening the exteriors after the interiors—which, since sold separately, was certainly possible—there would still be a sense of relational continuity, despite not conforming entirely to the continuity standards Hollywood later developed, which generally dictate exteriors as establishing, not concluding, shots. However, as previously noted, there is a stylistic inconsistency between the exterior panoramas and the staged interiors. The juxtaposition of actuality with reproduction is, to some degree, discontinuous.

I contend that editing encouraged the demise of actualities. Perhaps the exteriors of Auburn Prison alone would have, at one time, satisfied movie-goers, but the amalgamation with reenacted scenes paved the way for highly constructed forms of nonfiction content like newsreels and the fictionalized documentaries of Edward S. Curtis and Robert Flaherty. *Execution of Czolgosz with Panorama of Auburn Prison* could ultimately be considered an ancestor to both documentary and historical fiction. It is equally both reproduction and reality. More importantly, while romanticizing modern technology and the (false) humaneness of a new form of capital punishment, *Execution of Czolgosz* recast premodern impulses. Although not outrightly resistant to modernity, technology, both the electric chair and motion pictures themselves, produced a guise of modernity that merely reasserted premodern modalities, particularly with regard to forms of punishment. *Execution of Czolgosz* satiated a public desire to witness executions,

which had become increasingly more privatized, and the criminalized subject's association with anarchism is important. By vanquishing the threat of anarchism and revolutionary overthrow, those who celebrated Czolgosz's death likewise conformed to broader forms of cultural hegemony.

Lynching Films

Discipline and Punish is well-known for its analysis of Bentham's panopticon, the architectural conceptualization of a prison, or any state-sponsored institution, designed for the state to view all of its subjects at any moment, while they are unable to look back. Panopticism aligns with the late eighteenth-century move toward new forms of discipline. For Foucault, "The exercise of discipline presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation."⁸⁷ But the panopticon is less a physical structural design than a societal architecture. As a cultural modality embedded in society, "The perfect disciplinary apparatus would make it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly. A central point would be both the source of light illuminating everything, and a locus of convergence for everything that must be known: a perfect eye that nothing would escape and a centre towards which all gazes would be turned."⁸⁸ This description of panopticism as both a "source of light" and a "centre toward which all gazes would be turned" sounds remarkably like the movie-going experience. Discipline is both a form of power and a technological apparatus that innately creates a hierarchy, one that empowers

⁸⁷ Foucault, 170.

⁸⁸ Foucault, 173.

some and marginalizes others, and not only in the penal sector. As Foucault notes, panopticism operates universally, undermining the law, and fundamentally homogenizing its subjects: “The perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it *normalizes*.”⁸⁹ This normalization of penalty lends itself to racial hierarchization.

The technology of the gaze has historically functioned as a racist mechanism. The ethnographic exhibits analyzed in the previous chapter demonstrate this. It is also worth noting that the slave plantation functioned as a panoptic technology, what Novotny Lawrence has dubbed the “plantopticon.”⁹⁰ The remainder of this dissertation will examine how early cinema embodied the panoptic gaze as a form of racial Othering, demonstrating how antimodern impulses informed modernity and development of documentary film aesthetics. In this chapter specifically, I will elaborate on this topic in the final two sections addressing lynchings in the United States and beheadings during the Boxer rebellion. The films discussed all elucidate a narrative of disciplining domestic and foreign Others. This analysis shall demonstrate how modernity (discipline, panopticism) and antimodernity (executions, lynchings) both functioned collaboratively toward racist ends.

⁸⁹ Foucault, 183.

⁹⁰ Novotny Lawrence, “White Mansions, Black Bodies: *Get Out* and the New Age Slave Plantation,” Popular Culture Association (PCA/ACA) annual conference, Washington, D.C., 2019.

Between 1885 and 1903 there were roughly 2,875 lynchings in the United States, predominantly in the South, though this was ultimately a nationwide issue. Only five states—Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, Rhode Island and Utah—had no lynchings during these years.⁹¹ The practice of lynching became more racialized by the twentieth century. While 2/3 of lynching victims in the 1880s and 1890s were Black, in the first decade of the twentieth century 90% of lynching victims were Black.⁹²

Undoubtedly, reaffirmations of White supremacy throughout the unstable post-Civil War Reconstruction era fueled this illegal activity, and racial violence was often premised by the threat of certain aspects of pre-Civil War culture vanishing, but the fact that racialized violence only increased after 1900 also suggests an aversion to more modern forms of cultural change, such as industrialization and progressive reform. Wood observes how these sentiments led to new forms of racial oppression in the modern age:

In this new environment, traditional forms of authority—the patriarchal household, the church, the planter elite—were called into question, and traditional notions of community, in which people could claim familiarity and kinship with their neighbors, were no longer as relevant. This new social order most threatened white dominance, as urban spaces and establishments brought whites and blacks together in new kinds of interactions and exchanges, and as many African Americans came to expect the same legal and civil rights accorded to whites. It was in response to these changes that white southerners, beginning in the 1890s, sought to reassert their racial privileges and authority through Jim Crow laws and

⁹¹ Although it is difficult to accurately quantify the number of lynchings during this period, see J. Cardinal Gibbons, “Lynch Law: Its Causes and Remedy,” *The North American Review* 181, no. 587 (October 1905): 503. The Chicago Tribune also claimed to have compiled accurate lynching data consistent with the aforementioned account. See Thomas Nelson Page, “The Lynching of Negroes: Its Cause and Its Prevention,” *The North American Review* 178, no. 566 (January 1904): 35.

⁹² Muhammad, 60.

ordinances and through the systematic disenfranchisement of former slaves and their offspring.⁹³

Throughout the history of the United States, slavery and White notions of superiority had shaped the social mobility of White Americans at the expense of racial Others, especially African Americans. The “new social order” that Wood alludes to threatened not only White dominance but also the potential progress of White Euro-Americans. In a sense, modern progress may have easily been conflated with White supremacy for the many individuals, particularly White southerners, who sought to reclaim the racial privileges that seemed to be vanishing in the modern world. As modernity was increasingly integrated, the potential threat of an equitable justice system, which of course has never truly existed in the United States, may have demanded that the law be taken into the peoples’ hands. Therefore, lynching was commonly performed as a way to reassert racial privilege, not necessarily in resistance to modernity but as a means toward maintaining such privilege as a defining feature of this new world.

While perpetuating stereotypes of Black criminality, and resistant to the idea that justice should be racially equitable, the increase in lynching activity around the turn of the twentieth century may have also been a consequence of disillusionment with the trend toward universally abolishing capital punishment. At the time, Bye asserted that despite the argument by some proponents of capital punishment that its abolition would lead to more lynchings, to satiate the public’s desire for justice, lynchings rarely occurred in states where capital punishment had been abolished.⁹⁴ I would argue, however, that

⁹³ Wood, 6.

⁹⁴ Bye, 64-65.

lynchings were also a response to the increasing *threat* of abolishing capital punishment, as well as the possibility of racial integration. Lynching has been a pervasive practice throughout American history, one that is not geographically specific per se but has statistically seen higher numbers in the Southeast. According to Bye, “the practice of lynching rests in the racial and social constitution of the community, and bears no relation to the use of the death penalty at all.”⁹⁵ Although the first statement can be substantiated through historical evidence, the second is less persuasive. The fragmentation of the country, with regard to capital punishment, illustrates an ideological dichotomy that resulted in mobilized forms of violent vigilante justice, such as lynchings, in which people took the law into their own hands. However, vigilante violence and Black criminality were nationwide cultural discourses, which Goldsby argues was not merely about the South’s resistance to urban modernity but the entire “nation’s ambivalences attending its nascent modernism.”⁹⁶ It is therefore striking that early cinema frequently represented both legally sanctioned forms of capital punishment and non-sanctioned lynchings, perhaps as journalistic commentaries on topical issues that allowed audiences to contemplate their own position, but I shall argue that lynching films invoked strategies that tended to celebrate the practice for both rural and urban audiences.

Like the victims of premodern public executions, lynching victims were often paraded around in order for all to have the opportunity to witness the condemned.⁹⁷ The ritual of lynching was theatrical, a visually pleasurable experience for those who wished

⁹⁵ Bye, 71.

⁹⁶ Goldsby, 24.

⁹⁷ Bye, 24, 26, 31.

to view such spectacles. Perhaps this is why, throughout American history, lynchings have frequently been represented through a variety of media. Wood alludes to the connection between modernity's lack of authentic experience and the vicarious authentic experience of witnessing a lynching that many White audiences desired:

It was precisely because Americans no longer witnessed death, pain, or brutality in their everyday lives that sensational literature and images, which abounded with scenes of cruelty and suffering, so titillated and fascinated them. These media pandered to fears, desires, and impulses that modern life had otherwise restrained or forbidden. For instance, newspapers began to provide detailed and lurid accounts of executions only once the state began conducting them behind prison walls, away from public view. The less direct access people had to pain and suffering, the more they saturated their lives with images of it. The desire to read sensational accounts of lynching and, especially, to view lynching in photographs and moving pictures derived from these inclinations to witness and imagine primal experiences of punishment, torment, and death.⁹⁸

While some consumers of media sought content that depicted violence against racial Others, we have to nevertheless assume that many also abhorred these representations. After all, the eventual abolition of public executions suggests that opposition was pervasive. Although industry-wide censorship had not yet been established, local municipalities often censored certain films, and exhibitors had the prerogative to omit parts of films or ban them entirely. Black audiences, who could have witnessed stories and/or images regarding lynchings in the press, would have been encouraged to assume the White point of view espoused by such representations, but horrified resistance was also probably a common reaction among spectators of color.⁹⁹ The prevalence of lynchings around the turn of the twentieth century—the practice itself and its

⁹⁸ Bye, 12-13.

⁹⁹ See, for example, Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

representation, whether real or reenacted, in media—demonstrates a desire by a demographic of primarily White Americans to reassert premodern primal experiences that involved both fetishizing violence *and* racial Othering. However, mediated representations of lynchings inevitably fail to re-create the experience of witnessing a live execution. It is interesting that, unlike the visual spectacle of public executions, photographic and cinematographic representations of lynchings often employed an aesthetic of reportage, with the view of the lynching at a distance. These images could therefore be interpreted pluralistically, perhaps as celebrations of perceived extralegal justice or as critiques of vigilante violence.

While some viewers may have perceived Lynching photographs problematically, for others they became a common means for continually repeating the act of torturing and killing. The visual history of lynchings elucidates the disturbing fact that public executions were celebratory spectacles. The James Allen photograph collection is a massive archive of amateur photographs taken of lynchings between 1880 and 1960. These photographs often served their owner's base and racist proclivities, as visual proof of success in defeating their Other. Shawn Michelle Smith observes how lynching photos, often used as postcards and souvenirs, participated in a "hunting-trophy logic."¹⁰⁰ This representational strategy of hunter, typically White and male, pictured with their dead trophy reveals the heavily gendered elements of White supremacist ideology. Such ideologies are fundamentally patriarchal and position the "white man as masculine

¹⁰⁰ Shawn Michelle Smith, "The Evidence of Lynching Photographs," in *Lynching Photographs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 25-26.

hunter, black man as degenerate beast.”¹⁰¹ Moreover, lynching photographs provided viewers with repetition. The presentness of the medium continually re-presents past events, and in the case of lynching photos, allows White viewers to continually repeat and reify their racism and fascination with violence. Never did they problematize this grotesque act. The alleged criminal is always brought to justice, and law and order, ostensibly prescribed and performed in an extralegal manner, is revered.

The lynching of Henry Smith in Paris, Texas in 1893 is often considered the first modern lynching because it was the first to be disseminated to a wide audience through photography. Smith pleaded guilty to the murder of a 3-year-old girl, Myrtle Vance, and a non-legally-sanctioned mob tortured and burned him to death. Local photographers J.L. Mertins and Frank Hudson captured a series of images (now available through the Library of Congress), including the opening act of Smith being paraded through the streets of Paris, Texas, the site of the lynching itself, and the mob’s celebration in the aftermath of Smith’s death. The search for truth through extrajudicial torture that Foucault identifies is far more salient here than, for example, *The Hanging of William Carr*, indicating how the modern penal transition away from torture, as outlined by Foucault, was slow and faced resistance, particularly in the United States. The photographs of Smith’s lynching were circulated to newspapers nationwide. Several images underscore how the word “Justice” was painted on the front of the scaffold used to stage Smith for the onlooking crowd, reinforcing the idea that vengeance through violence is valid, while also reminding us that, even though some newspapers throughout

¹⁰¹ Wood, 98.



Figure 2.3: Henry Smith lynching (J.L. Menkins), Paris, TX, 1893

the country recontextualized the images in an effort to address this problem, the photographers were complicit in the act by intentionally framing the images to heighten the sensationalized nature of this form of vigilante “justice.”

Public executions were spectacles by nature, and as visual stimuli, photographs and motion pictures provided a similar experience. Additionally, as Wood asserts, these images performed a function similar to that of a mug shot, as part of the “increasing professionalization of police work and the development of criminology as a social science.”¹⁰² This strategic use of typology inherently classified and stereotyped certain groups, particularly Black men, as criminals. Commenting on a related phenomenon, Fatima Tobing Rony analyzes a body of pseudo-scientific early films that recorded problematic ethnological experiments on Indigenous bodies. She asserts, “Emptied of

¹⁰² Wood, 89.

history, their bodies are *racialized*. The racialized body in cinema is a construction denying people of color historical agency and psychological complexity. Individuals are read as metonyms for an entire category of people... scientific cinema teaches us how to read bodies.”¹⁰³ Kahlil Gibran Muhammad identifies “racial criminalization” as “the stigmatization of crime as ‘black’ and the masking of crime among whites as individual failure,” a discourse that begins to surface in the 1890s as prison statistics are used for the first time.¹⁰⁴ By the 1890s social scientists had shifted the scientific paradigm of Darwinism toward a “behaviorist paradigm, measuring inferiority not just by physical differences but also by the historical and contemporary behavior of ‘primitive’ races in civilized societies. That is, they used evidence of political, economic, and social status found in society to shore up the physical evidence found in the body.”¹⁰⁵ I argue that photographs and motion pictures of lynchings participated in these traditions of racialized pseudo-science and the construction of Black criminality. I suspect that many White audiences viewed these images through the lens of contemporaneous “modern” discourses of social science, particularly the demarcation of race as associated with criminality.

We have to also assume, however, that these images appalled some audiences, particularly African Americans. In Seattle, Samuel Burdett, a Black veterinarian who later became an anti-lynching activist, recalled being horrified by the sounds of Henry Smith’s

¹⁰³ Fatima Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 71.

¹⁰⁴ Muhammad, 3.

¹⁰⁵ Muhammad, 24.

lynching on a phonograph recording.¹⁰⁶ In 1893 lynching photographs were often displayed in public along with phonograph recordings of the events, a form of proto-cinema that would have enhanced the re-experiencing of the original event.¹⁰⁷ Within a few short years, cinematic representations of lynchings would perform a similar ideological function. Racial difference was inscribed in the new medium from the outset. Coincidentally, the United States Supreme Court's ruling in favor of racial segregation in *Plessy v. Ferguson* occurred in the spring of 1896, as Biograph and Edison were premiering their projection technologies. Alice Maurice observes how the catalog description for *A Morning Bath* (Edison, 1896) advertised the clarity of the picture through the distinct contrast between the African American mother's skin tone and the white soapsuds.¹⁰⁸ Not only is race clearly demarcated, but this demarcation is also associated with realism: "The cinema has relied, in various ways, on the rhetoric and performance of 'race': to show off its technology, to hide its flaws, to negotiate tensions between narrative and spectacle, and to ground its claims to authenticity and presence."¹⁰⁹ The earliest lynching films also conflated racial difference with authenticity.

A Frontier Scene (Edison, 1895), possibly the same film as the alternately titled *Lynching Scene*, represents a lynching in the western United States.¹¹⁰ Unfortunately, this film is non-extant. Another non-extant lynching film, *Lynching Scene: A Genuine Lynching Scene* (International Photographic Film, 1897), was described as "The most

¹⁰⁶ See Goldsby, 13-15.

¹⁰⁷ See Wood, 72-73.

¹⁰⁸ Maurice, 3.

¹⁰⁹ Maurice, 6.

¹¹⁰ Musser, *Motion Picture Catalogs*.

thrilling and realistic subject ever offered for sale. This scene shows an angry mob overpowering the sheriff, storming the jail, and dragging their prisoner to the nearest telegraph pole, from which he is immediately swung into eternity, as bullet after bullet is fired into his swinging and writhing body.”¹¹¹ The conflation of “thrilling” and “realistic” to describe this film suggests that sensationalism was associated with realism. The title presumes the film to be actuality, though it may have just been staged in an attempt to achieve verisimilitude. The film was screened in Dallas in 1897, along with *A Frontier Scene/Lynching Scene*, another film depicting a hanging, and *The Watermelon Contest* (Edison, 1896).¹¹² In *The Watermelon Contest*, four Black men are seen devouring watermelon in a manner stereotypical of what Jacqueline Najuma Stewart regards as “the popular watermelon-eating genre,” which were intended to be comical and tap “into discourses on Black animalistic behavior and revive southern iconography (returning Blacks to the plantation).”¹¹³ The decision to program this film with *A Frontier Scene/Lynching Scene* placed the comical, racist sentiments inherent in *The Watermelon Contest* in dialogue with a lynching, encouraging spectators to view the latter as part of a just racial hierarchy, perhaps even reducing the violent and racially hateful punishment to a humorous punchline for a motion picture audience that, in 1897, would have been exclusively White. It is not entirely clear whether *Lynching Scene* was filmed live as an actuality, reconstructed with actors, or simply fiction. However, the catalog entry does

¹¹¹ Charles Musser, *Edison Motion Pictures, 1890-1900: An Annotated Filmography* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997).

¹¹² Wood, 122.

¹¹³ Stewart, 55.

note, “By our contract with the authorities names of party and place cannot be given.”¹¹⁴ This would indicate the possibility that this film was an actuality. It at least suggests that the International Photographic Film Company intended to produce a film based on a real recent lynching.

An Execution by Hanging (Biograph, 1898), not to be confused with Biograph’s 1905 film of the same name, claimed to be an authentic hanging of a Black man in Jacksonville, Florida. The film was most likely based on the execution of Edward Heinson, who was accused of assaulting a White woman, Ida Bailey, and was legally sentenced to be hanged by the Jacksonville court system. A large crowd, including the victim, attended the event.¹¹⁵ According to the Biograph catalog,

This is probably the only moving picture that was ever made of a genuine hanging scene. It was taken in the court yard of the Jacksonville jail, and shows the execution of a negro. The man is seen mounting the platform accompanied by several clergymen. The executioner adjusts the black cap and the noose about the prisoner’s neck. The trap is touched and the body is seen to shoot through the air, and hang quivering at the end of the rope.¹¹⁶

Along with potentially only one other film from this period, the aforementioned *The Hanging of William Carr* (Edison, 1897), it is quite likely that Biograph did film the real execution. While the hanging of Heinson was legally sanctioned, it demands attention in the context of lynchings. It is an example of the nascent motion picture medium constructing a representation of Black criminality for an exclusively White audience. For those familiar with Heinson’s story, the portrayal in *An Execution by Hanging* may have

¹¹⁴ Musser, *Motion Picture Catalogs*.

¹¹⁵ “Florida,” *The Morning News* (Savannah, GA), July 8, 1898, 6. This account makes no mention of the presence of a motion picture camera crew.

¹¹⁶ Musser, *Motion Picture Catalogs*.

seemed obvious. For others, Heinson may have served as a simulacrum of real lynching victims in their local or regional vicinity. For many viewers, individuals portrayed in lynching films may have simply been interpreted as anonymous Black criminals.

Tracked by Bloodhounds; or, A Lynching at Cripple Creek (Selig, 1904) is a fictional account of a lynching. Selig advertised the film as “Negative Actually Made at the Colorado Gold Camp During Actual Occurences [*sic*]. The Best Advertised Moving Picture on Earth, and One Without an inch of Blemish.”¹¹⁷ And the Selig catalog claimed, “Our photographer was in Cripple Creek ready for business when the exciting events occurred. The negative was made in the great gold camp. Dozens of prominent miners and citizens who have since been involved in deportation troubles can easily be recognized in the picture.”¹¹⁸ It is difficult to verify the accuracy of this account, particularly since the opening scene contains a conspicuously theatrical set. But the remainder of the film consists of exterior images, which Selig cameramen may have actually filmed in Cripple Creek, Colorado, with real local citizens. There is a short pan left at the end of one shot, which, similar to the formal aesthetic of *Execution of Czolgosz*, suggests verisimilitude, or reportage, not fiction. More likely, it functions to disguise the fact that the events did not actually take place. I have only come across one account of a potential lynching in Cripple Creek in the recent past preceding the release of this film. John Randolph, an African American miner also known as “Black Stratton,” was arrested for allegedly stabbing and killing a store clerk, William Wilkinson, over a

¹¹⁷ “The Most Sensational Film Ever Made,” *New York Clipper*, July 16, 1904, 470.

¹¹⁸ Musser, *Motion Picture Catalogs*.

payment dispute. Randolph purportedly helped himself to some nuts in the store where Wilkinson worked, and an altercation ensued after Randolph refused to pay.¹¹⁹ On August 2, 1902 a mob surrounded the county jail in Cripple Creek, where Randolph was being held, and a lynching seemed imminent before nightfall.¹²⁰ I have found no evidence to corroborate whether Randolph was in fact lynched, but this is likely not the event represented in *Tracked by Bloodhounds*. Despite being closer to pure fiction than historical fiction, there is a degree of verisimilitude in the Selig film, and based on the catalog description, it was intended to at least appear as if it were documenting a real event. The film embodies a form of reenactment that Bill Nichols categorizes as “typification,” where “there is no specific event to which the reenactment refers, and the sense of separation between event and reenactment fades as a sense of typifying past patterns, rituals, and routines increases.”¹²¹ While closer to fiction, this form would be employed in the pseudo-ethnographies of Curtis and Flaherty, as well as those of Grierson and others associated with the British documentary movement in the 1930s. In the context of lynching reenactments, the historical reality of thousands of real lynching victims became reduced to typifications, creating a simulated version of reality that stereotyped Black criminality and White benevolence.

While the Tramp in *Tracked by Bloodhounds* may represent one of the miners “involved in deportation troubles,” as the catalog description suggests, and he is darker-

¹¹⁹ “Homicide at Cripple Creek,” *Santa Fe New Mexican* (Santa Fe, NM), Aug 2, 1902, 1.

¹²⁰ “A Probable Lynching,” *The Semi-Weekly Messenger* (Wilmington, NC), August 5, 1902, 1.

¹²¹ Bill Nichols, *Speaking Truths with Film: Evidence, Ethics, Politics in Documentary* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 47.

skinned than his captors, perhaps to appear more ethnic, the actor is White.¹²² In at least one primary source account, the Tramp is described as Black.¹²³ I would like to suggest two possible readings of this film. Since some audiences regarded the Tramp as Black, this somewhat ambiguous representation could have served as a stand-in for the racist typifications of Black criminality that were pervasive in the cultural discourse during this era. Or, the Tramp could be interpreted as a sympathetic White victim of modernization, distinguishable from the popular representation of Black criminals as comedically buffoonish and irreconcilably criminal. According to Muhammad, “Progressive Era white social scientists and reformers often reified the racial criminalization process by framing white criminals sympathetically as victims of industrialization.”¹²⁴ Progressive reformers more disproportionately sought to Americanize European immigrants than African Americans. The Tramp, a hungry beggar seeking food, has one violent murderous outburst but is generally not depicted as dangerous. Additionally, the presence of the actual Cripple Creek village and mining camp, where workers strikes had taken place in 1894 and 1903, might suggest that the Tramp is in his impoverished position as a result of exploitative industrial labor practices.

The final scene—listed in the catalog as scene XI, “The Lynching”—is only nine seconds long. It depicts an abrupt *dénouement* in which we very briefly see the Tramp hung up a tree before the film ends. The final two scenes, the capture and the lynching, contain camera pans, adding to the sense of reportage. Moreover, violence is not

¹²² See Olsson, 266-70, who determines that the Tramp is played by White actor Chris Lane.

¹²³ See Olsson, 269.

¹²⁴ Muhammad, 8.

represented in a sensationalized manner. There is a shootout during the capture, which may have reminded audiences of the shootout in *The Great Train Robbery* (Edison, 1903), but the gun violence in that film is performed more for the sake of showmanship, particularly in one scene as the bandits ride toward the camera firing their guns into the air for no apparent reason. In other words, *The Great Train Robbery* is more stylistically aligned with Buffalo Bill, while *Tracked by Bloodhounds* eschews showmanship in favor of the perception of verisimilitude. While it is noteworthy that *Tracked by Bloodhounds* shows the actual execution, it is perhaps more striking that the reenactment is presented with an aesthetic of reportage, the view of the lynching shown only briefly and from a wide angle. Violence is not glorified or aestheticized as a visual attraction. Objectively, as a visual text alone, the film is polysemic. Rather than suggest one particular reading, and keeping in mind the increasingly heterogeneous demographics of cinema audiences during this period, the film encourages the viewer to discern and contemplate the information for themselves, perhaps from a modern civil perspective (lynching is wrong), or perhaps through an antimodern lens (capital punishment is just, even if not legally sanctioned), or conceivably some negotiated amalgam of both. The formal and generic ambivalence further points to the lack of one dominant reading.

It is worth considering how the Tramp's whiteness may have informed the more objective aesthetic of reportage in *Tracked by Bloodhounds*. Contemporaneous films that feature White actors playing Black characters in blackface were generally intended to be comedic, such as the aforementioned *The Watermelon Contest*. Films that feature Black criminals and narrativize the cathartic humor of their punishment include *A Nigger in the*

Woodpile (Biograph, 1904), *The Chicken Thief* (Biograph, 1904), and *The Watermelon Patch* (Edison, 1905). In these films, petty larceny committed by Black men is punished through some form of non-lethal violence. In her discussion of *The Chicken Thief*, Stewart asserts a thematic alignment with lynching films:

In many ways, these cinematic scenes reproduce the dynamics of lynchings, which were common occurrences during this period. Practiced in the South and throughout the country, the lynching of African Americans (particularly men) served as a graphic warning to Black communities to remain in their subservient social, economic, and political positions. These films perform a function that is strikingly similar to “spectacle” lynchings, those less frequent but highly publicized, grotesque displays of torture and murder that were staged by and for large white crowds, sometimes numbering in the thousands. Like spectacle lynchings, which were frequently captured by cameras and sound recorders, films like *The Chicken Thief* serve as cathartic, entertaining, mass-mediated assertions of white supremacy.¹²⁵

While the dénouements in these films do not involve the death of the criminal, as in execution films, violence nevertheless serves as a just resolution. What distinguishes these films from *Tracked by Bloodhounds*, however, is the more conspicuous positioning of Black criminality. Moreover, the blackface performances are enacted in a highly sensationalized manner, thus depicting the Black characters as buffoons whose comeuppance in the end is presented as both justified and humorous. These films paint a more explicitly racist narrative than *Tracked by Bloodhounds*, but also the theatricality of the Blackface performances, and the absence of reportage, limit the interpretative possibilities.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Stewart, 74.

¹²⁶ Although the majority of Selig films from this period are non-extant, based on my research, I would speculate that this was also a more common stylistic difference between Selig and Biograph/Edison, suggesting that Biograph and Edison were more assertive in their racist attitudes.



Figure 2.4: *Avenging a Crime; or, Burned at the Stake* (Paley and Steiner, 1904), frame grab courtesy of the Library of Congress

Execution films also feature Blackface performances. *Avenging a Crime; or, Burned at the Stake* (Paley and Steiner, 1904) depicts the lynching of a Black man through the guise of a White actor in blackface. The print that is currently available at the Library of Congress only contains excerpts, approximately 80 seconds, of the original film. But the entirety can be reconstructed, to some degree, through catalog descriptions. According to the Library of Congress's paper print catalog,

The film was set in a rural community. The first scene shows four men shooting dice in front of a grocery store. The next scene is of a man struggling with a woman whom he chokes to death. The following scenes are the townspeople being notified of the discovery of the body, the organization of a posse, the escape of the villain, and his apprehension by the mob. The picture ends as the mob is about to lynch him.¹²⁷

¹²⁷ Niver, *Motion Pictures From the Library of Congress Paper Print Collection, 1894-1912*, 167.

The Lubin catalog more specifically outlines nine scenes, which, similar to *Tracked by Bloodhounds*, concludes with the hanging in a section titled “At the Stake:” “They are seen dragging him through the woods. Lashing him to a tree, they gather brushwood and stacking it around him, set it on fire. He is soon enveloped in flames, the angry mob fire shot after shot at him and the vengeance is complete.”¹²⁸ The catalog also notes that the antagonist has lost all of his money gambling and therefore is compelled to rob the woman. Criminality in the form of gambling might be interpreted as a behavioral attribute, not necessarily the isolated outburst of violence that the Tramp in *Tracked by Bloodhounds* experiences. This narrative of degeneracy was frequent in the press at the time, reinforcing the discourse that produced stereotypes of Black criminality. These narratives often involved Black men raping White women, reifying the patriarchal need for White masculinity to protect the honor of women. While *Avenging a Crime* does not represent a rape, the victim is a woman, and the film accomplishes metonymically what it does not depict on screen. The prevalence of narratives of Black men raping White women in popular media did not reflect reality. Throughout the 1890s Ida B. Wells attempted to debunk the contradictory myth of Black men raping white women, and the invisibility/erasure of Black women rape victims.¹²⁹ Only around 25% of all Black men lynched throughout this period were accused of rape, and among that 25% most were later proven innocent.¹³⁰ The sensational press constructed similar rumors and calls for

¹²⁸ Musser, *Motion Picture Catalogs*.

¹²⁹ See Shawn Michelle Smith, 16 and Muhammad, 58-61.

¹³⁰ Mary Church Terrell, “Lynching from a Negro’s Point of View,” *The North American Review* 178, no. 571 (June 1904): 854. For specific examples see 858.

lynchings that undoubtedly inspired these violent acts to be committed. Motion pictures participated in promoting this ideology while also providing an experiential platform in which the spectacle of lynching was consumed and re-consumed by White audiences.

There is, of course, a distinction between witnessing a live lynching, or in some cases actively participating in a lynch mob, and watching a lynching film. Both allowed, and perhaps even encouraged, the White spectator to feel a sense of belonging and commonality in supporting these violent acts. Live lynchings were events that solicited the spectator to actively engage in perpetrating these crimes. However, while many Americans participated in these live events, most consumed them through media representations. Reading about lynchings in a press account, or viewing them through photographs or motion pictures, are physically, and temporally, restrictive experiences. In other words, the mass dissemination of lynchings through a variety of media shifted the primary form of viewership of public executions from one of mobilized presence, both physical presence and the temporal present, to one of virtual simulation of the past, and in the case of motion picture reenactments, quasi-historical reconstructions of the past.

Another quasi-historical lynching film is *The White Caps* (Edison, 1905), which is similar to *Tracked by Bloodhounds* in terms of structure and realism, with one fake interior set used toward the beginning followed by a series of rural exterior scenes. Here the vigilante group, the “White Caps,” is more organized and strikingly resembles the Ku Klux Klan in their use of white masks. While the film predates *Birth of a Nation* by a decade, it was released in the same year Thomas Dixon Jr. published *The Clansman*, from which *Birth* was adapted. The White Caps were real vigilante groups comprised primarily

of farmers in the South and Midwest who fought against transgressions of patriarchy—like spousal abuse, as seen in *The White Caps*—and against racial equality. An Edison advertisement described the film’s representation of vigilantism matter-of-factly:

During the rapid march of civilization in America, covering the past fifty years, certain social conditions developed which had to be regulated and controlled by unusual methods. A lawless and criminal element almost invariably accompanied the advance guard of civilization and to keep this element in check the law abiding citizens were compelled to secretly organize themselves for their own protection. The “Vigilantes” during the gold excitement of ’49 in California and the “White Caps” of more recent years in Ohio, Indiana, and other Western States, are well-known organizations which dealt summarily with outlaws and the criminal classes in general. We have portrayed in Motion Pictures, in a most vivid and realistic manner, the method employed by the “White Caps” to rid the community of undesirable citizens.¹³¹

The rurality of these vigilante movements demonstrates their aversion to modernity. The film seems to condone the actions of the White Caps, and the “method” they employ visually inscribes race in the condemnation of the criminal. Although the lynching victim in *The White Caps* is White, he is subject to a process of tarring and feathering, in which he is first covered in black tar, then white feathers that stick to the tar, before being paraded as a public spectacle. The act of tarring blackens his skin, or more metaphorically condemns his criminality as Black, and the white feathers serve as a visual facade, suggesting that his perceived whiteness cloaks his true criminal blackness.

One can imagine various cinema audiences responding very differently to these images. Many White viewers would have cheered and applauded, whether vocally or silently, the ostensible justice depicted in these films. Minorities, such as the increasing

¹³¹ Quoted in Charles Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 303.

immigrant population from southern and eastern Europe, as well as some Black viewers, may have aligned with this form of viewership as a means of assimilating to American whiteness. Contrarily, the visual shock of violent vigilante justice would have appalled some Black and White audiences. However, Muhammad notes that progressives' condemnation of lynch mobs as barbaric and primitive served to reify the perceived racial dichotomy between White civilization and Black primitivity.¹³² Moreover, while White lynching spectators may have been shocked and disgusted, they were to some degree complicit through their patronage. Although these films are no longer commodities, contemporary viewers and historians retrospectively analyzing these films undoubtedly risk falling into the trap of complicity. As Shawn Michelle Smith argues, "all photographs are vehicles of identification and disavowal," and we have to look at these images to disavow them, rather than ignore them entirely.¹³³ Similarly, Goldsby proposes a method of examining contemporaneous personal biographies to avoid "homogenizing the murders."¹³⁴ In other words, we must critically reconstruct the narratives surrounding dominant modes of film, photography, literature and other forms of media. While the aforementioned films provided an outlet for viewers to experience public executions that were no longer available, they also could have served a broader function of authenticating one's own bodily existence, witnessing the experience of death without the threat of dying. However, any potential pleasure in this affirmation ultimately served to erase the bodily sovereignty of thousands of real lynching victims. Goldsby contends that the

¹³² Muhammad, 29.

¹³³ Shawn Michelle Smith, 15.

¹³⁴ Goldsby, 7.

building of the modern nation in the United States involved not only the destruction of Black bodies but also the erasure of their memory: “the unspeakableness of these photographs describes lynching’s deepest enigma: why the violence could command the public’s attention and yet will the nation to a collective silence; why Americans remember to forget lynching, when—and if—they recall its history at all.”¹³⁵ The erasure of Black victimhood and reaffirmation of Black criminality informed modern notions of law and order. In the twenty-first century, Black criminality, and the criminalization of various dark-skinned groups, is a cultural construct that continues to prevail in our media texts, and more broadly in our social/political discourse.

Beheadings and the Boxer Rebellion

Much like the representations of domestic lynching victims that reinforced existing racial dichotomies, foreign Others were vilified in cinematic representations of capital punishment. Western production companies produced several films that reconstructed recent incidents during the Boxer Rebellion in China. While less a rebellion than an uprising in response to Western imperialism, “Boxers,” a term designated in the West due to their skill in martial arts, fought against an eight-nation alliance of Western countries, including the United States. The Boxer Rebellion was framed as a “race war” because it was a response to the decades-long, and increasing, presence of Christian missionaries and Western traders in China. Western aggression in the region dated back to the early nineteenth century with the opium wars beginning in 1839. By 1882 racist Othering of

¹³⁵ Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret*, 281.

foreign groups in the Far East led to the Chinese Exclusion Act, which prohibited Chinese from entering the United States and becoming naturalized citizens until 1943. The Boxers were defeated in 1900, which marked the end of the rebellion against the West and the beginning of modernization in China. Western society's imposition of Christianity created a dichotomy between modernized values and ostensibly archaic, non-Christian values. The Chinese were stereotyped by exotic characteristics: they were viewed as superstitious and barbaric, and according to Western accounts, they ate strange foods and were overly susceptible to opium addiction. Edward Said defines "Orientalism" as a "corporate institution," in which the West asserts power and dominance over the Near and Far East.¹³⁶ The West produced this discourse, and it therefore represents the Western world more than the Orient.¹³⁷ Early cinema participated in perpetuating this discourse through reconstructions of Boxer activities that were predominantly fictional, or typified like the aforementioned lynching films. More specifically, representations of beheadings by rebels against imperialism not only reified Western conquest of the East but also did so by glorifying ancient forms of capital punishment.

In *The Yellow Peril* (Paul, 1900), a Boxer is seen stealing gold from Westerners, which is a reversal of the West's history of exploitation of Chinese resources. According to Stephen Bottomore, films of the Boxer Rebellion possessed a tone of "'yellow peril'—of hostility toward the Chinese and outright abhorrence for the Boxers... these films

¹³⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge, 1978), 11.

¹³⁷ Said, 20.

often depicted the gruesome habits and barbaric attacks by Boxers... the demonisation goes beyond what we see in the fake films of other wars in this period.”¹³⁸ Stef Franck has identified seventeen film reconstructions produced about the Boxer uprising circa 1900.¹³⁹ Among these, based on my research, there are nine titles that involve public executions, though various production companies re-distributed several of these under different names, so there may only be four distinct films.¹⁴⁰ The interest garnered by several producers regarding this subject matter demonstrates its public interest. These films demonized Boxers through depictions of public beheadings, which, according to Western accounts were common during this conflict. On June 20, 1900 the *New York Times* reported that Boxers had begun beheading foreigners with no motivation other than opposition to Western imperialism.¹⁴¹ The duration of this section will analyze reconstructions of Boxer executions. Before continuing, it is important to note that the Boxer rebellion was not the only conflict around this time in which motion picture producers reconstructed war executions. Examples include *Execution of the Spanish Spy* (Lubin, 1898), *Shooting Captured Insurgents* (Edison, 1898), *Shooting the Spy* (Paul, 1899), *The Assassination of a British Sentry* (Mitchell & Kenyon, 1900), *Capture of a Boer Spy* (Pathé, 1903), and *Execution of the Same* (Pathé, 1903). I choose to focus on

¹³⁸ Stephen Bottomore, "Filming, Faking and Propaganda: The Origins of the War Film, 1897-1902" (PhD diss., Utrecht University, 2007), ch. 13, p. 18.

¹³⁹ Stef Franck, "Boxer Rebellion Novelties," in *To Dazzle the Eye and Stir the Heart: The Red Lantern, Nazimova, and the Boxer Rebellion*, ed. Stef Franck (Brussels: Cinematek, 2012), 114.

¹⁴⁰ Edward H. Amet produced a Boxer execution film, *Execution of Six Boxers* (1900), which to my knowledge is non-extant and will not be included in the following analyses.

¹⁴¹ "All Foreigners in Peking Dead?" *New York Times*, July, 2 1900.



Figure 2.5: *Chinese Massacring Christians* (Lubin, 1900)

the Boxer films as case studies for this chapter due to their archival accessibility and because they narrate an Orientalist rhetoric, which further demonstrates how the disciplinary function of modernity is fundamentally tied to racial demarcation and criminalization.

Chinese Massacring Christians (Lubin, 1900) is Méliès-esque. The painted backdrop is clearly fake due to its warped perspective, so much so that it is difficult to imagine 1900 audiences thinking otherwise. The set is essentially a theatrical stage. Three Chinese Boxers, played by White actors in yellowface, barge into a home using swords to chase out the family of Christian missionaries residing within. The Boxers violently drag the victims along the stage. Conveniently, a tree stump in the foreground is used as a platform for the beheading of a male victim, most likely the father and husband of this

family. An edit between shots transitions the real human victim to a fake dummy. The discontinuous positioning of the ax makes the edit far more conspicuous. Additional Boxers have arrived to witness the execution, and they all celebrate as the executioner triumphantly raises the severed head. The Lubin catalog described the film as follows: “They batter down the door of a dwelling and enter, driving the inmates out before them. One is seen to raise a child by the feet, and throwing her over his shoulder, runs off with her. Another drags a woman out by the hair, while a third, with the assistance of several others places a man on a block, and decapitates him. A perfect realistic picture.”¹⁴² This final assessment of realism is hardly accurate. Franck notes that the costumes are inauthentic, and the Boxers’ use of an ax would have been unlikely since they preferred swords and spears.¹⁴³ One contemporaneous source reported that a film titled *Beheading Chinese Christians* screened after *Execution of Czolgosz*.¹⁴⁴ This was most likely an alternate title for *Chinese Massacring Christians*, which another production company may have pirated. It is described as a man being decapitated while other inmates are chased out, a description strikingly similar to that in the Lubin catalog. It is interesting that these films screened together. It demonstrates that executions were generically categorized to some extent.

But the films promote very different ideologies. *Czolgosz* reifies victory of the state over its leader’s assassin, while *Chinese Massacring Christians* reinforces the backwardness of “primitive” forms of violence. This ideological difference more broadly

¹⁴² Musser, *Motion Picture Catalogs*.

¹⁴³ Franck, 113.

¹⁴⁴ “Eiler’s Big Pavilion,” *Warren Sheaf* (Warren, MN), August 28, 1902.

alludes to the public's interest in the spectacle of death, not simply the historical event of either Czolgosz's execution or the Boxer Rebellion but an amalgamated desire to experience the premodern thrill of public executions. Lears asserts that antimodernists accepted the Orient as akin to medievalism, rather than exoticizing it as a potentially dangerous Other, in order to negotiate spiritual ambivalence in the face of modernity.¹⁴⁵ The spiritual ambivalence of antimodernism is worth emphasizing. While some antimodernists may have whole-heartedly embraced perceived medievalism, such as what was perceivably associated with the Orient, I would argue that ideological uncertainty, in the midst of a rapidly changing world, more appropriately identifies antimodernism. *Chinese Massacring Christians* accommodated spiritual ambivalence by both exoticizing the Boxers and thematizing the comeuppance of specifically religious Western intervention. The film offers an opportunity to either sympathize with the Christian victims or to problematize their religious imperialism. Although the cinematic apparatus contains the primitive behavior of the Boxers and codes it as Other, Western audiences could have contemplated and discerned these images as affirmation of Western Christianity, or perhaps as a way to experience something more authentically visceral than the civilized quotidian of Western urban modernity; in other words, something more spiritually real than the increasingly secularized modern world.

By contrast, *Beheading the Chinese Prisoner* (Lubin, 1900) represents the beheading of a Chinese prisoner. By early 1901 several Boxer officials had committed suicide, and Chih-Siu, former Grand Secretary, and Hsu Cheng Yu, son of the notorious

¹⁴⁵ Lears, 175.



Figure 2.6: *Beheading the Chinese Prisoner* (Lubin, 1900)

Hsu Tung, were publicly beheaded, though French, German and American troops heavily guarded these events.¹⁴⁶ In *Beheading the Chinese Prisoner*, a Chinese official places a tree stump—seemingly identical to that used in Lubin’s other Boxer film, *Chinese Massacring Christians*—at the center of the stage/frame. Upon his exit, a group of Chinese officials enter, escorting their prisoner, who is swiftly executed. Franck observes that, like *Chinese Massacring Christians*, the costumes in *Beheading the Chinese Prisoner* are inauthentic.¹⁴⁷ To contemporary audiences, the film is clearly fake.

However, it was intended to fool 1900 audiences. As Bottomore notes, “A contemporary advertisement and the 1903 Lubin catalogue both suggest that this film was marketed as

¹⁴⁶ “Public Executions Begin in Pekin,” *St. Louis Republic*, February 27, 1901, 8.

¹⁴⁷ Franck, 111.

an actuality straight from the war. But the film was indeed shot at the Lubin studio, which is very apparent from the stylization, and if one were in any doubt, both it and *Chinese Massacring Christians* include painted backdrops and an identical papier-mâché chopping block.”¹⁴⁸ In this picture, a sword, not an ax, is used for the execution, and the trick edit is far more believable than *Chinese Massacring Christians* as the placement of the sword remains consistent. Next, as the Lubin catalog notes, “the executioner displays the head to the spectators to serve as a warning for evil doers[;] [v]ery exciting.”¹⁴⁹ There is a celebratory air among the spectators on screen, but the reaction from the Chinese officials is far more business-like than the parading around that concludes *Chinese Massacring Christians*. Furthermore, here the execution seems to be set in a municipal building, not in the streets. Therefore, in comparing these two Lubin films, there is a clear dichotomy between the rational, precise measures taken by the Chinese officials and the extralegal tactics of the Boxers. The varying preciseness of the trick edit reinforces this dichotomy. But it is not entirely obvious whether the prisoner is intended to be a Boxer, executed during the war’s conclusion, or a Chinese Christian, many of which were executed by Chinese officials throughout the war. It is tempting to assume the latter in light of the fact that the victims in Lubin’s other Boxer film, *Chinese Massacring Christians*, are also Christians. But I am more inclined to argue that, based on the distinction between a rational bureaucratic execution by Chinese officials in *Beheading a Chinese Prisoner* and the vigilantism represented in *Chinese Massacring Christians*,

¹⁴⁸ Bottomore, “Filming, Faking and Propaganda,” ch. 13 p. 3.

¹⁴⁹ Quoted in Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 31.

Lubin intentionally created this contrast to demonize the Boxers. However, both films allowed for pluralistic interpretations.

Pathé produced four films about the Boxer uprising, which were often screened collectively. Among these, *Beheading a Chinese Boxer* (1900)¹⁵⁰ is the only extant film. It is set in a rural location and therefore appears more authentic than the aforementioned Boxer films. Perhaps as many as a couple dozen Chinese gather in an open field to witness this execution. There are two executioners, one who performs the actual beheading while the other retrieves the severed head on a stake to be displayed to the crowd. The trick edit makes the beheading appear too fast, though it is possible there are missing frames in the existing print. The film was often spliced with a scene of Allied troops leading Chinese prisoners over Tien-Tsin bridge, titled *Chinese Prisoners and Decapitation*, and various distributors also reappropriated and re-contextualized the film.¹⁵¹ In both *Chinese Massacring Christians* and *Beheading the Chinese Prisoner*, the severed head is raised for all present, including the cinema spectator, to visually acknowledge the execution's conclusion. In *Beheading a Chinese Boxer*, the severed head on a stake serves a function similar to that of the hanged lynching victim photographed, as a visual trophy. Western audiences may have been encouraged—

¹⁵⁰ I use this title since this is how the film is labeled at the British National Film and Television Archive (NFTVA), and my source, the DVD collection *To Dazzle the Eye and Stir the Heart: The Red Lantern, Nazimova, and the Boxer Rebellion*, distributed by Cinematek, also titles the film *Beheading a Chinese Boxer*. However, catalog entries list several varying titles. Selig also released a film in 1903 titled *Beheading Chinese*. It is possible that this was a re-distribution of *Beheading a Chinese Boxer*—or one of the aforementioned Lubin films, though the exterior realism of the Pathé film would've been more aligned with Selig's style—but my research does not confirm this.

¹⁵¹ See Bottomore, ch. 13, pp. 6-9.

through catalog descriptions, exhibitor narration, newspapers, and other cultural products that helped construct a certain mindset regarding the Boxer uprising—to demonize the Boxers in the case of the first film while aligning themselves with the triumphant Chinese and their trophy-spectacle in the latter two films.

The narrative across these films presents an interesting paradox that more generally characterizes modernity. Foreign Others are exoticized for their ostensibly primitive behavior, and the victory over their enemies is celebrated through the same methods! In these examples, cinematic representations of public executions demarcate modernity from pre-modernity. Both Western audiences' compliance with the visual spectacle of death as performed by the Boxers, as well as similar acts performed against them, demonstrates antimodern sentiments. Yet they function within modernity. Like the use of electrocution in *Execution of Czolgosz*, the rational methods in *Beheading the Chinese Prisoner* demarcate civilized behavior from the presumed primitivism of *Chinese Massacring Christians*, and of course all of these films function within the modern technology of motion pictures.

The fact that these films were all reconstructions of events points, on the one hand, to Western film producers' inaccessibility to the East but, on the other hand, demonstrates a constructed reality, which became the Western popular perception and cultural discourse about the East. It is interesting, though, that none of these films depict heroic Western characters. The Chinese are always the victors, regardless of which side they are on. Western viewers may have exoticized the Orient, but it is worth considering that many may have simply enjoyed participating in the attraction/spectacle of

executions, as well as the act of contemplating and discerning the content for themselves, since the political narrative and its implications about the Chinese population were left somewhat ambiguous.

It is worth noting here that, in 1900, the Chinese cinema was still several years from establishing itself. Chinese audiences viewed imported films from the West as early as 1896, though Chinese productions did not begin until 1905. The medium itself represented a certain degree of Western cultural imperialism, precisely that form of power against which the Boxers ultimately rebelled, a more elaborate history of which shall be outlined in the following chapter. Before the 1920s, Chinese filmmakers generally did not use the medium politically, so there were likely no contemporaneous filmic responses to the Americanized representations of the Boxer Rebellion from the Chinese perspective. Nevertheless, motion pictures were quickly coined as “shadow plays” in China, referring to the traditional dramatic practice of the same name, resisting imperial modernization by offering a distinctively Chinese, and non-Western, character to the new medium.¹⁵² Moreover, the earliest Chinese films do seem to be interested in sustaining national cultural identity, particularly the synthesis of motion pictures with opera, which ultimately paved the way for cultural nationalism in Chinese cinema beyond the 1920s. So there remains a striking negotiation between modern technology and premodern, pre-Western-contact cultural traditions. The impulse to approach this negotiation through the practice of reconstruction was therefore somewhat different than Western producers’

¹⁵² See Jubin Hu, *Projecting a Nation: Chinese National Cinema Before 1949* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), 32.

reenactment of current events, but nonetheless involved an attempt to reclaim something that might remind Chinese audiences of premodern Chinese traditions in the face of modern imperialism by the West.

Conclusion

This chapter is titled “Reconstructing Capital Punishment,” but it could also be titled “Reclaiming Capital Punishment.” These films all reify a belief in and support for capital punishment while this practice was becoming increasingly jettisoned in favor of modern penal reform. Through reconstruction, these films analogously *reclaim* capital punishment as a means toward reforming modernity. And it is this quality that aligns them with documentary practices that would evolve later in the twentieth century. They do not simply report reality but rather attempt to aesthetically construct a certain reality shaped by cultural, ideological, and political discourses of the era.

Foucault notes that modern penal reform ultimately aimed to establish a more systemic way of asserting power: “to punish better... to punish with more universality and necessity; to insert the power to punish more deeply into the social body.”¹⁵³ This transition involved a greater emphasis on punishment as conceptual (affecting the mind and soul) rather than real (embodied): “it is no longer the body... it is the mind or rather a play of representations and signs circulating discreetly but necessarily and evidently in the minds of all.”¹⁵⁴ Early cinema seems tied up in a paradoxical web of seeking such

¹⁵³ Foucault, 82.

¹⁵⁴ Foucault, 101.

embodied authenticity while inevitably conforming to a system of conceptual representations. Reenactments seem to be attempts to pivot from the merely conceptual, as quests to reclaim an event's verisimilitude through aestheticization, but they inevitably conflate the idea of authenticity with representational patterns that are narrativized. It is therefore not coincidental that executions on film were so pervasively reconstructed as presumed typifications of historical events. While the deaths of many victims were very real, these typified reenactments suggest a desire for something that was no longer real in the modern world; in other words, a reclamation of premodern modalities that are interpolated into modern life.

One crucial distinction between actualities and documentaries is the pre-existence of social attitudes in the former and the argumentative nature of the latter. Editing is used in both but not for the sake of montage or dramatization, more like sequentiality. Reconstructions, however, differ from actualities in that they are, at least to some extent, dramatizations of events rather than indexical reports. Early reconstructions served as cinematic experiments for discovering ways of representing reality when reportage was not possible, or perhaps not desired. Execution films in particular illustrate how fictional formulas became more complexly synthesized with nonfictional content; for example, the typifications of lynchings and Boxer beheadings. This fictionalization would become a defining feature of documentaries in subsequent decades. Vivian Sobchack argues that we categorize fiction and documentary based not on objective qualities but rather our

“*subjective relations* to a variety of cinematic objects.”¹⁵⁵ Similarly, Jaimie Baron’s notion of “false archive effects” asserts that the archival document must be considered in terms of its “experience of reception,” which she terms the “archive effect.”¹⁵⁶ Fidelity and indexicality are always open to debate, and the audience negotiates this. The “false” archive effect occurs when a fabricated representation of a historical event is perceived as the actual event.¹⁵⁷ Reenactments are by nature false archive effects that deceive their audience unless their status as not real is obvious or disseminated transparently. The false archive effect is often an essential component in the documentary experience. As Sobchack notes, “embodied and extratextual knowledge, posited and particularized existence, and personal ethical responsibility are *all* necessary to the full constitution of documentary consciousness on one side of the screen and documentary space on the other.”¹⁵⁸ Despite the constructedness of the reality represented, the audience participates in negotiating between an experience that is perceived as reality (documentary) or one that is perceived as imaginary (fiction), though reality and imagination often interweave in imprecise ways (e.g., reenactments), much like the contemplating and discerning early cinema viewer. Antimodern impulses illuminated these formal developments in early film reenactments.

¹⁵⁵ Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 261.

¹⁵⁶ Jaimie Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 7.

¹⁵⁷ Baron, 50.

¹⁵⁸ Sobchack, 285.

Foucault notes that spectators of public executions could have rejected them and often collectively mobilized to overturn them. In these cases they were carnivalesque experiences. Discipline and punishment were not always celebrated but often mocked, and criminals became heroes, while the authorities became villains.¹⁵⁹ Similarly, *Execution of Czolgosz* presents a patriotic narrative but one that many anarchist groups could have easily resisted. The idea that punishment is an assertion of power is not unlike the function of war where power is likewise physically asserted through violence. The preceding chapter buttresses the next in this regard. A further study of war reconstructions on film, prevalent from 1897-1904, and covering several global conflicts, demonstrates a similar fascination with premodern violence as the execution film, as well as an ambivalence of interpretive possibilities.

¹⁵⁹ Foucault, 59-61.

CHAPTER THREE

CONTEMPLATING VIOLENCE AND MODERN WARFARE

Violence was frequently thematized in early cinema, a fact consistently evident among films that reenacted current events. Imperialism defined modern Western progress and was served through acts of violent aggression toward various global communities as numerous wars plagued the globe between 1898 and 1904. Motion picture pioneers readily sought to capture battle scenes as they occurred, or more frequently, and more conveniently, to reconstruct them. Like the violence present in reconstructions of executions, battle reenactments also aggrandized antimodern behavior—in this case the violence that is concomitant with war—in the guise of modern rhetoric. The impulse to represent reality through fictional reconstructions suggests a proto-documentary aesthetic, what Grierson would later identify as the creative treatment of reality, which rejected the presumed verisimilitude of actuality and required intervention on the part of the filmmaker to achieve truth.

The quantity of war-related film content produced between 1898 and 1904 seems almost insurmountable. Stephen Bottomore has superbly tackled this corpus of films in his lengthy, rigorously researched dissertation project. Due to this existing seminal work, and because I am merely addressing the topic as one component in a broader theoretical project, I have significantly narrowed down the specific texts examined in this chapter. Battle reenactments are my primary focus as they exemplify the desire to participate in violent warfare, more specifically to repeat the embodied experience of combat heroism in the present. The majority of war-related content produced during this period involved

non-combat activity. Focusing specifically on battle scenes is somewhat challenging as the demarcation between battle and non-battle content is often not entirely obvious, particularly when dealing with reenactments that have no specific reference to a real event. Authentic battles were filmed during this period, and many remain extant. However, in relation to other current event topics reported by the nascent motion picture medium, battle scenes were one of the few genres in which reenactments were more prevalent than actualities. Bottomore avoids using the term “staged” unless in reference to allegorical war films not produced on location. Many war reenactments were performed in conflict zones, and he refers to these as “arranged actualities” or “set up films” since the locations and personnel were authentic.¹ But staging is an act, not simply an object in a studio, performed by both real historical figures (e.g., soldiers) and actors. In either case, there is a certain degree of documentary-esque, creatively-treated appearance.

Along with the previous chapter, the concern here is the dawn of media violence, present of course in earlier forms but becoming more widespread through motion pictures. But violence in these early cinematic texts is not necessarily glorified in the way that it often is in contemporary media. We see this restrained treatment of violence in many execution films, where the moment of death is brief. In turn, the horror of the violent act is de-emphasized. Most war-related motion pictures produced during this period did not even contain battle scenes, even though filmmakers had the capability to

¹ Stephen Bottomore, “Filming, Faking and Propaganda: The Origins of the War Film, 1897-1902” (PhD diss., Utrecht University, 2007), xxvi.

reenact them. Imperialism was instead celebrated through a conspicuous lack of violence. The first war films focused on their ideological messages, while the visual spectacle of violence became secondary, obfuscated, or even non-existent. If early cinema was a cinema of attractions, as Gunning argues, then war reenactments were outliers that subdued spectacle in favor of ideology. Their ideological emphasis is evidence that the cinemas of contemplation and discernment, elaborated by Charles Musser, functioned alongside the cinema of attractions. I use the term “alongside” in an attempt to avoid jettisoning the idea of attractions entirely. In fact, these films demonstrate a conflation of spectacle and ideological meaning. Ideology, not the authenticity and horror of violence, became the visual attraction.

There is another important link between the topic of this chapter and the previous chapter on execution films. The formalization and increasing institutionalization of penal reform throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is similarly apparent in the shifting culture of militarization. According to Foucault,

Historians of ideas usually attribute the dream of a perfect society to the philosophers and jurists of the eighteenth century; but there was also a military dream of society; its fundamental reference was not to the state of nature, but to the meticulously subordinated cogs of a machine, not to the primal social contract, but to permanent coercions, not to fundamental rights, but to indefinitely progressive forms of training, not to the general will but to automatic docility.²

Ironically, by the turn of the twentieth century, war was often perceived as a means of escaping the docility of modern life. As Lears argues, “war has offered men the chance to escape the demands of bourgeois domesticity and reintegrate a fragmented sense of self

² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995, originally published, 1975), 169.

by embracing a satisfying social role.”³ The “warrior image” was “born in opposition to mercantile expansion, bureaucracies, and professional armies,” and this was a specifically white self: “The archaic warrior typified the racial superiority of the ‘pure Nordic strain’ as well as the intensity of life amid danger and death.”⁴ Theodore Roosevelt epitomized this symbol, as a Social Darwinist in terms of both race and class. For Roosevelt, the western hero of the past would personify the man of the future, an exclusively White, Anglo, aristocratic man.⁵ While espoused as progressive, Roosevelt’s view of modern progress was simultaneously, and backwardly, antimodern. It assumed America’s past as exceptional and romanticized traditional virtues. The irony is that both modern life and military life, the latter sought as an escape from the former, regiment the individual into a system comprised of cultural ideologies and power structures. Early war films demonstrate this irony. On the one hand, the act of capturing war footage, whether it was authentic or not, functioned as an attempt to escape quotidian bourgeois domesticity. On the other hand, viewers of war films assumed a domestic position in which the authentic experience of combat in foreign locales represented an abstract, simulated version of reality. Furthermore, it is important to observe that the development of early war films—which had a profound impact on cinematic development, and one might argue was the biggest influence on fiction, historical fiction, and documentary formulas that developed

³ T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, originally published, 1983), 98.

⁴ Lears, 101-02.

⁵ See Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 41-42.

throughout the early twentieth century—was an attempt to affirm White masculinity and demonize anyone categorized as racially or sexually Other. Woodrow Wilson made Roosevelt's politics less popular by the 1910s. However, his foundational ideologies, particularly the notion of hero-centered narratives, informed early film production and profoundly influenced media culture throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, perhaps most conspicuously in popular American film genres like westerns and war dramas.

The modernization of warfare increasingly augmented the physical distance between opposing combatants. Most historians agree that this use of distance began in the late nineteenth century and culminated with World War I, a war in which mobile fighting was still performed but longer range warfare had become the norm. D.W. Griffith traveled to the European front in 1917, as the only American film producer permitted in the trenches, but he ultimately decided that modern warfare made for an uninteresting documentary subject. Perhaps his nostalgia for past wars, as narrativized in films like *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916), did not align with the modern reality of war. He jettisoned his initial plan to capture the war's actuality and instead produced the fictional war film *Hearts of the World* (1918). For earlier motion picture pioneers, staged scenes of war often attempted to bring the action closer to the viewer, but close-up action was no longer how war was fought. Therefore, early war reconstructions were a form of resistance to modern warfare.

Battle scenes of current and/or recent wars were popular in the theater around the turn of the twentieth century. Military drills had become an attraction at fairs and other

amusement sites throughout the latter nineteenth century. It is therefore not surprising that these were popular subjects in early cinema. By 1893 Buffalo Bill's Wild West had formed the "Congress of the Rough Riders of the World." This choice of title reveals an interesting cyclical to the cultural production of westerns and war reenactments. Roosevelt named his militia of Spanish-American War volunteers the "Rough Riders," though he denied the connection to Buffalo Bill.⁶ Whether this is true or not, the mythology of the frontier was conflated with American imperialism in the Wild West and concomitantly aligned with Roosevelt's ideology. In other words, whether intentional or not, Roosevelt symbolically reappropriated Cody's Rough Riders. In 1899 at Madison Square Garden, Cody reappropriated his own appropriated label in the show "Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Rough Riders," a performance of the Wild West alongside a reenactment of the Battle of San Juan Hill.⁷ This performance would become a staple of the Wild West, as it attempted to sustain its popularity into the twentieth century, including scenes from the wars in Cuba and the Philippines, as well as reenactments of the sieges of Tien-Tsin and Peking during the Boxer War.⁸ This cyclical process foreshadowed broader trends in cinema, particularly American cinema, between the inauguration of the war picture in 1898 and the immense popularity of the western genre between roughly 1908 and 1912. Because of Buffalo Bill's Wild West, audiences might have perceived the old West and the current wars as similar attractions or genres.

⁶ See Slotkin, 83.

⁷ "Last Three Days and Nights," *New York Daily Tribune*, April 13, 1899, 16.

⁸ See Tom Gunning, "Early Cinema as Global Cinema: The Encyclopedic Ambition," in *Early Cinema and the "National"*, eds. Abel, Bertellini & King (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2016), 12.

I argue that popular tropes associated with westerns, drawn from the frontier mythology established by nineteenth-century literature and Buffalo Bill's Wild West, influenced early war films, particularly reenactments, which concomitantly influenced the western genre on film. This is perhaps most evident in their representations of rugged masculine heroism but can also be seen in the striking parallels between colonialism in the American West and imperialism abroad. After all, war is essential to the construction of the western imaginary, whether it is the Civil War and its memory in the postbellum cultural conscious, or the Indian Wars of the latter nineteenth century that solidified the colonization, and closing, of the frontier. I will make the following three primary arguments in this chapter: 1) war reenactments were more ideological than spectacular; 2) war reenactments demonstrate a resistance to modern warfare; and 3) war reenactments, to a large extent, influenced the prevalence of westerns later in the twentieth century's first decade. The first two arguments are most closely linked to this dissertation's overarching argument. The parallel between war as ideological resistance to modern warfare demonstrates the strange paradox of antimodernism's compliance with modernity, and vice versa. Taking these claims together will provide a useful segue to Chapter Four and my discussion of the erasure of Indigenous voices.

The Culture of Modern Warfare and Violent Masculinity

By the dawn of motion pictures in the late nineteenth century, indexical representations of real wars were still relatively new. The Crimean War (1854-55), the American Civil War (1861-65), and the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71) were all photographed. But this

medium had limitations. The development of positive prints from photographic negatives was a lengthy process, and gaining access to a live battlefield from an appropriate distance, in terms of both acquiring a suitable image for audiences to actually see the action and positioning the camera crew out of harm's way, was nearly impossible. Dramatic drawings often served to compensate for the lack of detail in the extreme wide shots that early war photographs ultimately produced.

Bottomore observes how war expanded in size and influence between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: "In the nineteenth century... armed conflict had been smaller in scale and impact than modern war, with a concomitantly lesser effect on the armed forces and the general population."⁹ Battles were increasingly taking place less on unoccupied land and more in populated public spaces, which amplified the possibility of ordinary citizens suffering injuries or even death. Warfare itself had also transformed by the twentieth century, "relying more on defence and concealment and less on highly visible offensives such as cavalry charges; and furthermore, there was increasing official regulation and censorship of reporting."¹⁰ The latter, of course, made filming war very challenging for early motion picture producers. As a result, the industry developed four solutions: 1) stage scenes using real soldiers on, or near, real battlefields; 2) film military activity, not battle itself, in and around war zones; 3) reenact or fabricate battle scenes in studios; 4) mix war-related footage to create longer programs from little material, often using footage from previous wars. Bottomore identifies three categories of staged war

⁹ Bottomore, "Filming, Faking and Propaganda," ch. 1 p. 1.

¹⁰ Bottomore, iii.

films: “symbolic or allegorical films, re-staged battles using actors, and re-staged naval battles using model ships.”¹¹ “Flag films”—a subgenre of war pictures that emphasized the visual spectacle of, and ideology associated with, national flags—exemplified the first category. These categories were formally innovative but substantively nothing more than propaganda. Nevertheless, they were immensely impactful on the development of the medium and the industry:

The convergence of war and cinema had effects on the development of the film medium itself. In overcoming some of the problems of filming and exhibiting war on screen, these early film pioneers managed to further the aesthetic and commercial development of cinema in general, popularising longer durations of shows, and spurring on stylistic developments and the shift to the story film.¹²

Reconstructions of battle scenes and war activity determined, to a large extent, how the industry would come to favor fiction as the dominant paradigm while undermining the potential for authenticity. Fictional aestheticized formulas therefore shaped documentary realism, and because of these blurred boundaries, the documentary form took several decades to become distinguishable.

As outlined in Chapter One, reenactments were increasingly becoming more prevalent throughout Western culture in the late nineteenth century. Battle reenactments were particularly popular at fairs and other performance sites. At the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition in Omaha in 1898, the most popular part of the “Indian Congress,” a collective of various Indigenous performers, was a sham battle between Whites and Natives. In an attempt to promote assimilation, so-called “friendly Indians”

¹¹ Bottomore, “Filming, Faking and Propaganda,” ch. 6 p. 1.

¹² Bottomore, xvii.

fought alongside Whites against the presumably less friendly members of the Indian Congress.¹³ President McKinley attended the Indian Congress in Omaha as it was the one part of the fair he did not want to miss.¹⁴ It was less an ethnological exhibit than a pseudo-reenactment of the Indian Wars, and the popularity of such reenactments suggests that audiences delighted in repeating the colonial triumph of White Euro-Americans over Indigenous peoples. Similarly, in 1906 Spanish War veterans reenacted battle scenes at Luna Park as a way for audiences to reify their patriotism and celebrate the American victory over the Spanish several years earlier, more specifically to *repeat* the celebration of victory.¹⁵ Greenhalgh observes how the desire to repeat already won victories marked a shift from militaristic conquest to propagandistic entertainment: “The ambition to consume as much as possible became a frenzied desire to hold on to what had already been won. Exhibitions became a propaganda ground for imperial justification, attempting to reinforce that unity of empire.”¹⁶ In many cases, starting in 1898, historical battle reenactments represented very recent events. Both historical battles and current/recent war-related events performed similar functions. The freshness of the latter simply reinforced the fact that both current and past victories should be celebrated in anticipation of future imperial conquests, a representational strategy that persisted in motion pictures.

¹³ See Robert Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at the American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 114-15.

¹⁴ See Rydell, 121.

¹⁵ “Honor Santiago Day,” *Evening Star* (New York, NY), July 17, 1906, 3.

¹⁶ Paul Greenhalgh, *Ephemeral Vistas: The Expositions Universelles, Great Exhibitions, and World's Fairs, 1851-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 59.

Earlier performances prepared cinema audiences with the proper protocols for reading battle reenactments on film, which sustained the propagandistic impulses of their predecessors. Furthermore, early cinema not only appropriated styles and themes from other media but also frequently overlapped with them. In an interesting historical example of mixed media, the “Indian Congress” exhibit at the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition included a railway scenic in which *The Battle of Manila* (Vitagraph, 1898) was screened along the walls of a giant tunnel as riders passed by on the train, juxtaposing the film with the live performances of the Indian Congress and consequently aligning domestic colonialism with foreign imperialism.¹⁷ Live performances of reenactments were also frequently captured on film. These films can be regarded as pseudo-actualities since, although they captured real live events, the performances were reconstructions of reality, or in some cases outright fabrications. Several of these performances were entirely fictitious, some serving as military exercises, with no historical referent. Examples include *Naval Sham Battle at Newport* (Edison, 1900), *Sham Battle on Land by Cadets at Newport Naval Training School* (Edison, 1900), *Sham Battle at the Pan-American Exposition* (Edison, 1901), and *Mimic Battle on Whale Island* (Urban, 1909). In other cases, performances reenacted specific historical events. *Naval Battle, St. Louis Exposition* (Biograph, 1904) captures an exhibit at the exposition consisting of “a large water tank designed to look like either the Havana Harbor or Manila Bay. Approximately twenty ship models of the American and Spanish navies are moving about on the water. There are simulated explosions, gun fire, etc. to give the

¹⁷ See Rydell, 120.

impression of a moving picture of a full-scale naval battle.”¹⁸ *Military Maneuvers, Manassas, Va.* (Edison, 1904) depicts a reenactment of the Civil War battle at Manassas. The film is clearly a pseudo-actuality of a live performance since “The last few feet of film consist of close-ups of the spectators.”¹⁹

The Greco-Turkish War of 1897 was most likely the first captured on film. Bottomore provides compelling evidence that Frederic Villiers did film actuality footage of this war.²⁰ Méliès also produced four films on the subject. *Sea Fighting in Greece* (Star, 1897) and *The Surrender of Tournavos* (Star, 1897) remain extant, while *Execution of a Spy* (Star, 1897), aforementioned in Chapter Two, and *Massacre in Crete* (Star, 1897) are non-extant. *War Episodes* (Star, 1897) was most likely a compilation of all four films. Bottomore argues that Méliès’s films were the first to reconstruct a news event.²¹ But we know this is not true based on earlier films, particularly *McKinley at Home*. The Lumières also produced a war-related picture in 1897, *Russian Dragoons—Charge and Dismount*. The film is described in the British Film Institute catalog as “A squadron of Russian cavalryman [*sic*], all mounted on white horses, charge towards the camera. When half-way, one line dismounts and takes up a firing position.”²² While perhaps not a news event in the sense in which Bottomore regards the Méliès films—in that the incident does not refer to a particular historical event—this is nevertheless an early example of a battle

¹⁸ Kemp R. Niver, *Motion Pictures From the Library of Congress Paper Print Collection, 1894-1912*, ed. Bergsten (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967).

¹⁹ Niver, 145.

²⁰ Bottomore, “Filming, Faking and Propaganda,” ch. 2 pp. 5-6.

²¹ Bottomore, ch. 3 p. 10.

²² <http://collections-search.bfi.org.uk/web/Details/ChoiceFilmWorks/150001117>

reconstruction, one that could have been produced before Méliès's films. Therefore, characterizing Méliès as the first to reconstruct a news event on film is problematic. It is also noteworthy that the Lumières' film is probably the first cinematic representation of a cavalry charge, a familiar plot in later war films.

While by no means "*the* pioneer,"²³ Méliès's Greco-Turkish War films were unquestionably seminal for the war film genre. In *Sea Fighting in Greece*, the set moves to simulate a rocking battleship. It is not reportage but rather an attempt to re-create the sensations experienced during this naval battle. Indeed, the officers on deck seem to stare directly toward the camera, as if the viewer is implicated as a participant. The viewer's point of view is that of the opposing navy, though it is not necessarily clear whether these are Greeks or Turks. It is notable that the camera does not move with the set. Perhaps this would be too disorienting, particularly to nascent cinema audiences. The connection between sensation and reconstruction is important. Linguistically, "sense" refers to the modes in which we comprehend the world around us, and "sensations" pertain to specific stimuli. Silent cinema produces visual sensations first and foremost, but it also often attempts to elicit other bodily responses; for example, through aural accompaniment, camera angles, movement, blocking, performance, etc. The *mise-en-scène* can produce non-audiovisual sensations (touch, smell, taste). Drawing from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Vivian Sobchack identifies a "*cinesthetic subject*," where meaning is produced through a conjunction of the cinematic spectator's body and the audiovisual representations in the

²³ Bottomore, "Filming, Faking and Propaganda," ch. 3 p. 19.

text.²⁴ *Sea Fighting in Greece* is an early example of reflexively acknowledging the body's role in meaning production, by literally attempting to invoke it in order to augment verisimilitude. The rocking of the ship simulates the feeling of uneasiness that one may experience in an actual naval battle. The terms "sense" and "sensation" are also linguistically linked to "sensationalize." By sensationalizing a particular event through means of reconstruction that heighten the degree of stimulus, Méliès's film is arguably more authentic—in terms of embodiment, not necessarily accurate reportage—than an actuality of the real event might have been.

Warwick produced several reconstructions of the Sudan War between 1898 and 1899. At the risk of being too American-centric in my focus, I will not cover these films in depth, though this conflict was an important milestone in the history of British imperialism. It is, however, worth pointing out that Bottomore laments the fact that the Battle of Omdurman could have been an opportunity to capture authentic premodern warfare before it disappeared for good. Most historians agree that this was the last war in which hand-to-hand combat was the primary modality. But the lack of interest in reproducing these events, which continued throughout the first decade of the twentieth century, may have been due to the fact that there was little resistance to—in other words, no desire to reconstruct—this form of warfare.

In order to demonstrate how war reenactments in early cinema informed modernity by tapping into antimodern impulses, I will begin my analysis with films of

²⁴ Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 67.

the Spanish-American War (1898), then continue with the Philippine-American War (1899-1902), the South African War (1899-1902), and the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901), concluding with the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05). Bottomore asserts that, before 1898, actuality films were mostly of everyday life, and the Spanish-American War shifted the balance of production as actualities began more frequently representing newsworthy events.²⁵ While the kinetoscope's popularity faded rather quickly in 1894, the introduction of theatrical exhibition in 1896 did not experience a similar lull, and this was at least partially due to topical subject matter eclipsing the mere novelty of a new form of visual stimuli. In 1898 the *Dramatic Mirror* referred to war movies as "the biggest sensation in the program."²⁶ Because the Spanish-American War was a primary concern in the American cultural consciousness, and because motion picture content was predominantly war-related, Edison temporarily referred to the kinetoscope as the "Wargraph."²⁷ It is therefore difficult to overestimate the impact war and its coverage had on the development of the medium.

During this time, motion pictures, and their production catalogs, began taking on an encyclopedic form. Gunning observes,

The commercial catalogue of the turn of the century (and this would be true of the great merchandizing publications of Sears and Roebuck, and Montgomery Ward, as well as film catalogues) performed the function of systematic gathering and presentation of information that could best be compared to the first great global projects of the Encyclopedia of Diderot and d'Alembert.²⁸

²⁵ Bottomore, ch. 5 p. 30.

²⁶ Quoted in Robert C. Allen, "Contra the Chaser Theory," in *Film Before Griffith*, ed. John L. Fell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 111.

²⁷ See Allen.

²⁸ Gunning, "Early Cinema as Global Cinema," 13.

The encyclopedic aspiration seeks an all-encompassing knowledge but is also incomplete. Films, and the catalogs describing them, were a system of incomplete fragments that could be constantly expanded upon but always remained incomplete.²⁹ There was a conspicuous incompleteness of pluralistic voices. The point of view was exclusively White, male, and first-world, despite a rather diverse plurality of viewership that the cinema would ultimately cultivate in just a few short years. The encyclopedic impulse was connected to the increasing newsworthiness of motion pictures beginning around 1898. The determination of newsworthiness insists that one ought to be focusing on a certain event or story. An encyclopedia similarly insists how knowledge should be defined, what is classified as important to know. In this sense, actuality can be considered a form of reconstruction. War reconstructions simply augmented, and made indubitably visible, the ideological polemics already existent in the motion picture's actuality encyclopedia.

Seemingly objective documents, such as actualities, are inevitably, at least unconsciously, ideologically coded. Frederic Jameson claims, "history is *not* a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that, as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and that our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious."³⁰ This political unconscious is not necessarily an explicit imposition of ideology onto a text. For

²⁹ See Gunning, 14.

³⁰ Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 35.

Jameson, “ideology is not something which informs or invests symbolic production; rather the aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal ‘solutions’ to unresolvable social contradictions.”³¹ Form carries ideological messages, often distinct from those found in the superficial content of the work. Actuality, as a form, produces an ideology of authenticity. It asserts itself as real. Reenactments do the same, unless they are transparent or self-reflexive. In the case of war reconstructions, imperialism becomes perceived as the natural order of things, a defining characteristic of the real world, not necessarily an ideological lens for making sense of the world. Of course, this is a false perception. Imperialism is not an inevitability but rather a socially constructed ideological framework for asserting power and dominance on a global scale.

The contradictions of imperial discourse align with my overarching argument regarding antimodernism. Amy Kaplan observes that empire rejects anarchy while contradictorily relying on it as a modality for perpetuating imperial expansion. For Kaplan, the “anarchy of empire” is an oxymoron that

suggests the breakdown or defiance of the monolithic system of order that empire aspires to impose on the world, an order reliant on clear divisions between metropolis and colony, colonizer and colonized, national and international spaces, the domestic and the foreign... Anarchy is conjured by imperial culture as a haunting specter that must be subdued and controlled, and at the same time, it is a figure of empire’s undoing.³²

³¹ Jameson, 79.

³² Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 13.

In attempting to extend a national identity to foreign lands, the nation inevitably risks the dissolution of the very idea of nationhood: “If the fantasy of American imperialism aspires to a borderless world where it finds its own reflection everywhere, then the fruition of this dream shatters the coherence of national identity, as the boundaries that distinguish it from the outside world promise to collapse.”³³ There are also paradoxes in the discourse differentiating “Domestic” and “Foreign,” which are metaphors, not geographic locations.³⁴ Foreign Others were not alienated because of their foreignness per se but rather because they were viewed through the same lens as domestic Others, who were perceived as foreign. But the foreign Other abroad was also “rendered ‘foreign’ in the ‘domestic sense.’”³⁵ This discourse elucidates the backwardness of colonialist/imperialist rhetoric that, in a broader sense, is a definitive aspect of modernity. American exceptionalism and nationalism, two ideas that similarly assert the supremacy of American culture over Others throughout the globe, are ultimately forms of anarchy.

At the risk of digressing somewhat, it is worth considering how, in contemporary American culture, forms of nationalism and exceptionalism have become contrarily anti-imperialist. In 2006 Susan Douglas identified how American culture had become increasingly narcissistic by the dawn of the twenty first century. This is exemplified by the increasing popularity of reality television throughout the aughts, despite the prevalence of new digital technologies designed to communicate globally. The “turn within,” as she describes it, has seemingly only augmented since then, most poignantly

³³ Kaplan, 16.

³⁴ Kaplan, 3.

³⁵ Kaplan, 10.

by the election of a famous reality television personality to president of the United States.³⁶ While subscribing to nationalism, former President Donald Trump showed himself to be uninterested in imperial conquest and would have preferred to wall the United States off from the rest of the world. Perhaps there is a certain degree of fear in the potential dissolution of national identity that imperialism risks, fear of global contact as potentially altering our economy and labor force, or more fundamentally altering traditional American values. In a more globalized world, the sustainment of American exceptionalism seems to require an inward focus. Through this lens, the differentiation of anything Other is still reinforced. Both forms of nationalism are dangerous in their own ways.

Before moving on to films of the Spanish-American War, there is one additional slight digression that I would like to make in order to contextualize the culture in which early war films were produced and consumed. Representations of masculinity were extremely popular during this period. Boxing films, for example, much like battle scenes, rather frequently consisted of reenactments of real bouts. It is important to contextualize how the battle reenactment's popularity was linked to a form of viewership that was simultaneously established, and premised on similar proclivities toward romanticizing violent masculine activity, by other nascent genres. Early motion picture producers and exhibitors attempted to cultivate the same audience, which intentionally or not traversed gender boundaries for both genres. Dan Streible observes that the "sporting and theatrical

³⁶ Susan J. Douglas, "The Turn Within: The Irony of Technology in a Globalized World," *American Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2006): 619-638.

world” was a social milieu, and boxing culture more specifically aligned with the culture of Roosevelt’s strenuous life.³⁷ T.J. Jackson Lears makes a similar assertion that “the cult of the strenuous life” was not only militaristic but also characterized the sporting world and outdoor activities more generally.³⁸ Motion pictures sought to reproduce and sustain this culture. Some of the earliest films included *Men Boxing* (Edison, 1891) and *Newark Athlete* (Edison, 1891), and *Corbett and Courtney Before the Kinetograph* (Edison, 1894) was the most popular film during the kinetoscope era.³⁹ Boxing spectatorship became a different experience when viewed on screen in the movie house, popular with women as well as working-class and minority audiences.⁴⁰ Cinema allowed spectators to view fights without entering the morally questionable space of the boxing arena. Miriam Hansen suggests that boxing films, particularly *Corbett-Fitzsimmons Fight* (Veriscope, 1897) (quite possibly the first feature-length film with a runtime of 100 minutes!), unexpectedly appealed to women, who may have found the seminude male subjects an arousing taboo.⁴¹ Female audiences may have also been attracted to the accessibility of masculinized subject matter unavailable to them in other cultural sites. Exhibitors eventually, or perhaps even from the outset, consciously targeted this demographic. Some theaters attempted to draw women to war-oriented films with souvenir pictures, such as

³⁷ Dan Streible, *Fight Pictures: A History of Boxing and Early Cinema* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), 11, 23.

³⁸ Lears, 108.

³⁹ See Streible, 34.

⁴⁰ See Streible, 7.

⁴¹ Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 1-2.

the USS Maine.⁴² As a mediated experience removed from reality, the new medium allowed violent masculinity to be experienced without the corporeality of real violence.

This vicarious experience of masculine violence suggests a paradox in the relationship between production and reception. The search for premodern forms of masculinity, through representations/reenactments of masculine activity, demonstrates a resistance to the perceived feminization of modern life. Kaplan describes U.S. imperialism as a double discourse, which involves the recovery of masculinity denied by the modernizing forces at home, resulting in both disembodied territorial power and embodied masculinity.⁴³ The recuperation of masculinity is not performed through battle itself but in the representational form of theatrical visual spectacles for domestic audiences, “a double dynamic of recovering the primitive and staging it as a high-tech spectacle.”⁴⁴ Boxing is an obvious example, but forms of masculine spectacle were prevalent throughout media culture around the turn of the twentieth century. Roosevelt epitomized this theatrical spectacle of masculinity in his Spanish-American war reconstructions, his affinity for appearing in actualities throughout the first decade of the twentieth century, as well as frequent appearances in travelogues like *Roosevelt in Africa* (Pathé, 1910). In *Big Game Hunting in Africa* (Selig, 1909), an actor plays Roosevelt while local Chicagoan African Americans play Africans. A contemporaneous report noted that the studio staging happened *before* Roosevelt visited Mombasa, and they actually

⁴² See Kaplan, 159.

⁴³ Kaplan, 97.

⁴⁴ Kaplan, 99.

killed a real lion named Leo.⁴⁵ Selig's Chicago studio, which later relocated to California, contained a large stable where animals were kept, trained and used in films. The film serves as a representation of Roosevelt's intended goals in Africa through the form of a theatrically staged pre-enactment.

An interesting counterpoint is Edwin S. Porter's 1901 film *Terrible Teddy, the Grizzly King*, produced under Edison, a reflexive satirical commentary on Roosevelt's affinity for the camera. A buffoonish actor playing Roosevelt shoots and stabs a small animal, all while a newspaper photographer follows wearing a sign around his neck that reads "My Photographer," along with another man wearing a sign that reads "My Press Agent." Louis Pizzitola suggests that a satirical cartoon published in Hearst's *New York Journal* on February 4, 1901 influenced the film, but I am unable to confirm this.⁴⁶ The original Edison catalog describes the film as a burlesque, and Niver's catalog lists the film under comedies. The former account assumes the animal to be a cat, mocking Roosevelt's recent expedition in Colorado hunting mountain lions, while Niver describes the animal as a small cub. It is difficult to discern, but in either case the message is clear: Teddy is in fact terrible at hunting, and the designation of "Grizzly King" is facetious. The film demonstrates the absurdity of Roosevelt's assertion of masculine strenuousness through visual spectacle. It is an antimodern perspective that challenges Roosevelt's

⁴⁵ Quoted in Kalton C. Lahue, *Motion Picture Pioneer: The Selig Polyscope Company* (South Brunswick and New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1973), 51-52.

⁴⁶ Louis Pizzitola, *Hearst Over Hollywood: Power, Passion, and Propaganda in the Movies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 86-87. Pizzitola's study contains no references, and while the Library of Congress does hold an extensive archive of *New York Journal* publications, I cannot find anything from this date.

progressive ideology. Like *Execution of Czolgosz*, *Terrible Teddy* reconstructs a real recent event to paradoxically critique violence through the visual spectacle of violence. While *Terrible Teddy* seems fictional, one can imagine audiences laughing and ultimately celebrating the death of the animal at the hands of the Roosevelt stand-in. The film demonstrates that early motion picture producers catered to an audience that may have found humor in the satirical representation of Rooseveltian hyper-masculinity.

The satire in *Terrible Teddy* points to a broader cultural ambivalence regarding masculinity and femininity in an increasingly modernizing world. Lynne Kirby asserts that the context of reception for early motion pictures did not result in a conspicuously feminized spectator, but rather one whose gender and sexuality are thrown into question: “we might instead consider the early film spectator as ‘undone,’ uncoded, a subject whose sexual orientation vis-à-vis spectatorship is broken down, put into crisis, and thus hystericized.”⁴⁷ It is therefore not surprising that masculinized, violent content like lynching, boxing, and war pictures were prevalent in the films produced throughout the medium’s first decade, as a way to shore up existing gender norms. And it is also noteworthy that such content was more frequently reconstructed than other subject matter, as a more heavily narrativized and aestheticized form of discourse than actualities. Hansen describes the paradoxical relationship between production and reception as it pertains to gender stereotypes. By juxtaposing the connotative associations of “Babel” and “Babylon,” Hansen underscores the tension “between the cinema’s role as

⁴⁷ Lynne Kirby, *Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and Silent Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 72.

a universalizing, ideological idiom and its redemptive possibilities as an inclusive, heterogeneous, and at times unpredictable horizon of experience.”⁴⁸ Early cinema’s interest in boxing and war exemplifies this tension. Often these films seem to wholeheartedly subscribe to universalized ideologies. But it is important to also be mindful of the obfuscated boundaries between genuine violence, as portrayed in authentic boxing matches or battle scenes, and burlesque, satire, and comedy. The latter is rather obvious in highly fictionalized films like *Terrible Teddy*, but traces of burlesque can also be found in the semi-fictional reenactments of boxing matches and battle scenes. These activities would have been more closely associated with playful amusement for a modern audience rather than the poignant horrors of genuine violence.

Another emphatic example of the cultural overlap between boxing and war is present in the 1900 Warwick film *A Prize Fight or Glove Fight Between John Bull and President Kruger*, which the British national archive catalog described as follows: “A political pantomime on the Boer War in the form of a boxing match between John Bull and President Kruger. The seconds for Kruger are France and Russia. For John Bull, Uncle Sam.”⁴⁹ The sport of boxing was therefore easily conflated with theatrical comedy and parody. Like boxing pictures, war reenactments served to reify ideologies associated with primitive masculinity while also performing a role as sensationalized entertainment—much like humbug, burlesque, and magic—for a modern audience.

⁴⁸ Hansen, 19.

⁴⁹ National Film Archive (Great Britain), *National Film Archives Catalogue, Part II: Silent Non-Fiction Films, 1895-1934* (London: British Film Institute, 1960), 27.

The Spanish-American War

The sinking of the USS Maine in Havana Harbor on February 15, 1898 led to the intervention of the United States military against the Spanish colonists in Cuba. The Spanish-American War began in April 1898. The United States won the war as early as August of the same year. The sensational press's reports insisted the Spanish were involved in the sinking, which mobilized support for military intervention. But opposition was also widespread. The first meeting of the Anti-Imperialist League occurred at Faneuil Hall in Boston on June 15, 1898. League members blamed republicans for the war and claimed that newspapers were allied with capitalists. They argued that, by following the business model of aggregating capital, institutions of journalism were equally interested in the exploitation of new territories, and the notion that the Spanish had a hand in the destruction of the Maine was a delusion.⁵⁰ Their ire was justifiable. A 1911 investigation discovered that the sinking of the Maine was likely the result of an internal combustion explosion rather than an act of war.

The war inaugurated a transition in the history of cinema by which reenactments became a more prevalent formula among most early motion picture producers' repertoires. On the one hand, reconstructing war scenes was often a necessity due to a variety of technological and logistical restrictions. On the other hand, producers may have realized that audiences were just as likely to patronize reconstructed war scenes as authentic battlefield actualities, and the former were easier, cheaper, and safer to produce.

⁵⁰ See Erving Winslow, "The Anti-Imperialist Faith," *The North American Review* 175, no. 553 (December 1902): 811-818.

Biograph cinematographer Billy Bitzer shot authentic footage in Cuba, which was just as well-received as the fakes put out by Biograph and Edison prior to Bitzer's return.⁵¹ In his autobiography, Bitzer discusses the logistical hurdles he faced during his time in Cuba:

Divers were at work recovering bodies—at one end Spanish divers, and at the other Americans. I knew it would be impossible for me, with my bulky camera, to get pictures that would tell the true story, but our boys with still cameras did such admirable work that today in the photo section of the Library of Congress you are able to see it for yourself. All I got was moving pictures of the *Maine* as seen from the shore... Without means of transportation to follow the troops, I returned to my towboat, where we stationed ourselves, taking pictures each morning as the battleships in Havana harbor fired on the sand batteries about Morro Castle. Through binoculars we could see the clouds of sand and what seemed to be bodies of men and fragments of guns flying in the air toward us. At this point we were ordered out to sea, with threats of arrest if we came in line of the battleship fire again. We stationed ourselves three miles out, in international waters, awaiting a reprieve. I was relieved by this, remembering a near-miss shell that struck the water just a little in front of us and ricocheted over my head. I had pulled the focusing cloth I was using just a little further over my head, like a damn fool, but continued grinding out the action nevertheless.⁵²

The position of danger described by Bitzer was very real and, to a large extent, determined how motion pictures of war would be photographed; from a distance, with the photographer out of harm's way, or staged in some manner.

A majority of Biograph's Spanish-American War films were staged, though most were performed at exterior locations, not in a studio. One picture produced at Biograph's New York studio, *A Duel to the Death* (1898), was an outlier. An American swordsman dueled a Spaniard aboard a naval vessel. Based solely on the original catalog description,

⁵¹ See Pizzitola, 62.

⁵² G.W. Bitzer, *Billy Bitzer: His Story* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1973), 34-35.

as the film is non-extant, while set amid a real historical event, the performance style and mise-en-scène were distinguishable from the exterior reenactments of other films. At least one Biograph film was staged on location abroad. *A Landing Fight* (Biograph, 1898), non-extant, was described in the original catalog as an “imaginary enemy” firing upon a scene of troops landing in Cuba. The film was reconstructed at the location where battle either actually took place, was imagined to have taken place, or was speculated to potentially take place in the near future, using real soldiers on the warfront. This is probably the same film as *Landing of U.S. Troops Near Santiago* (Biograph), shot in 1898 but not copyrighted until 1902. Niver’s description in the Library of Congress catalog considers the film’s verisimilitude questionable and in all likelihood a reproduction.⁵³ Biograph also staged a slew of battle scenes in domestic military settings. *Behind the Firing Line*, *Charge by Rushes*, *In the Trenches*, *The Last Stand*, and *The Defence of the Flag*, all non-extant, were filmed at Camp Meade, Pennsylvania in 1898. The original Biograph catalog does not indicate whether these films were a series of drills performed in preparation for war or if they were reenacted performances of battles concurrently occurring in Cuba. Either possibility is conceivable. It is also worth considering that they may have been actualities of military drills producers and exhibitors recontextualized to appear as either authentic or staged battle scenes. *Behind the Firing Line* is detailed in the original catalog as “men fire a volley and charge upon the enemy’s intrenchments [*sic*],” and *Charge by Rushes* as a film “showing the method adopted by

⁵³ Niver, *Motion Pictures From the Library of Congress Paper Print Collection, 1894-1912*, 250, 335.

United States troops in the assault upon San Juan Hill.” The latter description demonstrates a certain degree of transparency on the part of Biograph, the assumption being that this was a performative exercise, though exhibitors were not beholden to disclose this to audiences.

It is worth reiterating here that I am focusing my analysis on films that specifically represent some form of battle. Many war scenes involve non-battle activities. The “cavalry charge” subgenre, which represents a pseudo-battle activity of sorts, is difficult to categorize as either battle or non-battle activity and therefore warrants some attention. In cavalry charges, the enemy is presumed to be off-screen, and the focus is exclusively on one group, typically Americans. These films do not explicitly represent battle but assume it is about to commence, though savvy viewers may have considered the possibility that these were merely drills performed for the camera. Battle scenes more frequently involve both sides. The one-sidedness of the cavalry charge produces more of an ideological focus on the hero(es), while two-sided battle scenes provide entertaining theatrical spectacles. Both are essentially narrative forms. Biograph described *A Cavalry Charge* (Biograph, 1898) as a reconstructed cavalry charge of “Rough Riders” filmed in Tampa, Florida. This is likely the same film as *Roosevelt’s Rough Riders* (Biograph), copyrighted several years later in 1903 and currently extant in the Library of Congress archive. Troops charge forward toward the camera then off-screen. The emphasis is clearly on the visual spectacle of a mass cavalry charge and its visceral evocation through elongated fast motion—once the cavalry veers to the left it takes several seconds for the entire troop to clear the frame—and proximity to the viewer. *President Roosevelt and the*



Figure 3.1: *Roosevelt's Rough Riders* (Biograph, 1903)

Rough Riders (Biograph) was also filmed during the war in 1898 but not copyrighted until 1903. In this film, shot at Camp Wikoff in Montauk, Long Island, Roosevelt and several troops on horses gallop toward camera, dismount, then walk off-screen. It is more transparently classifiable as a military drill, not a potential prelude to battle. Depicting Roosevelt front and center demonstrates his proclivity for celebrity, while also emphasizing the visual spectacle of this graceful activity in motion amid a rural landscape. This visual trope would become iconic in American cinema of the 1910s, first by cowboy heroes in westerns then the Ku Klux Klan in *The Birth of a Nation* (Griffith, 1915), albeit for different, though related, political purposes. They all function similarly, to evoke a sense of premodern heroism to a modern audience. It is also interesting that Biograph included “President” in the copyrighted title as Roosevelt was not the president

in 1898. In 1903 this would have served to recapitulate the Commander in Chief's bravery in past military conflicts. What is important to underscore here is the fact that these films avoid depicting explicit violence. Emphasis is placed on the visual attraction of motion pictures and the patriotic idealism that rugged White male figures on horseback represent. The notion of reenacting the past for ideological, not authentic, purposes, is fundamentally Rooseveltian. During his tenure as President, Roosevelt's policies regarding western land preservation functioned as a way for tourists to experience "the frontier's ideological essence," its historical value, not to actually participate in authentic frontier experiences like hunting.⁵⁴

The perspective early war films present is almost always one-sided. The victor's triumph is underscored more so than the violence imposed on the opposition, which is often not seen at all. This ideological focus may have influenced the predominance of staged battle scenes. The action that was sought, seeing only the heroic protagonists, could easily be restaged because it only required American actors. It is, however, worth considering how a lack of developed aesthetic formulas necessitated one view only. The concept of shot/reverse shot was not yet established. And it does appear that Biograph may have attempted to provide something like a reverse shot (opposition perspective) with the non-extant *The Last Stand*. Here a group of soldiers are defeated "defending the flag against an imaginary onslaught."⁵⁵ The Biograph catalog does not specify whether these are American or Spanish soldiers, but it is difficult to imagine a film from this

⁵⁴ Slotkin, 56.

⁵⁵ Niver, *Motion Pictures From the Library of Congress Paper Print Collection, 1894-1912*, 250, 335.

period representing the defeat of American soldiers, particularly since the United States won the Spanish-American War so quickly. Perhaps this was an attempt to represent the reverse shot of Spaniards dying at the hands of American (and potentially Cuban) soldiers, for exhibitors to program this with films representing the heroes, such as the Camp Meade reconstructions, narrating both the United States's victory and the Spanish defeat.

While Selig produced few war films, which all appear to be non-extant, the titles they did produce also seem to focus exclusively on one side. Films like *Battery Charge* (Selig, 1898) and *Charge at Las Guasimas* (Selig, 1898) are described in the Selig catalog in a manner similar to that of the aforementioned cavalry pictures. These films similarly helped establish a cinematic formula, later associated with fictional narratives, in which the focus is primarily on the protagonist. Indeed, the canonical approach to instructing screenwriting in film school is to focus as exclusively as possible on the protagonist's point of view.⁵⁶ This is certainly the case throughout the history of Hollywood war pictures and westerns, with the persistence of stereotypical White male heroes. The Other, whether foreign in the war picture or domestic (but perceived as foreign) in the western, is deemphasized, and thus dehumanized, through shorter screen time and less character development.

It is also worth noting the presence of the flag as an ideological symbol in *The Last Stand*. National flag symbolism recurred so frequently that a subgenre of "flag

⁵⁶ See Blake Snyder, *Save the Cat! The Last Book on Screenwriting You'll Ever Need* (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2005), 47.

films” established itself during the Spanish-American war. Films such as *Tearing Down the Spanish Flag* (Vitagraph, 1898), *Raising Old Glory Over Morro Castle* (Edison, 1899), *Old Glory and Cuban Flag* (Edison, 1898), and *What Our Boys did at Manila* (Biograph), the latter representing this conflict’s extension to the Spanish-controlled Philippines, rather blatantly promote the ideological symbolism associated with a particular flag through its close-up. *Old Glory and Cuban Flag* demonstrates a nascent form of stop motion photography as a Cuban flag replaces an American flag, thus narrativizing Cuban freedom through American intervention. Flags are also featured in many battle reenactments. For example, in the Camp Meade reconstruction *The Defence of the Flag*, the dénouement involves the soldiers “planting their flag on the crest of a hill.” It almost seems too obvious to assume that exhibitors would have easily made the decision to program battle reenactments with flag films.

J. Stuart Blackton and Albert E. Smith of Vitagraph claimed to have gone to Cuba but retrieved no usable footage. Smith recalls being forced to produce a re-creation, in their studio at 140 Nassau Street in New York, of the sea battle in Cuba after he pompously told reporters that they shot live footage abroad, which they had not.⁵⁷ Smith may have lied to the press for financial reasons. Vitagraph was not economically successful at the time. Pizzitola claims they were transparent about the fabrication made in their studio with a tub, paper cutouts for boats, a painted background, and cigar smoke to mimic canon fire.⁵⁸ Smith recalled this later in his autobiography, written in the 1950s,

⁵⁷ Albert E. Smith, *Two Reels and a Crank* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1952), 65-66.

⁵⁸ Pizzitola, 67.

but I have found no other contemporaneous evidence to indicate that Vitagraph did not intend to fool audiences, and it is unclear what sources Pizzitola is drawing from to make this claim. The resulting film, *Battle of Santiago Bay* (1898), was used interchangeably as *The Battle of Manila* (1898) since exhibitors, perhaps taking their lead from Smith's insincerities with the press, could get away with this dual function. According to Bottomore, audiences predominantly perceived the film as real.⁵⁹ Smith also mentions a thirty-minute compilation of war actualities titled *Fighting With Our Boys in Cuba*.⁶⁰ Historians have continually debated the veracity of these pictures, or whether Smith and Blackton even travelled to Cuba. Bottomore is doubtful. Ultimately, I have to assume that none of Smith's assertions, whether contemporaneous or made retrospectively in his 1952 autobiography, can be substantiated. They do nevertheless illustrate interesting aspects about American culture during this period. For example, in his ostensible recollections of filming in Cuba, Smith notes that Roosevelt was very receptive to being filmed and even struck a pose for the camera as he marched up San Juan Hill.⁶¹ While this may not be true—though it is certainly conceivable that Roosevelt, showman that he was, did in fact do this—it at least demonstrates how Roosevelt might have been perceived in the cultural imagination of many Americans such as Smith.

Throughout the motion picture industry's first two decades, there existed very little professional collegiality and integrity between production companies. Edison distributed numerous war films during this period, many of which were simply copied

⁵⁹ Bottomore, "Filming, Faking and Propaganda," ch. 6 p. 10.

⁶⁰ Albert E. Smith, 68.

⁶¹ Smith, 148.

from other producers and re-distributed under the Edison brand. *Battle of San Juan Hill*, originally produced by Edward H. Amet in 1898, was perhaps the most re-distributed war film. Amet was a noteworthy pioneer of early cinema but did not remain active after 1900. *Bombardment of Matanzas*, *Firing Broadsides at Cabanas*, and *Dynamite Cruiser Vesuvius in Action* were all screened together in an exhibition marketed as the “War Electroscope.”⁶² Edison redistributed *Battle of San Juan Hill* in 1899. Lubin and Selig followed suit, though the Lubin catalog noted it as “copyrighted.”⁶³ At a time when legally copyrighting films did not exist, this seems like an informal attempt to demarcate the film as not an original Lubin production. Edison’s *Sailors Landing Under Fire* (1898) might be a copy of a Biograph reconstruction at Camp Meade, which Selig also potentially redistributed under the same name. *A Great Picture* (Edison, 1898) claims to be the first authentic recording from Cuba. It is described in the Edison catalog as showing Cubans firing at Spaniards with a “Dynamite Cannon,” which sounds strikingly similar to the Lubin film *Brave Cubans Firing at the Spanish Soldiers with a Dynamite Canon* (1898).⁶⁴ It is fair to assume that many, or all, of Edison’s non-extant films were copied from other production companies, which is perhaps why the Library of Congress’s Paper Print Collection never archived them along with the majority of Edison films. Edison’s extant Spanish-American War films were, in all likelihood, original Edison productions, the majority of which were staged. One possible exception is *U.S. Troops*

⁶² “Peckville,” *Scranton Tribune* (Scranton, PA), January 26, 1899, 9.

⁶³ Charles Musser, *Motion Picture Catalogs by American Producers and Distributors, 1894-1908* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1984-1985), Microform.

⁶⁴ Musser.

Landing at Daiquiri, Cuba (Edison, 1898), presumed to be authentically shot in Daiquiri. This may be true, and the film is visually convincing, but how can we really know? With no additional actuality footage, it seems safer to assume that Edison's cinematographers never travelled abroad during this conflict.

In *Cuban Ambush* (Edison, 1898), a group of Cuban soldiers, hiding in an abandoned building, launch a surprise attack on a group of Spanish soldiers. It is unclear who wins the ensuing battle, and after a few shots are fired back and forth, both sides simply stop fighting, demonstrating a lack of verisimilitude. Bottomore notes that most of Edison's films were reenacted with members of the New Jersey National Guard costumed as American soldiers, while African Americans played the Spaniards, though *Cuban Ambush* is one of the few examples in which Spanish or Cuban soldiers are depicted at all.⁶⁵ The Spanish are synonymized with all dark-skinned individuals. This racial generalizing was common and would ultimately become a paradigm in Hollywood representations. While the location appears to be an authentic exterior, it was most likely filmed in an abandoned building in New Jersey. If the scene were in fact real, the Spanish would have caught on to the sneak attack before it happened, seeing an Edison camera crew nearby. Some viewers probably considered this logistical inconsistency and assumed the picture to be a fictional representation. It is also unique that we see both sides fighting in one scene. This is distinguishable from one-sided cavalry charge scenes and may have consequently encouraged viewers to regard the film as staged. With no clearly established formulas consistently employed by motion picture producers, fiction

⁶⁵ Bottomore, "Filming, Faking and Propaganda," ch. 6 p. 7.



Figure 3.2: *U.S. Infantry Supported by Rough Riders at El Caney* (Edison, 1899)

and nonfiction conflated and diverged in a variety of ambivalent ways, ultimately influencing both forms in subsequent decades.

Other Edison-produced extant Spanish-American War films are more aligned with the cavalry charge aesthetic seen in Biograph's Camp Meade reenactments. *Skirmish of Rough Riders* (Edison, 1899) and *U.S. Infantry Supported by Rough Riders at El Caney* (Edison, 1899) are similar in terms of plot—both depict Rough Riders charging past the camera and off into the presumed battle location—with visual emphasis on a Rough Rider toting an oversized American flag, possibly the same flag in both films. The flag's size tends to upstage the action. Visual spectacle is important, but the ideological narrative is foregrounded. *U.S. Infantry Supported by Rough Riders at El Caney* is a more elaborate film. The current print produces an elliptical edit, which is probably the result

of poor quality, in between two nearly identical scenes. The action is doubled to show more Rough Riders supporting the U.S. Infantry. It is possible that this is the same film as Lubin's *Charge of the Rough Riders at El Caney*, produced one year earlier. Niver cataloged these films as reproductions, and it seems somewhat obvious that the settings appear more like New Jersey than Cuba (of course, inaccurate settings continue to fool movie audiences today). Both pictures were copyrighted in 1899, which might indicate that they weren't filmed until after the war. But audiences likely accepted their veracity, as stylistically similar to the fly-on-the-wall aesthetic of actualities, more so than the theatricality of fake violence seen in films like *Cuban Ambush*. At least one contemporaneous reporter assumed *Charge of the Rough Riders at El Caney* to be "a picture taken at great risk of life."⁶⁶ The film also perpetuates the narrative that Roosevelt's Rough Riders were superior to the regular U.S. Infantry as the former supports the latter. This narrative also assumes a racial dichotomy. The purportedly more skilled, and all White, Rough Riders could be distinguished from the racially mixed regular infantry.⁶⁷

Edison performed showmanship in a slightly different, and arguably less ethical, manner than Smith and Blackton. Smith and Blackton sensationalized the truth. Edison ripped off other producers. The term "dupe" comes to mind, which would later become an industry term associated with the practice of copying, or duplicating, a film, but it also more popularly denotes fooling someone. Although Lubin and Selig participated in

⁶⁶ "Leaving Jerusalem," *Idaho County Freepress* (Idaho County, ID), April 17, 1902, 1.

⁶⁷ See Slotkin, 105.

similar acts, Edison probably started the trend and was the most egregious abuser of the lack of motion picture copyright laws. His ambitions toward monopolization would become more obvious over the course of the following decade. It would be a bit of a generalization to assume that the goal of all motion picture producers at this time was to fool audiences. Production catalogs generally alluded to reproductions. And Smith and Blackton lying to the press may be an outlier. Such generalizations disregard the power of exhibitors, who were the ultimate showmen. Audiences consumed these films in the context of the exhibition site first and foremost. Many showmen, such as Lyman H. Howe, mixed staged scenes with authentic war footage, which likely led to the believability of the fakes. There is evidence to support that at least some reporters assumed all to be real because of this conflation.⁶⁸ Press reports and other forms of motion picture advertising would have also provided a framework for viewership. It is likely that the general audience did not read any original production company catalogs, which were intended for exhibitors purchasing films.

All of Lubin's Spanish-American War films are non-extant, though Lubin could have originally produced some existing Edison films. This is a shame because, based on their catalog descriptions, they were quite possibly the most unique reenactments of the Spanish-American War. For example, *After the Battle* (Lubin, 1898) may have been the first film to represent Red Cross workers tending to wounded soldiers after a battle, a subgenre of war pictures that would become popular during subsequent global conflicts.

⁶⁸ See Slotkin. Also see Bottomore, "Filming, Faking and Propaganda," ch. 6 p. 13-14. Bottomore notes that one reporter assumed that Amet had used a telephoto lens to capture a real battle from a distance, when in fact all of Amet's war films were fake.

Edison's non-extant *Red Cross at the Front* (Edison, 1898) was probably a copy of this film. Lubin's war films also more consistently focused on two-sided battle. Descriptions for *Capture of a Spanish Fort Near Santiago* (Lubin, 1898), *Repulse of Spanish Troops at Santiago by the American Forces* (Lubin, 1898), and *Spanish Infantry Attacking American Soldiers in Camp* (Lubin, 1898) indicate that these films showed both sides fighting in the same scene. One outlier, *American Cavalry Charging with Drawn Sabres* (Lubin, 1898), is advertised in the Lubin catalog as a "rare" view of a cavalry charge.⁶⁹ Such a formula was certainly not rare, but it may be an indication that Lubin did not consider cavalry charges as a prevalent part of *their* work. The films depicting actual battles were probably similar to *Cuban Ambush*, and like that film, the verisimilitude of the reconstructed acts was probably less believable than cavalry charges and their actuality-like aesthetics. In this light, it is worth considering the possibility that Lubin was less invested in fooling audiences and more interested in providing entertaining pictures. Moreover, this might suggest that Lubin was less invested in outwardly supporting the American war effort. It is, however, difficult to fully substantiate this speculation. After all, these films depict American victories for American audiences. Even in *Spanish Infantry Attacking American Soldiers in Camp* the Americans are surprisingly ambushed but ultimately win. I would like to make a broad assertion that motion picture producers were primarily interested in sincerely searching for authenticity through the new medium and did not necessarily intend war reenactments to be viewed as

⁶⁹ Musser, *Motion Picture Catalogs*.

humbug, burlesque, or comedy. More specifically, these films asserted American exceptionalism, as rooted in premodern forms of violence, as reality.

American exceptionalism as realism was not necessarily an approach that filmmakers abroad took in representing the events surrounding the Spanish-American War. Gaumont produced *Explosion of the Merrimac* (1898) and *An Incident in the Spanish-American War* (1898). Interestingly, both films depict Spanish victories.⁷⁰ Georges Méliès also produced at least two films, the non-extant *The Blowing Up of the "Maine" in Havana Harbour* (Star, 1898) and the extant *Divers at Work on the Wreck of the Maine* (Star, 1898), the latter of which is conspicuously fake, with a highly fabricated set design, as one might expect from a Méliès production.

Approaching the twentieth century, representations of war became increasingly fictionalized while not necessarily jettisoning realism altogether. *Love and War* (Edison, 1899) is an interesting example of a current event reconstruction that is more conspicuously fictional. The film originally had six scenes according to the Edison catalog, a remarkable editorial feat for 1899, though only four survive. In the opening scene, we see a soldier leaving home to go to war. Next is the battle reenactment where our hero is wounded. The theatricality of this formula permits a more realistic two-sided battle to be enacted. The final scenes show the wounded soldier's arrival at a Red Cross tent, concluding with his return home where he introduces his new spouse, a Red Cross nurse. The normativity of gender roles—masculine war hero, compassionate feminine caretaker—and patriarchal family life would become standard Hollywood tropes. A

⁷⁰ See Bottomore, ch. 6 p. 6 for descriptions.

similar narrative occurs in Biograph's *The American Soldier in Love and War* (1903), set in the Philippines. By 1903 fiction had become a more established formula, and actualities were less common. In 1899 films like *Love and War* often relied more on actuality-like aesthetics. Kaplan observes that the second scene in *The American Soldier in Love and War* is an earlier Biograph actuality of men embarking for Cuba from Governor's Island.⁷¹ To some extent, attempting to capture the reality of war motivated the nascent medium to become more fictional than nonfictional. Cameraman Robert Pitard noted that staged films "probably gave a better idea of an engagement than could have been obtained from photos taken during an actual battle."⁷² The goal was to reconstruct real events in order to authentically capture the experiences of real soldiers. Part of this authenticity involved over-sensationalized actions in the vein of Victorian melodrama; for example, dramatically throwing one's hands in the air at the moment of death. To contemporary viewers, this might seem like blatant acting, but according to Bottomore, this may have been a conventional way to die and therefore would have appeared authentic to many viewers. Indeed, in my own research I have found evidence to support the possibility that soldiers took pride in falling and may have exaggerated the action.⁷³ In a circularity of cultural (re)production, soldiers may have performed their deaths based on assumptions from cultural products; in the case of this war, primarily illustrated and theatrical representations, though in later wars this would have been based more on motion picture reconstructions. These reconstructions ultimately formulated the

⁷¹ Kaplan, 156.

⁷² Quoted in Bottomore, ch. 6 p. 8.

⁷³ "Of Fighting Blood," *Denison Review* (Denison, IA), February 3, 1899.

reality of these events as perceived in the cultural memory. The audience can interpret them as associated with reality and to some extent determine how that reality is narrativized in their memory. The same is true today of media that represent real events, whether we consider them documentary (or some other form of nonfiction) or historical fiction. In the case of Spanish-American War films, the value of imperialistic conquest, through premodern forms of reality, became modern reality.

Roosevelt personified the imperial conquests of the United States around the turn of the twentieth century. In *The Strenuous Life*, he proposes the value of expansion as a means toward peace. A variety of United States leaders throughout the past century have subscribed to this ideology; for example, the Bush administration post-9/11. Its inherent contradictions point to the many paradoxes of modernity. According to Roosevelt,

On the border between civilization and barbarism war is generally normal because it must be under the conditions of barbarism. Whether the barbarian be the Red Indian on the frontier of the United States, the Afghan on the border of British India, or the Turkoman who confronts the Siberian Cossack, the result is the same. In the long run civilized man finds he can keep the peace only by subduing his barbarian neighbor; for the barbarian will yield only to force, save in instances so exceptional that they may be disregarded... It is only the warlike power of a civilized people that can give peace to the world.⁷⁴

Through this logic, civilization and modernity can only be sought through premodern forms of violence. Aimé Césaire associates this backwardness with the psychology of colonialism: “the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as *an animal*, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform *himself* into an animal,” resulting in what he refers to as a

⁷⁴ Theodore Roosevelt, “Expansion and Peace,” in *The Strenuous Life* (St. Clair Shores, MI: Scholarly Press, 1970, originally published, 1899), 31, 37.

“boomerang effect of colonization.”⁷⁵ Transforming the Other into an animal—concomitantly, and unknowingly, transforming oneself into an animal—motivated imperial conquests by Western powers, particularly the United States, as the world transitioned into the twentieth century, and motion pictures played an integral role in promulgating this reality.

The Philippine-American War

The United States was at war with the Spanish-controlled Philippines in 1898, and at least three films produced during this year were set amid this conflict. *What Our Boys did at Manila* (Biograph, 1898), aforementioned, is one of several flag films, and Vitagraph’s *The Battle of Manila* (1898) is the same film as *Battle of Santiago Bay* (1898), produced in a bathtub at Vitagraph’s New York City studio. Not only was the film reconstructed to appear set in Cuba, but it was further recontextualized as set in Manila (or vice versa) through a simple name change. Selig’s *Infantry Charge* was also produced in 1898. The original catalog described American soldiers charging out of frame then returning after the battle is won. Like the cavalry charge formula, battle was presumed, not seen, with an unambiguous resolution; the Americans definitively won. These films demonstrate how American intervention in the Philippines prior to the Philippine-American War was of popular interest. It may also demonstrate that some audiences conflated these two conflicts, the latter perceived as a continuation of the former. No doubt one was the result

⁷⁵ Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (Paris: Editions Présence Africaine, 1955. Translated by Joan Pinkham. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 41.

of the other. But it is important to distinguish the Philippine-American War (1899-1902) as one in which the enemy was not another colonial power, like Spain, but a subjugated group attempting to resist colonization through the establishment of their own government. American intervention served to exploit this weakness and re-colonize the Philippines. Motion picture reenactments of the Philippine-American War reinforced the ideological position that American intervention was justified, through visual spectacles that were more violent than the films of the Spanish-American War, while also reasserting pre-existing forms of racism.

At the conclusion of the Spanish-American War, the Treaty of Paris (1898) granted the Spanish colonies of Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines to the United States. A group of native Philippine nationalists, known as the First Philippine Republic, had been revolting against Spanish colonists since 1896 and continued their resistance against the United States after the Treaty of Paris. Most historians agree that the United States instigated the Battle of Manila, which inaugurated the Philippine-American War in February of 1899, despite Philippine President Emilio Aguinaldo's attempts to broker a ceasefire. But many Philippines welcomed American rule as opposed to Spanish rule. Apolinario Mabini, Aguinaldo's Prime Minister, resigned his position to pave way for a peaceful solution with the United States.⁷⁶ Negotiations between the United States and Mabini, seeking a ceasefire and armistice agreement, ultimately failed. The United States did not necessarily want to peacefully come to terms with, and aid, the Philippines. It

⁷⁶ See Apolinario Mabini, "A Filipino Appeal to the People of the United States," *The North American Review* 170, no. 518 (January 1900): 60.

seems instead that they were bent on going to war at all costs, not necessarily ruling the Philippines but exploiting their location and resources.

The Philippine Islands were an important geographical location for imperial conquest. With Japan covering most of northern Asia, the Philippines were perceived as central for controlling the southern Far East, and many of the steamers heading east from the Suez and Cape Town routes stopped in Manila.⁷⁷ Control over the Philippines would allow the United States to gain easy access to the Chinese and Japanese markets. For many Americans at the time, McKinley's actions in Cuba and the Philippines were not perceived as imperialism, at least not in a negative sense, because containment of Indigenous groups, as had been done in North America, seemed necessary. This rhetoric, that American colonialism was a good thing and therefore imperialism abroad could not be wrong, helped motivate such actions. One contributor to *The North American Review* summarized a collective assumption held by many Americans at the time that the people of the Philippines "will be aided by all the powerful influences of an advanced and aggressive civilization."⁷⁸ The use of the term "aggressive civilization" is particularly noteworthy here. It is not necessarily an allusion to a compassionate, benevolent, patriarchal figure coming to the rescue. Rather, it underscores the ostensibly essential connection between violence and modernity.

⁷⁷ See Charles W. Dilke, John Barrett & Hugh H. Lusk, "The Problem of the Philippines," *The North American Review* 167, no. 502 (September 1898): 260.

⁷⁸ W.A. Pfeffer, "Imperialism America's Historic Policy," *The North American Review* 171, no. 525 (August 1900): 258.

Both sides in the conflict employed fast-moving, guerrilla style warfare. This made it difficult for cameras to keep up with the action on the ground. As forms of longer-range warfare became more dominant throughout the early twentieth century, beginning with the Second Boer (South African) War (1899-1902), on-location battle photography was more frequent. Motion picture representations of the conflict in the Philippines, however, were almost always reconstructed as camera crews could not safely access battle zones. According to Bottomore, the Philippine-American War was particularly important in developing “the technique of ‘arranging’ scenes with troops in the war zone.”⁷⁹ Like many of the Spanish-American War films, the act of reconstruction provided a means for recontextualizing the war, a war in which the United States was the aggressor, through a propagandistic, pro-America lens. A closer examination of Philippine-American War films demonstrates that early motion picture producers took advantage of the reenactment formula’s propagandistic opportunities.

The Edison Company produced the majority of Philippine battle reenactments. In *Advance of Kansas Volunteers at Caloocan* (Edison, 1899), a group of dark-skinned actors playing Filipinos are seen in the middle-ground. They fire their guns directly toward the camera, a dead giveaway that the action is staged and also a source of visceral excitement for the spectator. We are placed in a precarious position that at first heightens our awareness of potential danger, then subsequently aligns our point of view with the American soldiers. They emerge from behind the camera, to the aid of the spectator, and seemingly fend off the enemy. One soldier is hit and emphatically falls to the ground—a

⁷⁹ Bottomore, “Filming, Faking and Propaganda,” ch. 8 p. 1.



Figure 3.3: *Advance of Kansas Volunteers at Caloocan* (Edison, 1899)



Figure 3.4: *Capture of Trenches at Candaba* (Edison, 1899)

performative act that, as previously mentioned, may not have been *that* unrealistic—while the others charge forward unharmed. This set of actions demonstrates a certain degree of realism insofar as there is at least one casualty depicted on screen, but the fact that there is only one suggests an ideological narrative of American dominance. The camera position not only interpolates the viewer into the point of view of the American side but also assumes a position in which Americans, or more specifically American audiences, are on one distinct side of a dangerous fight, rescued by the American soldiers. Audiences are encouraged to root for their saviors and concomitantly to support the American cause in the Philippines. Not only do the Americans upstage the Filipinos but also a large American flag, perhaps the same prop flag used in *Skirmish of Rough Riders* (Edison, 1899) and *U.S. Infantry Supported by Rough Riders at El Caney* (Edison, 1899), is carried by an American soldier, upstaging the entire scene.

Other Edison films of the Philippine-American War include *Capture of Trenches at Candaba* (Edison, 1899), *Colonel Funstan Swimming the Baglag*⁸⁰ *River* (Edison, 1899), *The Early Morning Attack* (Edison, 1899), *Filipinos Retreat from Trenches* (Edison, 1899), *Rout of the Filipinos* (Edison, 1899), and *U.S. Troops and Red Cross in the Trenches Before Caloocan* (Edison, 1899). It is easy to conceptualize these films being exhibited together and presented as one cohesive narrative, in the same manner as an edited scene or sequence, in a variety of potential structural permutations. The fact that Candaba is sixty kilometers north of Caloocan would not have necessarily dissuaded exhibitors from making this connection. Indeed, these films were all advertised together

⁸⁰ The original title in the catalog misspells both “Funston” and “Bagbag.”

in the Edison catalog. The programming choices would have been quite easy, and to some degree the Edison Company catalog insinuated them. *Capture of Trenches at Candaba* is similar to the scene depicted in *Advance of Kansas Volunteers at Caloocan* but taken from a side angle. It is voyeuristic, not necessarily implicating the spectator in the action, and therefore less obviously a reconstruction. Filipino soldiers retreat off-screen, abandoning their trench, as American soldiers emerge, one toting that same enlarged American flag, and take control of the trench. *U.S. Troops and Red Cross in the Trenches Before Caloocan* appears to be the same location and camera angle. In this film the Americans fire from behind the trench, and we never see their enemy. This is a rare example of a Philippine-American War film only showing one side of the battle. The cavalry charge formula established during the Spanish-American War seems to have faded rather quickly, perhaps because producers were attempting to move away from actuality aesthetics. The performance in *Filipinos Retreat from Trenches* is nearly identical to that in *Capture of Trenches at Candaba* but filmed from the opposite angle. Exhibitors could have easily interspliced these images to represent the same scene from two angles. There is, however, additional screen time in *Filipinos Retreat* after the American soldiers continue charging out of frame, suggesting that this should be programmed after the aforementioned films. The picture lingers on the aftermath for several moments as a mounted American soldier looks down on the defeated Filipinos in the trench. Several Filipinos scatter around, still alive, and the heroic figure towering over them—who triumphantly fires a gunshot in the air as the film concludes, a visual trope that would become popularized in *The Great Train Robbery* (Edison, 1903) and

subsequent westerns—will presumably capture them as prisoners of war. Although the stronger presence of actual battles increases the performative and fictional qualities of these films more so than their cavalry charge predecessors, they were nevertheless touted as historically accurate. For example, the Edison catalog describes *Rout of the Filipinos* as “A dense thicket at Caloocan showing tropical foliage and large trees.” This description alludes to popular audiences’ interest in exotic locales, which would become increasingly prevalent with travelogues in the coming years. It also demonstrates an attempt to fool exhibitors into assuming the New Jersey location to be the Philippines. It is less an example of promoting suspension of disbelief, as in Méliès’s work, than outright misinformation. There are, however, examples of transparency on the part of the Edison Company. *Colonel Funston Swimming the Baglag River* is described in the original catalog as “true to history,” assuming it to be a historical-fictional representation, not an actuality. An actor playing Colonel Frederic Funston dives from a raft carrying American soldiers and drags the raft across a river under heavy fire from the opposing side. It is a bold move, and to modern viewers might seem utterly foolish, but reports indicate that Funston did in fact perform this feat. The scene also demonstrates how this was not a long-range war. Funston’s seemingly absurd and reckless attempt to attack face-to-face under heavy fire aligns with the guerrilla style tactics of the Philippine-American War.

Funston became quite well-known for his heroic act. In an article satirically defending Funston, Mark Twain referred to this popularity as the “Funstonian boom.”⁸¹ Opposition to the war, and imperialism more generally, was common among a large percentage of Americans at the time, including Twain. Yet these films encouraged viewers to support the war. They would have appealed primarily to viewers either undecided, and perhaps bent toward supporting the war, or already set in their positive opinion of the war. At the risk of generalizing the early cinema audience, it is useful to consider, based on examining these texts, how the content and ideological underpinnings in these nascent films might have constructed a specific type of viewer, one inclined to see American imperialism as justified and patriotic. Mark Twain and other intellectuals who opposed imperialism were likely not part of this demographic.

Despite the abundance of actual battle in Edison’s Philippine-American War films, many producers maintained the one-sided representational approach seen in most Spanish-American War films. Because Biograph shot many of their films on location in the Philippines, they often resorted to staging battles without the Filipino side present. As Bottomore notes in his discussion of *The Battle of Mt. Arayat* (Biograph, 1900), “The effect on screen of such attack films was to depict the forces as active, competent and getting results. And if the enemy were nowhere in sight, the title could ‘put’ them there.”⁸² Films depicting soldiers before or after battle—for example, *25th Infantry* (Biograph, 1900) is an actuality view of troops returning from the Battle of Mount Arayat

⁸¹ Mark Twain, “A Defence of General Funston,” *The North American Review* 174, no. 546 (May 1902): 623.

⁸² Bottomore, “Filming, Faking and Propaganda,” ch. 8 p. 34.

—were more common among Biograph’s on-location work. Warwick produced several Philippine-American War films in 1901, which Bottomore suggests were probably all staged, and most involved soldiers charging toward camera.⁸³ Technological and logistical restrictions may have motivated the focus on one side (the American side). Producers could not film live battles on location and did not have access to actors in these locations. Reconstructions using real soldiers can be easily mistaken for actualities. This formula also creates a demarcating effect, whether intentional or not. American soldiers are celebrated through the spectacle of their motion on screen.

Inversely, the enemy is often viewed separately in their own distinct space. Lubin’s *Filipino War Dance* (1903), which may be a copy of a Prescott film from 1899, is a poignant example of Othering the foreign enemy. The original Lubin catalog describes the film as showing the “‘half-civilized’ and ‘unruly inhabitants’ of the Philippines who... were being subdued by ‘brave American soldier boys’.”⁸⁴ Nascent forms of ethnographic filmmaking were common during this period, perhaps most notably in Félix Regnault’s motion picture and chrono-photographic studies of Indigenous Africans.⁸⁵ Such studies generally served to exoticize the Other and empower the colonizer’s gaze. Similar films depicting Indigenous North Americans will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four, but it is important to note how racist sentiments toward these groups overlapped with racism against Filipinos. The Other was generalized in a variety of ways

⁸³ Bottomore, ch. 8 p. 15.

⁸⁴ Musser, *Motion Picture Catalogs*.

⁸⁵ See Fatima Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), particularly Chapters One and Two.

through popular entertainment. Edison used African American actors to play Spanish and Filipino soldiers. Inversely, Indigenous Filipinos were often referred to as Indians, the conquest overseas synonymized with the already conquered North American West. Buffalo Bill's Wild West even used Filipino actors to play Indigenous North Americans. At first, Filipino actors played Filipinos in Buffalo Bill's war reenactments, but audiences prone to supporting American imperialism, which comprised a large demographic of Wild West patrons, frequently booed them in support of the American war effort. Consequently, the show had them play Indigenous North Americans, which they could presumably get away with due to their non-Whiteness, a group of racial Others who were perhaps perceived as less villainous than Filipinos, a more recent antagonist of White Euro-America.⁸⁶

In comparison to films of the Spanish-American War, films of the Philippine-American War were more explicitly violent and upped the ante in terms of the new medium's possibilities as a visual attraction. Racist perspectives of the world inherently premised the impulse to entertain (cinema of attractions) through violence and attempted to cater to audiences that were likewise prone to accept racism and promote White American exceptionalism. Bottomore observes that supporters of the Philippine-American War would not have perceived these films as racist since the goal of the war was to assist the Filipinos and defeat a small percentage of rebels.⁸⁷ But the desire for violent spectacle often devolved into ideological absurdity. The fact that Filipino actors

⁸⁶ Though it is worth noting that African Americans fought in this war.

⁸⁷ Bottomore, ch. 8 p. 36.

were booed at Buffalo Bill's Wild West is an example of explicit racism and demonstrates that these audiences supported the war but only insofar as it symbolized American exceptionalism, not Filipino independence. Film reenactments would have likewise reproduced the racism already prevalent in American culture, encouraging early moviegoers to celebrate their pre-existing racist views, while also persuading others to align themselves with these views.

The South African War

Europeans discovered South Africa in the fifteenth century, just prior to the European discovery of the Western Hemisphere. It was perhaps assumed that the Dutch and English settlers would get along, as they later would in New York, but this was not the case. Dutch settlers, known as Boers, were farmers and lived distinctively non-modern lives. Britain annexed the Transvaal region in 1877. Boers soon resisted, which led to the First Boer War (1880-81). The British ultimately surrendered, but their presence in the Transvaal continued throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century. It was perceived that strength in South Africa would lead to strength in the Indian Ocean, bringing Britain closer to its colonies in India, Australia, and other potential locations in the Far East.⁸⁸ The conflict between Boers and English took place amid the presence of an Indigenous population that outnumbered both groups combined.⁸⁹ Today the war is officially known

⁸⁸ See Vladimir Holmstrom & Prince Ookhtomsky, "Great Britain on the War-Path," *The North American Review* 170, no. 518 (January 1900): 36.

⁸⁹ See James Bryce, "The Historical Causes of the Present War in South Africa," *The North American Review* 169, no. 517 (December 1899): 742.

in South Africa as the South African War, acknowledging that it affected both White and Black Africans, and many of the latter fought on both sides. Contemporaneous motion picture producers generally disregarded the involvement of Indigenous South Africans. Through reconstruction, filmmakers recontextualized the reality of South African battles in the popular consciousness, and these films demonstrate that American producers sought a different version of simulated reality, one that was relatively neutral and polysemic, not propagandistic as were British films.

The South African War marked a shift to modern, long-range warfare, and it was also a pivotal moment in the professionalization of location cinematography. Simon Popple claims it was the first “media war.”⁹⁰ Members of the armed forces, including Winston Churchill, served as newspaper correspondents.⁹¹ On-location cinematographers, working for British production companies, served a non-combative paramilitary function, accompanying troops on their journey to the battlefield while also remaining present during real battles, in some cases filming authentic action from a distance.⁹² Unfortunately, most of the footage shot on location was lost. Elizabeth Grottle Strebel concludes that Christian De Wet, who accompanied several Boer generals to England to participate in negotiations after the war, accessed many of the originally captured negatives and intentionally exposed them before they could be developed, presumably in

⁹⁰ Simon Popple, “‘Startling, Realistic, Pathetic’: The Mitchell and Kenyon Boer War Film,” in *The Lost World of Mitchell & Kenyon: Edwardian Britain on Film*, eds. Toulmin, Russell & Popple (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 150.

⁹¹ See Vanessa Toulmin, *Electric Edwardians: The Story of the Mitchell and Kenyon Collection* (London: British Film Institute, 2006), 242.

⁹² See Bottomore, “Filming, Faking and Propaganda,” ch. 9 p. 40-41.

an attempt to conceal authentic incidents of the war from the public. Additionally, a ship containing footage sank near the shores of Cape Town.⁹³ The war also inspired between forty and fifty reenacted scenes.⁹⁴ British-produced on-location reconstructions tended to support the war effort and concomitantly promote British imperialism. Unlike the aforementioned American-produced reenactments of the Spanish-American War and the Philippine-American War, which were heavily fabricated for the sake of propaganda, American-produced studio films on the South African War were strikingly neutral. By comparison with British filmmakers, American filmmakers were less outwardly critical of Boers, reflecting the pervasive ambivalence many Americans felt toward British intervention in South Africa.

Working for Biograph's British outfit, W.K.L. Dickson filmed the war on location in South Africa and documented this experience in his book, *The Biograph in Battle*. The extant films, which are actualities of real battles, include *Battle of Colenso* (1900), sold in four parts, *Battle of the Upper Tugela* (1900), and *The Boer War* (1905). Warwick's cameraman, Joseph Rosenthal, was also present in the Transvaal. *The 4.7-inch Gun in Action at the Battle of Pretoria* (Warwick, 1900) and *The 5-inch Siege Guns in Action at the Battle of Pretoria* (Warwick, 1900), both unfortunately non-extant, were authentic actualities. However, Rosenthal did occasionally stage scenes using real soldiers. In *A Skirmish With the Boers Near Kimberley* (Warwick, 1900), soldiers fight with swords,

⁹³ Elizabeth Grottle Strebel, "Imperialist Iconography of Anglo-Boer War Film Footage," in *Film Before Griffith*, ed. John F. Fell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 264.

⁹⁴ Bottomore, ch. 10 p. 1.

which was historically inaccurate, and the camera's angle would have positioned Rosenthal in the middle of the crossfire had the battle been real.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, the allusion to a real South African location near Kimberley was likely accurate, or close to accurate, since Rosenthal was present during the war.

According to Bottomore, Gaumont, R.W. Paul, and the Mitchell and Kenyon company reenacted war scenes because they could not afford to travel to South Africa.⁹⁶ Toulmin deduces that the majority of Mitchell and Kenyon's South African War films remain non-extant, so our sample remains unfortunately small.⁹⁷ The extant films produced by these three companies almost always represent Boers in a negative light. Britons commonly used the phrase "Dirty Boer" pejoratively, and Boer treachery is frequently thematized in these films. Boer characters generally wore dark colors, starkly contrasting clean-cut British soldiers in their khaki uniforms. Boers did not have an official uniform, so this representation is an example of creative costume design intended to denote a character, or group of characters, as the antagonist. Unlike the symbolism inherent in Roosevelt's rugged Rough Riders, these pictures hierarchize modern cleanliness over perceivably primitive dirtiness, suggesting that British imperialism was less steeped in antimodernism than American imperialism.

⁹⁵ See Bottomore, "Filming, Faking and Propaganda," ch. 9 p. 28.

⁹⁶ Bottomore, ch. 10 p. 1.

⁹⁷ Toulmin, 241.

James Uhlman observes that British writers often designated Boers as “primitive” and averse to modern progress.⁹⁸ This anti-Boer sentiment was not, however, consistent among British journalists. Some British newspapers favored the war while others were critical, but almost all described the British soldiers as heroes.⁹⁹ The South African War was also represented in a variety of British entertainment sites, such as circuses and music halls, which almost always supported the war effort.¹⁰⁰ British-produced reenactments of the war, which became immensely popular, particularly in the spring of 1900 as the British side was experiencing its greatest successes in South Africa, also viewed British intervention favorably. One of the earliest films representing the Boer conflict is Paul’s *Attack on a Picquet* (1899). The film is a reenactment performed at a golf course in London. A group of Boers, dressed in dark colors, ambush a group of Britons, dressed in light colors, unaware and unable to defend themselves. With the British soldiers dead, the Boers steal their belongings and flee the scene. British lack of awareness, exemplified in their susceptibility to ambush, seems to be a consistent trope. In *A Sneaky Boer* (Mitchell & Kenyon, 1900), a lone British soldier marches through an empty field then pauses to take a nap standing against his rifle. There are *two* (despite the allusion to *one* in the film’s title) sneaky Boers hiding in the background who ambush and kill the Briton. However, unlike *Attack on a Picquet*, these Boers receive their comeuppance when another British soldier emerges and attacks them both. British

⁹⁸ James Todd Uhlman, “Dispatching Anglo-Saxonism: Whiteness and the Crises of American Racial Identity in Richard Harding Davis’s Reports on the Boer War,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 19 (2020): 22.

⁹⁹ See Toulmin, 243.

¹⁰⁰ See Toulmin, 244-47.

incompetence is not necessarily the underscoring theme. Rather, it is the Boers' proclivity for fighting dirty that is punished and therefore thematically emphasized.

Shelling the Red Cross (Mitchell & Kenyon, 1900) is a somewhat different war reconstruction but nevertheless maintains a derogatory attitude toward Boers. Wounded soldiers are assisted into a Red Cross tent where a female nurse awaits them. An object enters the frame and lands near the tent, but a British soldier removes it. My guess, based to some extent on the catalog description, is that this is supposed to be cannonball fire. If so, it is not done particularly well. One can easily imagine a crew member standing off-screen tossing large rocks into the shot. Evidence suggests that British audiences were aware of these conspicuous stagings.¹⁰¹ Although the first cannon is removed, and seemingly evaded, another canon is fired into the tent and explodes. Three wounded soldiers emerge, as many as arrived earlier in the scene, and four additional soldiers, who are miraculously unharmed, tend to them. The female nurse is also injured, and the film ends with her presumed death. Pathos is attempted by drawing from cultural norms associated with gender roles on the warfront—men as soldiers and women as Red Cross caretakers—and concomitantly demonizing the Boers for not only murdering a woman but also disrupting patriarchy more generally.

The most popular reenactment of the war in South Africa was another Mitchell and Kenyon film, *The Despatch Bearer* (1900).¹⁰² Mitchell and Kenyon possessed a

¹⁰¹ See Simon Popple, "'But the Khaki-Covered Camera is the *Latest* Thing': The Boer War Cinema and Visual Culture in Britain," in *Young and Innocent?: The Cinema in Britain, 1896-1930*, ed. Higson (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), 19-20.

¹⁰² This is the original title based on the Nation Film Archive of Great Britain. However, the title *The Dispatch Bearer* was also often used.



Figure 3.5: *The Despatch Bearer* (Mitchell & Kenyon, 1900), courtesy of the British Film Institute

mobile dark room that could develop their film for exhibitors within four hours.¹⁰³ It is likely that Mitchell and Kenyon's war reconstructions became popular because of their immediacy, perhaps perceived as breaking news, albeit reenacted news, from the warfront. In *The Despatch Bearer*, three British soldiers charge up a hill (possibly the same location used in *Shelling the Red Cross*) to meet their darkly dressed opponents, who are in a stronger position. All three Britons are hit and fall to the ground melodramatically. Miraculously, the soldier positioned centrally in the frame has survived and quickly rises to his feet. A wounded Boer approaches him, pleading for his canteen of water. The Briton reluctantly obliges. But it is a trick! The Boer attacks, and as the Briton attempts to retreat, he is shot in the back. Then suddenly, one of the wounded British soldiers arises and attacks the Boer, chasing him around for several moments before

¹⁰³ See Toulmin, 14-15.

ultimately killing him. The film clearly positions the British soldiers as the protagonists. The viewer's visual perspective is literally on the side of the British. Additionally, the Boer trickster is depicted as a scoundrel who receives his comeuppance at the film's dénouement. Like more contemporary Hollywood action films, the conflict reaches a point in which all seems lost for the British side. It is almost impossible to conceptualize a way out of the protagonist's predicament, yet something unexpected occurs, a *deus ex machina* in the case of *The Despatch Bearer*, to elevate the protagonist and resolve the conflict.

Non-British producers also depicted the South African War on film. The French were overwhelmingly pro-Boer.¹⁰⁴ Yet it is unclear where French film producer Pathé stood ideologically. French film producers Lumière and Star seem to have produced no films about the war in South Africa. Bottomore suggests that Pathé may have attempted to appeal equally to French and British audiences.¹⁰⁵ While most of Pathé's films are constructed to appear neutral and objective, their body of work also includes films like *Episode During the Battle of Spion Kop* (1903), which portrays a British victory in a battle that was, in reality, one of Britain's most dramatic defeats during the war.¹⁰⁶ The more objective aesthetic might have appealed to French audiences, who would have been disinterested in the propagandistic films being imported from the U.K., and American audiences, who were often ambivalent in their opinion about the war.

¹⁰⁴ Bottomore, ch. 11 p. 18.

¹⁰⁵ Bottomore, ch. 10 pp. 24-26.

¹⁰⁶ Bottomore, ch. 10 pp. 24-26.

According to American film producer Alfred E. Smith, there was high demand for battle scenes after the Spanish-American War. Koster and Bial's even insisted "War films or none at all," which may be an exaggeration on Smith's part but nevertheless demonstrates the popularity of this subject.¹⁰⁷ Smith claims to have travelled to South Africa to film the war. In his autobiography, he is clearly prejudiced against the Boers, so his predisposition would have been to align with the British side, and this no doubt influenced the pictures he produced about this conflict. He recalls being forced to remain at a distance from the action and therefore often resorted to staging "mock skirmishes" to attain higher quality battle footage.¹⁰⁸ We have to question, since Smith was prone to fabricating the truth, whether he did in fact travel to South Africa. The only Vitagraph-produced film about this conflict that I can find records of is the non-extant *Boer War Films* (1900). As Bottomore concludes, these were probably a series of re-distributed war scenes produced by other companies.¹⁰⁹ Based on Smith's prejudice, one might infer that these films were stolen from British production companies, who naturally favored the British cause and frequently villainized Boers.

The Edison company was more ideologically neutral. In 1900 Edison reenacted scenes from the South African War in the Orange mountains of New Jersey. Aside from the aforementioned Vitagraph film, these are, to my knowledge, the only contemporaneous American-produced scenes of this war. According to Strebel, real cannons were used for authenticity (recall the dubious cannon fire in *Shelling the Red*

¹⁰⁷ Albert E. Smith, 85.

¹⁰⁸ Smith, 102.

¹⁰⁹ Bottomore, "Filming, Faking and Propaganda," ch. 10 p. 34.

Cross), and at least two actors were seriously injured.¹¹⁰ Additionally, the camera angles in these films are frequently quite far from the action, mimicking the aesthetic of war actualities. Nevertheless, though not often conspicuous, there are several inconsistencies, such as the soldiers being armed with swords, not rifles, and wearing what appear to be Union Army uniforms, unlike the ambivalent dark colors seen in British-produced films, which is doubly erroneous in its assumption that Boers even wore uniforms. This constructed inaccuracy denigrates Boer tactics. However, these films demonstrate a certain degree of support for the Boers, and in the context of Roosevelt's Rough Riders exemplifying antimodernism only two years prior, American audiences may have even celebrated representations of perceivably primitive warfare.

Uhlman argues that, although both the McKinley and Roosevelt administrations maintained a policy of neutrality that was pro-Britain, and perceived anti-British voices as a potential threat to Anglo-American social and political dominance, "many Americans of Irish, German, and Dutch descent sympathized with the Boers," viewing their socioeconomic struggles with Anglo-Americans as similar to the struggles of the Boers against British colonialism.¹¹¹ There are striking parallels between the South African War and the American Revolutionary War (1775-83) that many Americans may have considered at the time. In both cases, British colonization threatened White colonizers. The fact that Boers were fighting for the land they had claimed and farmed for themselves was frequently synonymized with the "'frontier' heritage" of the western

¹¹⁰ Strebel, 265.

¹¹¹ Uhlman, 20.

United States.¹¹² Of course, in both cases, claiming land involved colonizing Indigenous peoples. Moreover, the sympathies of American immigrants from southern and eastern Europe toward the Boers ultimately allowed these immigrant groups to demarcate themselves from non-White races, “redefining Americanness as a multiethnic whiteness.”¹¹³ The Edison company’s neutrality allowed exhibitors to cater to either pro-British or pro-Boer American audiences.

In *Charge of Boer Cavalry, No. 1 & 2* (Edison, 1900), images of Boer cavalymen on horseback charge toward the camera. The Edison catalog suggests that “the audience involuntarily make an effort to move from their seats in order to avoid being trampled under the horses.”¹¹⁴ While the political message may be somewhat ambiguous, the film was clearly intended to be a visual attraction. But it also recalls the visual trope Rough Riders represented in earlier films. The Boers are therefore aggrandized to some extent, a far different portrayal than their trickster counterparts in British-produced films. In this light, the inaccuracy of the Union Army uniforms may have been an intentional strategy for synonymizing Boers and Americans. It also recalls, and romanticizes, a premodern moment in the history of the United States. The uniforms and the use of swords might function as a form of resistance to modern warfare, which in turn supports the Boer cause.

In *Battle of Mafeking* (Edison, 1900), Boers are seen heroically attacking and defeating the British through a flank attack on horseback. The camera’s point of view

¹¹² Uhlman, 40.

¹¹³ Uhlman, 36.

¹¹⁴ Musser, *Motion Picture Catalogs*.

behind the British troops, discernible by a British flag, positions the spectator on the British side, much like *The Despatch Bearer*, and the Edison catalog describes the Boers as the “enemy.”¹¹⁵ However, the Boer cavalry effaces the British point of view by emerging in the foreground. Boers are victorious, which is never the case in British-produced films, and plant their flag as the scene concludes. The film was copyrighted on April 28, 1900 as the Mafeking Siege was still underway. Britain would eventually take Mafeking in May. This film might be a reenactment of a specific incident during this siege, which lasted 217 days, but does not accurately reflect the concluding results. It could be read as an inaccurate prediction, or pre-enactment, of the battle’s outcome. Early motion picture producers sporadically pre-enacted scenes in preparation for reporting current events as quickly as possible. The result of the Battle of Mafeking, as it is represented in this film, pessimistically assumes the future victory of the Boers. But disregarding the catalog description of the Boers as enemies (and these catalogs were intended solely for exhibitors, not audiences), the film itself offers the possibility of siding with Boers. Some American viewers would have preferred their victory, albeit one that never actually occurred, as an outcome.

English Lancers Charging (Edison, 1900) inverts *Battle of Mafeking*. It appears to be the same location with a nearly identical camera angle. However, Boers are in the foreground defending the hill while British soldiers charge forward from the distant background and ultimately win the battle, planting the British flag to solidify their victory. Like *Battle of Mafeking*, the planting of the flag is a relatively benign gesture,

¹¹⁵ Musser.

seen in the distant middle-ground, not nearly as emphatic as the presence of American flag imagery in Edison's earlier war films. In both films, unlike British-produced South African War reenactments, Boers fight fairly and with honor. The production of these two inverted scenes demonstrates the Edison company's ideological neutrality regarding the South African War. Exhibitors could choose to screen one, the other, or both. *Red Cross Ambulance on the Battlefield* (Edison, 1900) is a similar location and camera angle but depicts the aftermath of the battle as Red Cross nurses collect injured bodies. It would have been an easy choice for exhibitors to screen this after either of the aforementioned films. Importantly, neither flag is visible in this film. Therefore, the film could have been presented as the aftermath of either a British or Boer victory. This dual production provided exhibitors with the prerogative to target either pro-British or pro-Boer spectators.

In *Capture of Boer Battery by British* (Edison, 1900), the camera is positioned behind a group of Boers at the firing line as the British attack and ultimately win the fight.¹¹⁶ The shot lingers for several moments during the battle's aftermath. Here we see smiling Britons approach the camera triumphantly, some on foot, others on horseback. The British are clearly victorious, and the Edison catalog describes them in a favorable way while referring to Boers as "murderous," but it is ultimately unclear who should be rooted for.¹¹⁷ The scene elicits a certain degree of unease by positioning the camera

¹¹⁶ This film may have been released in two nearly identical parts. See <https://www.loc.gov/item/00694169/> and the inaccurately labeled <https://www.loc.gov/item/00694174/>.

¹¹⁷ Musser, *Motion Picture Catalogs*.

through the Boers' point of view, which encourages us to identify with the inevitable casualties. The point of view angles behind the Boers serve as dead giveaways that the scenes are staged—in other words, the cameraman, as part of the Boer battery, would have likely also been hit, and the British soldiers marching forward certainly would not have simply ignored the camera—while also underscoring the Boer deaths more than the British victory. Edison's films demonstrate an attempt to objectively reconstruct the war while allowing audiences to discern for themselves which side to support. However, the peculiar stylistic choice of framing these scenes primarily from the Boers' point of view, in contradistinction to *The Despatch Bearer*, tends to alienate the viewer from the British and potentially elicits sympathy for the Boers.

Bottomore observes that films about the war in South Africa were an important milestone in the shift toward acted narratives as the industry's dominant paradigm.¹¹⁸ War films inaugurated this trend starting in 1898. The South African War simply helped expedite this shift toward narrative dominance. More specifically, the development of these reconstructed scenes during the South African War allowed for more characterization of both sides of the fight. Additionally, staged war scenes answered a need for more dramatized representations of war than nonfiction could provide.¹¹⁹ In this sense, they are more accurately predecessors to historical fiction than documentary. I argue, however, that they influenced both. These films illustrate how our contemporary notions of fiction and nonfiction were not necessarily distinguishable during the earliest

¹¹⁸ Bottomore, ch. 10 p. 35.

¹¹⁹ See Bottomore, ch. 2 p. 15.

period of cinema's history. Bottomore's "theory of visual news" assumes a distinction between three forms of early war pictures based on semiotic categories: 1) index (actuality); 2) icon (staged but based on real events); 3) symbol (staged allegorical films).¹²⁰ His theory concludes that filmmakers representing real events, through categories 2 and 3, did their best to come as close as possible to an indexical connection with the original event. The distinction between index, icon and symbol is innately unclear when it involves photographic media that always appears indexical. But it is important to consider how these latter two categories could serve to uncover something more real beyond the capabilities of the index. Indeed, often the most successful war scenes were staged. While they may not have conformed to reality, they resonated with audiences. One might therefore speculate that this effect produced a sensation about the world and its events that seemed more real than an actuality view. Reconstructions of battles became the reality of those battles in the popular consciousness. In the case of the South African War, British and American audiences would have perceived different versions of simulated reality. South African War reenactments produced in the United States demonstrate not a predetermined reality but one that could be formulated uniquely through the individual experience of spectatorship.

The Boxer Rebellion

Battle reenactments of the Boxer Rebellion are heavily constructed, which serves to underscore visual tropes and ideologies associated with Orientalism and imperialist

¹²⁰ Bottomore, ch. 2 p. 4.

conquest in the Far East. Lears cites a variety of antimodernists who sought Oriental spirituality as an alternative to the secularization of modern life. But a similar desire for premodern modalities can be found in the rhetoric of Orientalism, of which Western-produced films of the Boxer Rebellion participated. This discourse represented Orientalism not as an alternative but as a racial demarcation, an ironic attempt to obliterate primitivity through a medieval Christian mentality. The perceived reality of this benevolent force was manifested through motion picture reenactments, as already seen in reconstructions of Roosevelt's Rough Riders and others. The draw toward the Orient as either an escape from modernity or a way to reinforce traditional racial and religious hierarchies in an increasingly secular and racially integrated world were not entirely indistinguishable impulses.

British production companies released at least two Boxer films: *Attack on a China Mission* (Williamson, 1900) and *Attack on a Mission Station* (Mitchell and Kenyon, 1900). *Attack on a China Mission* represents a Boxer attack on a Christian mission, which is resolved through British intervention. This is one of the most editorially innovative films of 1900. There are several camera angles edited together, including a reverse shot of British sailors as they storm the gate, coming to the aid of the missionaries. *Attack on a Mission Station* is similar in content and theme, though less stylistically sophisticated. Here we encounter the more common formula of a single, theatrically-framed camera angle. Boxers attack a family of missionaries outside their home. Somewhat miraculously, a troop of British soldiers is nearby, emerging in the background to gun down the Boxers, who are only equipped with swords. The film is cataloged in the British

National Archives as *Boxer Attack on a Missionary Outpost* and is noted to be a “‘faked’ incident.”¹²¹ While audiences may have been aware of this, particularly in the case of *Attack on a China Mission*, where the reverse angle would have put the camera operator directly in the line of fire, this did not limit their immense popularity and wide distribution.¹²² Additionally, both of these films Other the foreign enemy by hierarchizing modern methods over primitive ones. Modern warfare, such as using firearms from a distance rather than face-to-face combat with swords, is celebrated.

Edison distributed at least two naval reconstructions set during this conflict. Scaled-down reenactments of naval battle scenes were relatively common theatrical presentations at fairs and other amusement sites around the turn of the twentieth century. This practice dates back to the Romans, who would often flood arenas for gladiators to fight to the death in a sea-like environment.¹²³ *Bombardment of a Port* (Edison, 1900) and *Bombardment of Taku Forts by the Allied Fleets* (Edison, 1900) use the same conspicuously fake set. Bottomore observes that *Bombardment of Taku Forts by the Allied Fleets* is most likely a copy of Lubin’s *Bombarding and Capturing the Taku Forts*.¹²⁴ If this is true, *Bombardment of a Port* would also have to be a Lubin re-distribution since the set is identical. Both scenes reenact a naval attack that occurred on June 17, 1900. The Edison catalog mentions a production date of June 19, only two days

¹²¹ National Film Archive (Great Britain). *National Film Archives Catalogue, Part II*.

¹²² See Bottomore, “Filming, Faking and Propaganda,” ch. 13 pp. 1-2, 5, 7.

¹²³ Stef Franck, “Boxer Rebellion Novelties,” in *To Dazzle the Eye and Stir the Heart: The Red Lantern, Nazimova, and the Boxer Rebellion*, ed. Franck, (Brussels: Cinematek, 2012), 105.

¹²⁴ Bottomore, “Filming, Faking and Propaganda,” ch. 13 p. 3.

after the bombardment. On the one hand, the belated production date demonstrates that the Edison Company did not intentionally sell the film as actuality. On the other hand, Edison clearly did not want exhibitors to know the film was a Lubin dupe. The extent to which Edison fabricated the truth is therefore more a consequence of monopolistic business ethics, not necessarily a demand for authentic content. Edison probably wanted audiences to know these films were reconstructed because that is what most audiences desired. In fact, Franck points out several inconsistencies in the reenactment, such as the fact that the real bombings did not take place in the bay but rather further up the Hai River: “it was the event itself that was important and people tended not to focus on how accurately the battle was portrayed, something that couldn’t be verified anyway.”¹²⁵ Nothing about the set is believable. It recalls some of the earlier war reconstructions by Méliès and Vitagraph. My sense is that Lubin’s aesthetic interests were more aligned with Méliès, and Edison, in repackaging these films, simply knew they were too sensational to be sold as actualities.

What is perhaps most noticeable about these films is the camera’s distance from the action. Each film includes several shots, but each is an extreme long shot. To some extent, this is an inevitable consequence of reconstructing miniaturized naval scenes. Human actors cannot realistically be present. And while filmmakers today can simply juxtapose miniatures (though CGI has become far more common) with full-scale scenes, the creative possibility of intercutting these maritime miniatures with staged scenes onboard set piece ships was completely unprecedented in 1900. A later Edison film, *The*

¹²⁵ Franck, 104-05.

Battle of Chemulpo Bay (1904), represents a naval battle during the Russo-Japanese War and is filmed from the point of view onboard a Japanese vessel, albeit one that is conspicuously a studio reconstruction. Exhibitors could have used this film, out of context, alongside the wider angled miniature reenactments. As individual texts, these naval scenes are nevertheless outliers in the broader scope of early war reenactments. Unlike the war pictures that came before them, they are less about ideology than they are about producing an entertaining visual spectacle.

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that war reenactment films were motivated by ideology, not necessarily by the spectacle of violence. But both the former and the latter were integral components of early cinema. These particular Lubin/Edison naval reenactments demonstrate how, at least to some degree, early motion picture audiences desired to simply watch things blow up on the big screen, without any real human characters, much like the disaster films analyzed in Chapter One. Action, while fundamental to the medium itself, informed the development of narratives and documentaries, as seen in these spectacle-driven early war reconstructions based on real events.

Biograph produced a number of films about the Boxer Rebellion in China, most of which are non-extant. *The War in China* (Biograph, 1901) is listed in the original Biograph catalog in thirteen distinct parts. One part, *Assault on the South Gate Peking*, was particularly successful with audiences. This is likely the same film as *6th Cavalry Assaulting South Gate of Peking*, extant in the Library of Congress's Paper Print Collection. Biograph cinematographer Raymond Ackerman travelled to China during the

war, and many of the films distributed in *The War in China* series were authentic actualities of the war's aftermath. The uprising occurred somewhat abruptly, and while the war technically lasted two years (1899-1900), most of the fighting occurred during a short period of time in 1900, so most cinematographers only made it to China in time to film the aftermath. Consequently, the resulting footage was primarily travelogue-esque in the war's aftermath, and any battle scenes would have been staged. *6th Cavalry Assaulting South Gate of Peking* is a reenactment of the Siege of Peking but is aesthetically aligned with actuality. Buffalo Bill's Wild West also reenacted this particular siege in "The Rescue at Peking," where Sioux performed as Chinese rebels. In at least two cities, spectators mobilized and triumphantly joined the performers playing American soldiers.¹²⁶ *6th Cavalry Assaulting South Gate of Peking* was filmed on location, with distinguishable Chinese architecture in the background, and it contains only one camera angle, a notably wide angle from a position out of harm's way. The lack of editing, at a time when editorial experiments like *Attack on a China Mission* were increasingly more common, and the sense of reportage that the distant and logistically realistic camera angle imbues, add to the illusion of verisimilitude. In the foreground of the image, soldiers on foot fire at an unseen enemy off-screen, which, according to the catalog description, is intended to "clear the wall." Savvy spectators will, however, notice the absence of the enemy. A group of mounted soldiers emerge and could conceivably be mistaken as Boxers retreating beyond the gate, but it seems more likely that this is the Sixth United

¹²⁶ See John R. Haddad, "The Wild West Turns East: Audience, Ritual, and Regeneration," *American Studies* 49, no. 3/4 (Fall/Winter 2008): 5-38.

States cavalry charging the wall at Peking. We only see ally soldiers in this scene because the Boxers were no longer present. Sophisticated viewers familiar with earlier war reenactments might have picked up on this, but generally speaking, the film was intended to fool audiences into assuming it as actuality.

The film screened in Boston, and Ackerman, who claimed the scenes were shot during a real attack, curated.¹²⁷ Bottomore praises Ackerman as an early film journalist, or documentarian:

Some people would no doubt criticise this kind of ‘arranging’ in actualities as being artificial, as not recording real, unmediated events; but it has subsequently been practiced quite extensively in actuality films. Ackerman was a thoroughly ‘interventionist’ filmmaker, a ‘filmic choreographer’, not content with filming the world as it is, but wanting to make his documentary scenes better by arranging them to his own liking.¹²⁸

To a certain extent, I agree. Fictional styles are what ultimately developed the documentary form later in the twentieth century, and we see the conflation of authenticity and narrative reconstruction in this early Biograph film. Today, however, there are certain protocols regarding documentary transparency that Ackerman did not observe in this work. Documentary reenactments assume themselves to be reconstructions based on reality. Perhaps if Ackerman made this honest assertion, audiences would have become uninterested in the film. Nonetheless, the claim that this film was recorded during a live battle was an outright lie and therefore more aligned with humbug and showmanship than with documentary realism.

¹²⁷ See Bottomore, “Filming, Faking and Propaganda,” ch. 12 p. 25.

¹²⁸ Bottomore, ch. 12 p. 28.

The relative timeliness of these films means that they served as an early form of newsreels about the war in China. But they also performed a proto-travelogue function, as perceived actualities of exotic foreign locales. According to Frank Kessler,

The images are presented as both typical and true—typical, because they are true; and true, because they are typical. This is exactly the form of circular reasoning on which the logic of tourism is built. And this also constitutes the paradox of tourism, as the authentic has to correspond to the cliché, and thus the cliché determines what can appear as authentic. In tourism, as in travelogues, the ‘truly typical’ and the ‘authentic cliché’ of nation-ness become a commodity that can be offered as an experience and a visual spectacle. Cameramen are looking for the typical and authentic, but do so building upon mediated cultural knowledge concerning sights, buildings, traditions, costumes, and ways of life.¹²⁹

War films, in particular those depicting conflicts in the Far East, perform the function of typified authenticity while reifying one’s sense of belonging to the demographics of the audience. In the context of American audiences, for example, American nation-ness is affirmed. What occurs is an acknowledgement of one’s position as a tourist. Belonging is a process of identifying the Other and distinguishing oneself from belonging to *that* group. This is precisely what Said’s notion of orientalism as a Western discourse asserts. Boxer Rebellion reenactments produced by Western film production companies participated in perpetuating this discourse. The same tradition of visual tourism on motion picture screens would continue throughout the 1900s and 1910s in the form of travelogues, which provided audiences not with authentic global experiences but rather with idealized pictures of foreign locales through the Western gaze.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ Frank Kessler, “Images of the ‘National’ in Early Non-Fiction Films,” in *Early Cinema and the “National”*, eds. Richard Abel, Giorgio Bertellini & Rob King (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2016), 24.

¹³⁰ See Jennifer Lynn Peterson. *Education in the School of Dreams: Travelogues and Early Nonfiction Film* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 217.

The Russo-Japanese War

In his study on the relationship between war and cinema, Paul Virilio's history begins with the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05). He asserts that, even though both modern war and modern media began with photography during the Crimean and Civil Wars in the nineteenth century, the Russo-Japanese War was the first war to use searchlights: "every surface immediately became war's *recording* surface, its *film*."¹³¹ Since then, scholars of early cinema have tended to neglect Russo-Japanese War films. Bottomore's study only briefly touches on this subject and not nearly with the same degree of rigor as his research covering earlier conflicts. Perhaps because Virilio's seminal work begins with the Russo-Japanese War, Bottomore is more concerned with historiographically unearthing the period of war cinematography leading up to that moment. The war marks a pivotal moment in the history of imperialism, particularly as it concerns the Far East. Japan humiliatingly defeated Russia, who underestimated their opponent. Consequently, Japanese imperialism elevated Japan as a global power.¹³² 1905 is also an important milestone in the history of cinema. Conventionally designated as the beginning of the nickelodeon era in the United States, 1905 marks the point at which forms of exhibition were becoming more institutionalized, as was the narrative structure of the films themselves. Russo-Japanese War reenactments, in relation to their aforementioned predecessors, illustrate how filmmaking practices had shifted in just a few short years.

¹³¹ Virilio, Paul, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (London: Verso, 1989), 68.

¹³² See Greenhalgh, 74.

More importantly, these films continued the tradition of Orientalism while also promoting Japanese victories, positively fetishizing the Orient as antimodern.

Because Japan is a chain of islands, it has historically relied heavily on its mercantile marine exports. It is much like Great Britain in this regard. Consequently, because of its reliance on exports, its strength across the Far East increased over the years, which also bolstered the Japanese navy. By the turn of the twentieth century, Japan had become the Britain of the Far East in terms of its naval prowess.¹³³ During the Boxer Rebellion, Russia secured Manchuria in an effort to secure their interests from decimation by the aggressive Boxers, and they maintained control of the area after the rebellion.¹³⁴ The Japanese feared Russian absorption of Manchuria and, potentially by extension, Korea. Their motivation for attacking Port Arthur was therefore premised more on resisting Russian imperialism than their own imperialistic ambitions.¹³⁵ According to Cassini Comte, Russian Ambassador to the United States, Russia was reaching an amicable agreement with Japan regarding Manchuria and Korea, so the attack was unexpected, and the Russians were unprepared.¹³⁶ The Japanese rather convincingly dominated the conflict. Western film producers reconstructed the war with a favorable position toward the Japanese. According to Lears, Americans often perceived Japan as

¹³³ See Archibald S. Hurd, "The Growing Naval Power in Japan," *The North American Review* 177, no. 563 (October 1903): 576.

¹³⁴ Cassini Comte, "Russia in the Far East," *The North American Review* 178, no. 570 (May 1904): 684.

¹³⁵ See Kogoro Takahira, "Why Japan Resists Russia," *The North American Review* 178, no. 568 (March 1904): 327.

¹³⁶ Comte, 682-83.

primitive and childlike but also, perhaps more importantly, akin to medieval culture.¹³⁷

The simultaneous absence of modernity and ambitions for empire would have therefore appealed to American antimodernists. It is possible that Western filmmakers, and Americans in particular, sought to produce images celebrating Japanese victory.

Motion pictures were reportedly prohibited on the warfront, though it is unclear if Japanese cinematographers were prohibited.¹³⁸ Michael Baskett's research suggests that Japanese filmmakers produced actuality films of both this war and the Boxer Rebellion that were exhibited throughout the East.¹³⁹ It was publicized that Joseph Rosenthal, working for Warwick, was the only cinematographer granted access, and Lyman Howe had the exclusive rights to exhibit these authentic films, forty in total, in the United States.¹⁴⁰ It is possible that Howe, as a showman, falsely perpetuated this narrative to reporters. However, the *Optical Lantern and Cinematograph Journal* corroborated that Warwick did film with real Japanese soldiers in the East, though the author was unsure whether these actions were real or staged.¹⁴¹ We do know that Warwick produced at least two extant scenes representing the war. The *Russo-Japanese War Programme* was released in the U.K. in 1905 and contained a variety of scenes of the Far East produced by several different companies. The Huntley Film Archive currently owns a print of the

¹³⁷ Lears, 148-49.

¹³⁸ "New Films," *Optical Lantern and Cinematograph Journal* 1 (1905): 20.

¹³⁹ Michael Baskett, *The Attractive Empire: Transnational Film Culture in Imperial Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 7.

¹⁴⁰ "Lyman Howe's Big Strike," *Windham County Reformer* (Brattleboro, VT), September 15, 1905, 3.

¹⁴¹ "New Films," *Optical Lantern and Cinematograph Journal* 1 (1905): 30.

film, and it is available online.¹⁴² The program includes war-oriented scenes as well as other views of Japanese culture and Eastern landscapes. It is perhaps the most remarkable example of how various nonfictional genres—war pictures, exotic cultural activities, and travelogues—frequently overlapped. According to the British National Archives, it consists of the following scenes: *Japanese Dancers*, *Japanese Stave Duel*, *Ascent of Balloon*, *Tragedy in Mid-Air*, *Sunset Over Lake*, *Port Arthur*, *Cavalry Manoeuvres*, *Japanese Cavalry*, *Bombardment of Port Arthur*, *Firing of the Torpedo*, *Ammunition Transport Proceeding Through a Mountain Pass*, *Japanese Soldiers Scaling Wall*, *Capture of Russian Gun Position*, *Attack on 203 Metre Hill*, and *Japanese Gun Battery Firing*. All of these scenes remain in the existing print. Only *Cavalry Manoeuvres* and *Japanese Cavalry* are definitively Warwick pictures. They are rather banal, only presenting military exercises, not actual battle. The war films that follow are far more action-packed. They also all appear to be authentic, or at least staged on location. One notable exception is *Capture of Russian Gun Position* as the camera angle is directly in the line of fire, and there are actors playing Russian soldiers. It is possible that Warwick staged all of these on location. Otherwise, we have to assume that there were other war correspondents present in the Far East aside from Rosenthal.

There is a narrative to the *Russo-Japanese War Programme*, which is presented as a triptych: 1) Japanese culture; 2) Japanese war preparations; 3) battle. These films, and the programming strategy that placed them in conversation with each other, demonstrate

¹⁴² <https://www.huntleyarchives.com/preview.asp?image=1013002&itemw=4&itemf=0005&itemstep=1&itemx=3>

a racist sensibility similar to that of the Boxer Rebellion pictures, in which the eastern Other is fetishized. Another example is Edison's *Japanese Warriors in Ancient Battle Scene* (1904), a historical reenactment representing ancient Japanese culture. The fact that this historical fiction was produced during the Russo-Japanese War suggests that American audiences were fascinated by Japanese culture and history while Japan was on the global stage in the news. The "ancient battle" would have particularly appealed to neo-medieval antimodernists.

Aside from the Warwick films, all extant representations of this war that I have come across are reconstructions. The Japanese-produced films alluded to by Baskett may have been authentic footage. This is an area of early film historiography that has yet to be fully mined. The Western-produced films are unique for a variety of reasons. As previously mentioned, they are more structurally elaborate than previous war films and almost always employ some degree of editing between shots. Consequently, the films are much longer than the single-shot scenes of an earlier era. Since Western companies produced these reenactments, there is generally a certain degree of objectivity. Many of the films are non-extant, but based on catalog descriptions, I have determined that Japan virtually always wins the battles depicted. While this is historically accurate, the films tend to innately favor the Japanese point of view. Biograph's *The Battle of Yalu* (1904) favors the Japanese by predicting their victory. The film was registered on March 23, but the actual battle did not begin until April 26.¹⁴³

¹⁴³ See Levy, 253.

In *The Battle of Chemulpo Bay* (Edison, 1904)—which is quite possibly a re-distribution of Selig’s *The Battle of Chemulpo*, or vice versa—the viewer is treated to a view from the deck of a Japanese ship. It primarily consists of the same angle except for one insert shot, at the approximate midpoint, of a flag that is destroyed. Viewers today can easily observe the phoniness of the set. But the film does seem like an advancement from previous war reenactments in terms of special effects. Indeed, the explosions, particularly when they land in the miniaturized bay, are actually quite believable. Because of the spectator’s viewpoint, we are encouraged to cheer with the Japanese sailors as they celebrate their victory at the film’s dénouement. Contrarily, Pathé’s non-extant *Lookout at Port Arthur* (1904) is described in the original catalog as a Russian Captain on lookout seeing the naval battle ensuing in the distance until his ship is finally hit and destroyed.¹⁴⁴ The point of view, conceivably a literal point of view shot based on the catalog description, positions the viewer on the Russian side. It is possible that Pathé intentionally offered a different perspective than American producers. However, the Japanese still win in *Lookout at Port Arthur*.

Skirmish Between Russian and Japanese Advance Guards (Edison, 1904) is a much longer film, approximately ten minutes, and presented in four parts. In “Japanese Outpost on the Yalu River,” Japanese soldiers, played by White actors, hoist their flag then participate in a military exercise. “The Attack” involves a battle in which the soldiers from the previous scene are defeated. In the third part, “The Capture,” the victorious Russians arrive at the camp of the Japanese, remove their flag, and supplant it

¹⁴⁴ Musser, *Motion Picture Catalogs*.

with their own. Suddenly, they are fired at from off-screen. After returning the fire for several moments, they retreat into the woods. “The Retreat” continues this action as Japanese soldiers arrive, reclaiming their camp both physically and symbolically by replacing the Russian flag. For the most part these scenes are quite realistic, despite the White actors. The only noticeable giveaway is the fact that the Russians do not acknowledge the cinematographer positioned in the same location throughout the entire film. Indeed, each chapter is presented from the exact same camera angle. While Edison’s Russo-Japanese War films demonstrate a certain degree of sophistication regarding length and believability, they are ultimately uninspiring in terms of creative cinematography. The representation of Japanese victory, however, remained consistent.

One of the most narratively sophisticated films of the Russo-Japanese War is Biograph’s 15-minute long *The Hero of Liao-Yang* (1904). Produced at St. John’s Military Academy in upstate New York, the film seems to employ real Japanese actors (though they may have been Japanese American). It is an early example of the three-act structure that would become common in Hollywood feature film production later in the twentieth century.¹⁴⁵ There is an inciting incident when a courier arrives, disrupting the Hero’s blissful rural life to inform him of his duty to go to war. His departure marks the first act break. After receiving a dangerous mission to deliver a message to another officer, the Hero is presumably killed by Russians, an indication of another act break. Finally, there is a resolution as the Hero rises from the dead after being buried—a theme we have seen semblances of in earlier war pictures—and receives an accolade for his

¹⁴⁵ See Snyder, 67-90.



Figure 3.6: *The Hero of Liao-Yang* (Biograph, 1904)

service. *The Hero of Liao-Yang* is an appropriate culminating example to conclude this chapter. It exemplifies how the war reenactment transformed from fake actuality to something more akin to documentary, similar to both historical fiction and the heavily constructed nonfictional content of travelogues that was beginning to emerge, employing structural storytelling techniques that would become more standardized in the coming decades. In the opening scenes, for example, we see Japanese youths playing games and fencing, while the camera is conspicuously conscious of the landscape, albeit one that is actually upstate New York, with wide angles and panoramic camera moves. Like its war film antecedents and its travelogue successors, the film participates in the continuing tradition of exoticizing Other cultures and locales.

Before concluding this chapter, it is worth mentioning several films that reenacted the beginning of the Bolshevik Revolution, starting around 1905 as the Russian Empire was losing its global strength in the wake of their defeat in the Russo-Japanese War. Films like *Revolution in Odessa* (Pathé, 1904), *Mutiny on the Black Sea* (Biograph, 1905), and *The Nihilist* (Biograph, 1905) are all ancestors to the work of Soviet filmmakers like V.I. Pudovkin and Sergei Eisenstein, who produced historical reconstructions of revolutionary events that similarly blur the boundaries of fiction and nonfiction. These antecedents to Soviet cinema, produced by Western filmmakers, demonize Czarist Russia and celebrate the revolution. With that said, and keeping in mind how films focused on the Japanese side during the Russo-Japanese War, film pioneers in the West generally viewed the Russian Empire unfavorably. Additionally, as the Empire of Japan expanded, so did its motion picture industry, not only domestically but also across much of the Far East, allowing Japan to become one of the most prolific global manufacturers of motion pictures by the 1930s.¹⁴⁶ The ability to disseminate information through motion pictures came to be synonymous with imperial dominance.

Conclusion

Much has been written about the relationship between war reenactment and Freud's repetition compulsion, which asserts that the repetition of a traumatic event allows one to master and overcome the trauma of that event. Whissel addresses this notion in her study on the relationship between American modernity and war reenactments on film, arguing

¹⁴⁶ See Baskett, 3, 13-14, 21.

that these films produced an “imaginary circulation of audiences along with imperial traffic to distant frontiers through spectacularly rendered live performances and moving images that blurred the distinction between representation and the ‘historical’ real and in the process annealed the shocks of warfare.”¹⁴⁷ While I mostly agree, and generally find Whissel’s work to be absolutely seminal to my own, I am not necessarily convinced that early war films sought to anneal the shocks of warfare, though I do not doubt that they could have performed this function for some spectators. These films are almost always about the heroic protagonists of war, not the horrors of death and colonialism. The violent acts that occur in these early war reconstructions are underemphasized in order to focus attention on the heroic protagonist(s) as a representation of imperialist ideology. Of course, audiences at the time may have perceived the violence as low-brow and overtly gory. In the broader sense of American film history, local censorship was common throughout the silent era, but film producers could potentially get away with much more than was possible during the Hays Code era (1934-68). The intent in these early war reenactments was less to shock the viewer than to elicit a celebratory reaction for the White male hero, a theme that would later be adopted as an essential formula for virtually all Hollywood film genres. Only later in its history would cinema begin to deal with the shocking nature of violence and war.

By effacing war’s realities in favor of masculine heroism through reenactment, motion pictures constructed modern representations of war as antimodern narratives rather than actuality reports. Early war reconstructions on film were also ambivalent in

¹⁴⁷ Whissel, 66.

their response to shifts in modern warfare. There is a certain degree of resisting modern warfare and fetishizing premodern forms of battle, perhaps most notably in the images of Roosevelt's Rough Riders. Conversely, the superiority of modern warfare was also frequently narrativized to distinguish and hierarchize modernism over primitivism. Both served a dual function toward the same end, to empower the colonizer and marginalize the Other. These impulses became evident in an increasingly popular screen genre, the western. After fighting for the British in South Africa, Robert Baden-Powell developed the Boy Scout handbook. Boy Scouts would later reappropriate Indian lore in a variety of ways, performing acts of conquer and emulation, much like western heroes.¹⁴⁸

The Great Train Robbery (1903) is often considered the first western film.

According to Slotkin, "The history of the Western as a film genre begins with the decision to imitate Porter's work and repeat its success."¹⁴⁹ The gunfighting scenes are reminiscent of battles depicted in earlier war films. There is, however, more visual emphasis on gunplay and the spectacle of violence, most notably with the famous close-up, which could have been included at the beginning, end, or not at all based on the exhibitor's discretion. Viewing one of the first examples of a cinematic close-up, the proximity of the bandit on screen would have jarred audiences. By breaking the fourth wall and firing his gun directly at the audience, a further degree of shock is elicited. On the one hand, the film does possess an ideological message of justice. The bandits are ultimately killed for their actions. On the other hand, the bandit, who is both not our ally

¹⁴⁸ See Shari Huhndorf, *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 69.

¹⁴⁹ Slotkin, 231.

(he seemingly tries to kill *us*) and also the only character offered the privilege of being seen in close-up, which to some degree strengthens our identification with him—obfuscates the message. Violence is presented in more of a celebratory than problematic manner. The audience is encouraged to be entertained by the spectacle of gunplay, but the effects of violence are deemphasized. Through the development of early war films and later westerns, violence became a natural part of the motion picture's simulated reality.

The theme of colonizing the West would also continue in travelogues. While the western appears to be fiction and the travelogue nonfiction, it is important to contextualize these genres as amalgams of both, since neither form had yet been conventionalized. As Peterson observes, since terms like “nonfiction” and “documentary” were not yet common, “educational” was used as a way to differentiate travelogues from fiction.¹⁵⁰ Peterson argues that viewers understood travelogues less as truth about the world and its various locales and more as a dream-like reverie of them. Her notion of a “school of dreams” assumes an elicitation of desire more than actual education. The travelogue is therefore “a contradictory genre that poses as a form of knowledge but actually functions as a form of mythification.”¹⁵¹ Indeed, travelogues such as the *Flashes of the West* (Northern Pacific Railway, 192-?) series sporadically included scenes staged in studios. Viewers of travelogues witness foreign cultures and landscapes as well as the power relations involved in the act of Western filmmakers producing these images and Western audiences (themselves) looking at them.¹⁵² Pre-1905 war films performed this

¹⁵⁰ Peterson, 84.

¹⁵¹ Peterson, 4, 233.

¹⁵² See Peterson, 8.

function. Buffalo Bill's Wild West comes to mind as a similar knowledge guise. With regard to the western, I have outlined how certain themes overlap with early representations of war on film, drawing from cultural products of the late nineteenth century but also influencing the explosion of the western film by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, with very few global conflicts occurring again until World War I began in 1914.

The films aforementioned throughout this chapter, therefore, served as precursors to both fictional and documentary (presumed real) representations of the world that constructed modern reality through the guise of ideologies that resisted modern progress, notably colonialism/imperialism and the violent hyper-masculinity inherent in these forms of conquest. It is not coincidental that both travelogues and westerns became extremely popular in the late 1900s and early 1910s. Audiences not yet familiar with rigid generic guidelines probably perceived war reenactments, westerns, and travelogues as similar types of films. Additionally, the classification "western" insinuates a transportation of the viewer to an Other location, namely the North American West, and themes of modern/antimodern Othering are also present in this genre. Like the violence present in reconstructions of executions and battle reenactments, representations of White Euro-America colonizing the West aggrandized antimodern behavior—the violence inherent in colonizing Indigenous peoples—through the modern rhetoric of motion pictures. A closer examination of representations of Indigenous peoples throughout the motion picture's first two decades shall elucidate another striking example of antimodernism's persistence as a defining trait of modernity.

CHAPTER FOUR

INDIGENOUS REPRESENTATION AND ANTIMODERNISM

An analysis of Indigenous representation in early cinema, and the history of America's internal colonialism that such an analysis inevitably brings to light, is an essential corollary to the discussion of American imperialism begun in the previous chapter. More specifically, an analysis of Indigenous representation in early cinema sheds further light on the notion that colonial/imperial endeavors, as well as the push and pull of antimodernism within the modern experience, informed the development of documentary aesthetics. In *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination*, Shari Huhndorf notes that scholars of imperialism often fail to address this domestic history, in turn supporting the myth of American exceptionalism, which assumes that because America never had an empire it cannot be identified as imperial.¹ While scholarship has developed since *Going Native* was published in 2001, North American (including both the United States and Canada) domestic and foreign imperialism are still treated separately. Throughout the first two decades of film history, reenactments invoked antimodern sensibilities that reified both foreign imperialism and domestic colonialism in a variety of nuanced ways. I therefore conclude this study with a discussion of Native American colonialism in early film reenactments, pivoting from the assumption that domestic colonialism causally and chronologically led to foreign imperialism. Indeed, these histories overlap and continue to do so today.

¹ Shari Huhndorf, *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 9-10.

The problematic dichotomization of authentic/premodern and inauthentic/modern is perhaps most evident in White colonizers' historical treatment of Indigenous groups. This false binary is fundamental to colonial reasoning and underscores my overarching argument that antimodern impulses, including the fetishization of what was considered premodern authenticity, ultimately shaped the modern imperial project. The canonical histories of documentary filmmaking generally regard the purported Indigenous authenticity in the work of Edward S. Curtis and Robert Flaherty as the genre's progenitors. Both filmmakers hailed from the United States but conducted ethnographic photo and film projects in Canada, which demonstrates the porosity of these national borders and, with specific nuances of course, how both countries were part of a synonymous broader colonial narrative, one that significantly excluded cultures indigenous to the eastern United States, perhaps due to the misperception that such groups had already vanished. If the impulse by most proto-documentarians was to reconstruct the past/present for the sake of presumed authenticity, it is not surprising that the desire to salvage premodern Indigenous culture became a formative aspect of the documentary genre, much like the presumed authenticity of law and order in execution films and masculine heroism in battle reenactments, which modernity was threatening to erase. If the documentary impulse involved seeking authenticity in the face of modern observational banality, White elites would have perceived the premodern traditions of Indigenous peoples as authentic forms of culture.

This chapter explores representations of Indigenous culture on screen from 1894 to 1914. While the focal point is Curtis's milestone *In the Land of the Head Hunters*

(Continental, 1914), and at the risk of further canonizing a film that has gained considerable attention by historians of anthropology and cinema, a variety of case studies will be explored, including several films that have received very little scholarly attention. Not all of these examples are squarely reenactments. Many assume a typified past that is quite distant, and some are more clearly fictional, as part of the industry-wide institutionalization of narrative integration that began in the early 1900s. Nevertheless, it is useful to demonstrate how, with regard to Indigenous representation, various forms within the fiction/nonfiction polarity intersected, or in many cases began to diverge, beginning around the middle of the twentieth century's first decade.

By 1905 the French production company Pathé was the leading supplier of films in America. Richard Abel suggests that Pathe's distribution in America allowed conditions for the nickelodeon boom that occurred around this time.² As alluded to in previous chapters, nickelodeons may have facilitated a shift in content. With the establishment of theaters dedicated specifically to motion pictures—many of which, particularly in rural areas, maintained the five cent rate throughout the decade, though in urban centers this rate rapidly inflated—rather than an assortment of entertainment sites, such as vaudeville theaters, that may have included a variety of media, one can imagine a more immersive experience that likely helped pave the way for narrative integration. Abel speculates that the Pathé trademark may have been a familiar European icon for immigrants assimilating to the US: “the Pathé trademark made of the nickelodeon a

² Richard Abel, *The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900-1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 20.

significant ‘space in between,’ an anonymous haven of commercialized leisure that eased assimilation into the new ‘modern’ society of their adopted country.”³ The Americanization of cinema leading up to 1910 deviated significantly from the Frenchness of Pathé while also demonizing French films as morally suspect. There was an oscillation between the democratic and the propagandistic that eventually seems to have favored the latter. By 1908-09 the western was becoming the most popular American genre, and it served to counter Pathé’s foreign influence on American audiences, “functioning within a rejuvenated discourse of Americanization, an overtly racist discourse that sought to privilege the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ (and the masculine) as dominant in any conception of American national identity.”⁴ Westerns also served a transitional purpose, as both attractions, with their emphasis on western landscapes as visual spectacles, and narratives. Indeed, I would argue that one of the defining moments in closing the western frontier was the film industry’s establishment in southern California, a move that was at least partially motivated by a desire for realism (authentic western landscapes) and to affirm White Euro-America’s colonization of the West. Additionally, before the American motion picture industry fully established itself in Hollywood, there remained a space for Indigenous artists to participate in the nascent medium. Popular figures included Red Wing, James Young Deer, William Eagleshirt, Chief Dark Cloud, Dove Eye Dark Cloud, Luther Standing Bear, Red Eagle, and Standing Horse. These performers had assimilated into White culture and many migrated to the movies from other theatrical professions,

³ Abel, *Red Rooster Scare*, 73.

⁴ Abel, 152.

most commonly wild west shows. Their autonomy as creative artists in the industry dwindled, and became increasingly relegated to pejorative stereotypes, after Hollywood was colonized.

How does this history inform how events would be reconstructed on film? Did the changes in reception facilitated by the nickelodeon alter whether producers would seek to reproduce events or not? There does seem to be a drop in reenactments of current events around this time. However, the increasing practice of representing western subjects and themes, particularly with regard to Indigenous relations, can be linked to earlier desires to reconstruct subjects of current interest like executions and battles. It is difficult to assume that interest in Native subjects was something altogether new by 1910. In fact, Native depictions are quite pervasive in the earliest Black Maria films, as I shall outline later in this chapter. But there was a conspicuous representational shift during the period of narrative integration. While early Native subjects began as a form of spectacle—to realistically depict Indigenous cultures visually through costumes, artifacts, dances, and other cultural pastimes—they became aligned more with the representational patterns of dime novels and western folklore, where the focus is generally on the heroics of the White male protagonist and the clearly demarcated Native Other.⁵ Abel notes that Native subjects may have created a mass audience out of a heterogeneous American public, one that separated the American public sphere from Indigenous communities.⁶ Like

⁵ See Abel, 165.

⁶ Richard Abel, *Americanizing the Movies and "Movie-Mad" Audiences, 1910-1914* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 117.

reenactments of executions and battles, these representational forms served to reconstruct the past into a simulated reality guise in the present.

Western film producers often adopted the historical reenactment formula from wild west shows. The 101 Bison brand produced westerns for the New York Motion Picture Company, which were almost always variations on reenactments of either the 1876 Pat Henry Massacre or the 1844 Mountain Meadows Massacre. Buffalo Bill himself was featured in several films from this period, and reenactments of the historical events surrounding Custer's Last Stand in 1876 were also frequent.⁷ Most westerns, however, were more purely fictional, and because the American West was still in the process of being settled, their status as representations of either the past or present was probably not always entirely clear. Western films produced during this period therefore purport to have a certain degree of currency, or at the very least a sense that the western frontier had closed recently. The films themselves represent the twilight of the historical moment that the western genre represents. And there is something strikingly poignant in the idea that the industry's migration to find the "real" West ultimately terminated it and transformed it into a simulated ideological memory through the motion picture medium. I intend to place these fictional texts in dialogue with Indigenous representations that appear to be more nonfictional. By the time Curtis released *Head Hunters* in 1914, and even by 1922 when Flaherty finally completed *Nanook of the North*, a sense of reflexivity regarding the

⁷ For a discussion of these films, see Roberta E. Pearson, "The Revenge of Rain-in-the-face? or, Custers and Indians on the Silent Screen," in *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema*, ed. Daniel Bernardi (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 273-299.

reconstruction of history was still lacking, and contemporaneous audiences could have interpreted these films as either fiction or nonfiction, historical or recent.

It is, however, clear that these films were associated with documentary, more specifically a fusion of educational value and fine art, much like the creative treatment of reality that defines documentary according to Grierson. The oft-cited glowing review of *Head Hunters* by W. Stephen Bush in *Moving Picture World* insists on the film's artistic value.⁸ Reviews in the *New York Clipper* and *Motion Picture Magazine* similarly touted the film's unique fusion of drama and scientific education.⁹ In his memorial to J.P. Morgan, the financial benefactor for *The North American Indian*, in the project's ninth volume published in 1913, shortly after Morgan's death, Curtis referred to his work as a "documentary" endeavor. The Continental Film Company also used the term "documentary" in their prospectus:

The questions might be raised as to whether the documentary material would not lack the thrilling interest of the fake picture. It is the opinion of Mr. Curtis that the real life of the Indian contains the parallel emotions to furnish all necessary plots... All pictures made should be classed among the educational, and should be preserved as part of the documentary material of the country... In making such pictures, the greatest care must be exercised that the thought conveyed be true to the subject, the ceremony be correctly rendered, and above all, that the costumes be correct. It must be admitted that the making of such a series of pictures would be the most difficult thing attempted in motion photography, but it can be done, and will be one of the most valuable documentary works which can be taken up at this time.¹⁰

⁸ W. Stephen Bush, "In the Land of the Headhunters," *Moving Picture World* 22, no. 12 (December 19, 1914): 1685.

⁹ "Indian Picture Makes Big Hit," *Motion Picture News* (New York, NY), January 2, 1915, 59. Tarleton Winchester, "What's What—and Why," *Motion Picture Magazine* IX, no. 1 (February 1915): 124.

¹⁰ Quoted in Brian Winston, "Before Grierson, Before Flaherty: The Documentary Film in 1914," *Sight and Sound* 57 (Autumn 1988): 279.

As noted in the introductory chapter, the term “documentary,” in relation to cinema, probably derived from the French term “documentaire,” notably used by Gaston Méliès. In the popular lexicon, this descriptor had been used since at least the eighteenth century to refer to records or evidence. Curtis likely adopted “documentary” as a way to synonymize his work with archival documents and may have been familiar with the proto-documentary work of Méliès and others. He clearly did not invent the term. But his work does serve as an important example of the nascent medium’s attempt to differentiate fictional and nonfictional forms, at a time when these conflating impulses were noticeably entangled. Whether these demarcations are obvious in the text—and in the frequent cases in which they are not, as I shall analyze later in this chapter—or whether contemporaneous viewers would have discerned them, at the very least Curtis himself perceived his work as diverging from the “fake picture.”

In the Land of the Head Hunters is resistant to the activities and discourses of modernity but is also a text that fundamentally reflects the modern colonial project. This is particularly evident when one considers that J.P. Morgan funded Curtis’s *North American Indian Project*, and it was enthusiastically supported by Theodore Roosevelt. Archiving and cataloging the premodern through mediated new technologies was an important component of imperial modernity. Roosevelt’s vision of the American West was one in which the natural landscape could be preserved but compartmentalized into national parks, a process of museumification not unlike the treatment of Indigenous peoples who were once the sole inhabitants of those lands. Indeed, the idea of the West as

a premodern fantasy of both nature and Indigenous culture is particularly salient in early cinema, where western fictions and travelogue nonfictions conflated land and people.

The fascination with Indigenous culture, and its assumed links to a premodern past, reflect the antimodernism that T.J. Jackson Lears associates with the Arts and Crafts Movement in Britain: “Arts and Crafts ideologues... came usually from among the business and professional people who felt most cut off from ‘real life’ and most in need of moral and cultural regeneration.”¹¹ John Ruskin and William Morris inaugurated the movement in the 1880s, and societies for Arts and Crafts were established in cities throughout the United States by the turn of the century. It served as a form of neo-medievalism that romanticized the medieval artisan and assumed “the renaissance marked a decay of both art and morality.”¹² By appropriating cultural objects from the (perceived) premodern past, White elites in the present could conceivably counter the trends of modernity. In the context of the United States, this same impulse, while never specifically aligned with the neo-medievalism of the Arts and Crafts Movement, informs how Euro-Americans exploited and commodified Indigenous culture throughout this period. The desire to return to Indigenous pasts in the face of rapid industrial change around the turn of the twentieth century did not necessarily counter colonialism but rather reaffirmed it in a new way for the modern era.

¹¹ T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, originally published, 1983), 61.

¹² Lears, 66.

In cinema this impulse was more conspicuous in films associated with ethnography. Fictional narratives, such as westerns, were more concerned with abstract symbols and tropes that functioned alongside White-male-dominated narratives, whereas ethnographic narratives often deviated from the hero-centered plot to focus on premodern rituals, with visual emphasis on props and costumes. Brad Evans argues that Curtis's work involves a fascination with primitivity in the midst of modern banality, while ultimately conforming to the aesthetics and market demands of modernity.¹³ I would like to take this argument a step further, with a more critical bent than Evans. I argue that, while inevitably conforming to modernity, at the very least through the application of the mechanically reproducible motion picture medium, Curtis, and other filmmakers representing Indigenous peoples, conspicuously eschewed modern reality entirely in favor of a simulated, fantasmatic reconstruction of the past. Motion picture producers preferred to view Native subjects as past and fictional, not real and present. Although this treatment of indigeneity plays into the "vanishing Indian" trope, the ideological lens is not necessarily a colonial fantasy of having contained a threat to modernity that is past and no longer visible. Rather, it is nostalgia for the premodern that manifests into preservation and documentation. Ironically, this manifestation is filtered through the modern technology of motion pictures. Additionally, the Indigenous performances themselves offer an opportunity for colonized subjects to engage dialogically with

¹³ Brad Evans, "Indian Movies and the Vernacular of Modernism," in *Return to the Land of the Head Hunters: Edward S. Curtis, the Kwakwaka'wakw, and the Making of Modern Cinema*, eds. Brad Evans & Aaron Glass (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 201.

modernity. On the one hand, failing to acknowledge the present diminishes authenticity, but on the other hand, documenting the past opens up possibilities for resisting the colonialism associated with so-called progress. However, in fetishizing Indigenous culture as exclusively past, appealing to the desire to document, and not part of a politically and morally complicated present, these films sidestep any substantive commentary.

Proto-Pseudo-Ethnographic Attractions

In this section, I shall examine the proto-ethnographic films produced throughout the two decades prior to *Head Hunters*. I refer to these films as “proto-pseudo-ethnographic attractions” because ideological bias made their supposed scientific validity questionable, and to call them ethnographic films outright would be anachronistic (“ethnographic film” did not become part of the popular lexicon until after World War II). They functioned less as serious educational material, though often purporting to be such, and more as visual spectacles and commercial commodities for a predominantly White audience. Through the impulse to reject modernity by seeking premodern cultures and modalities, these films ultimately became consumer commodities, informing American capitalist enterprises, particularly in the tourism industries, that defined modernity. This assertion innately connects to this chapter’s broader argument that the erasure of indigeneity in the present reinforced the misperception that these cultures and peoples had vanished.

The attraction of premodern indigeneity is evident in the earliest cinematic texts. As Annie Oakley was performing at Edison’s Black Maria during Buffalo Bill’s Wild

West tour in Brooklyn, NY in the summer/fall of 1894, the Edison Company also enlisted Sioux performers from the show.¹⁴ Buffalo Bill himself even made an appearance in the early kinetoscope film *Indian War Council* (Edison, 1894), a reenactment of the Wild West's reenactment of a presumed event in the recent past (the Battle of Wounded Knee was only four years prior). Lubin later advertised a film reenactment using performers from the Wild West, titled *Indian War Dance* (1903), which may have been a copy of this earlier Edison film, particularly since the Wild West was primarily touring in Great Britain in the early 1900s.¹⁵ *Buffalo Dance* (Edison, 1894) and *Sioux Ghost Dance* (Edison, 1894) are more closely aligned with a broadly conceived attempt to re-create culture, otherwise known as "salvage ethnography," not an effort to reenact specific historical events. Pauline Wakeham describes salvage ethnography as "a fetishistic process whereby the imagined lost object of primitive origins was replaced with the west's own phantasmatic reconstruction of a pre-contact native state of nature."¹⁶ Additionally, both *Buffalo Dance* and *Sioux Ghost Dance* conspicuously dislocate Indigenous subjects from their milieu, whether we consider this milieu the actual Sioux land of the past that had been recently lost, or the present theatrical space of Buffalo Bill's Wild West. In other words, the subjects are doubly dislocated from their real

¹⁴ See Paul Henley, *Beyond Observation: A History of Authorship in Ethnographic Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 78 who notes the date of their performances as 9/24/84, several weeks prior to Annie Oakley's performance at the Black Maria on 10/19/84.

¹⁵ See Musser, *Motion Picture Catalogs by American Producers and Distributors, 1894-1908* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1984-1985), Microform.

¹⁶ Pauline Wakeham, "Becoming Documentary: Edward Curtis's *In the Land of the Headhunters* and the Politics of Archival Reconstruction," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 36, no. 3 (2006): 294.



Figure 4.1: *Sioux Ghost Dance* (Edison, 1894)

environment. There is, arguably, a certain degree of reflexivity in this dislocation. The Black Maria studio is clearly not reality and visually calls attention to its own artifice as a theatrical stage. There are also reflexive tendencies in the representational strategy. In both films the subjects are extremely conscious of the camera and periodically make eye contact with the viewer. *Sioux Ghost Dance* does not begin in situ. Rather, there is a brief moment in which the subjects stand immobile, as if waiting for direction to begin. There is an empowering aspect in the subject's direct address that the viewer cannot ignore. Yet the reflexive tendencies also call attention to the fact that these are subjugated peoples. By revealing the moment prior to the beginning of the performance, the film reinforces the reality that these individuals are being directed by White filmmakers behind the camera. *Sioux Ghost Dance* should more appropriately be labelled as promotional

material for Buffalo Bill's Wild West, like *Annie Oakley*, not ethnography. Indeed, a title card in the foreground of *Sioux Ghost Dance* identifies the subjects as "Buffalo Bill's Wild West," not only acknowledging that they are performers but also advertising the show. These scenes were filmed in the Black Maria, as opposed to live during a Wild West performance, likely due to technological restrictions—the large recording mechanism and the need for sunlight to expose the film properly, a challenge for which the Black Maria was specifically designed. The performative reflexivity may have simply been a consequence of uncertainty and poor timing, both filmmakers and performers not yet knowing how to construct meaning through the new medium. Moreover, the mise-en-scène of the studio's black background is symbolically ambivalent and does not necessarily signify anything about the subjects' position in modernity, other than the fact that they are performing for an audience.

The Ghost Dance in particular was not an ancient ritual but a relatively new form of cultural production by various Indigenous groups during the colonially resistant Ghost Dance movement (1869-90). After the Wounded Knee Massacre, the Ghost Dance was practiced less frequently. By performing the Ghost Dance for Edison's motion picture camera, Sioux performers, on the one hand, reasserted the transgressive practice that the United States military had recently curbed; on the other hand, however, the containment of the Sioux performers through the motion picture medium reinforced the fact that these activities had become suppressed. As a product intended for White urban kinetoscope audiences, not the more diverse demographics of later nickelodeons, for whom the Ghost Dance scare would have seemed recent or perhaps even current, *Sioux Ghost Dance*

serves as an example of Whites taking control of, or in a sense disciplining, these transgressive acts. Nicolas Rosenthal suggests that Indigenous actors possessed both “freedoms and limitations,” and we should not simply assume they were exclusively either resistant or victimized.¹⁷ While I agree with Rosenthal’s suggestion to a degree, early cinema primarily exploited Indigenous actors through representational strategies that intended to silence their voices.

Edison produced at least two additional representations of Indigenous subjects during the kinetoscope era, *Indian Scalping Scene* (1895) and the more historical *Pocahontas* (1895), both non-extant, which, along with *Buffalo Dance*, seem to have disappeared from the Edison catalog after the shift to theatrical motion picture exhibition.¹⁸ *Indian War Council* and *Sioux Ghost Dance* remained present in the catalog’s 1898 “Indian Dances and Customs” series, which also included five new films shot on location in the Southwest: *Buck Dance, Ute Indians*; *Circle Dance, Ute Indians*; *Eagle Dance, Pueblo Indians*; *Serving Rations to the Indians*; and *Wand Dance, Pueblo Indians*. These films possess more of an observational aesthetic than their predecessors. The camera remains at a safe distance, and the subjects do not acknowledge it. Exhibitors would have nevertheless been encouraged to narrate the films through a variety of racist stereotypes outlined in the Edison catalog. Indigenous customs were described as

¹⁷ Nicolas G. Rosenthal, “Representing Indians: Native American Actors on Hollywood’s Frontier,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (Autumn 2005): 341.

¹⁸ The Lumières were also interested in Native American subjects and employed cameraman Gabriel Veyre to film Mohawk performers near Montreal, resulting in the non-extant *Danse Indienne* (1898).

“eccentric,” “peculiar,” and even “grotesque,” while Indigenous women were pejoratively referred to as “squaws” and synonymized with dogs in *Serving Rations to the Indians*.¹⁹

As noted in Chapter Two in the context of lynching films, Nichols identifies what he terms “typifications” as reenactments with no specific historical referent. The earliest cinematic representations of Indigenous peoples and cultures generally tend toward typification. Although they produce a semblance of realist dramatization, the events they claim to represent are unspecified. By typifying Indigenous culture, the nascent motion picture industry perpetuated and augmented established stereotypes while also formulating new ones. The pseudo-ethnographies of Curtis and Flaherty assume this role but also demonstrate attempts to disentangle the archetype from its fabricated semblance of realism through drama, not as outright fictions but as authentic scenarios that are conscious of their fabricating elements. However, their appeal to typification also dehumanizes their subjects as archetypes and invalidates the authenticity of the history they purport to narrate, a tradition that, as I shall outline, traces back to earlier proto-ethnographies.

Essential to this typification was the idea that these cultures were exclusively premodern and past. To White audiences, Utes, Pueblos, and Sioux may have seemed like groups that had already vanished. But Indigenous groups of the Far North may have seemed less affected by modernity. In 1901 filmmakers recorded scenes from the Esquimaux Village at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, NY. Edison produced at least three films: *Esquimaux Game of Snap-the-Whip* (1901), *Esquimaux Leap-Frog*

¹⁹ See Musser, *Motion Picture Catalogs*.

(1901), and *Esquimaux Village* (1901). Biograph's *The Esquimaux Village* (1901) claims to include a panorama shot. Because the extant Edison films contain no panorama shots, I am inclined to assume that Biograph filmed original footage in Buffalo. Lubin cataloged two films, *Esquimaux Village* (1901) and *Panorama of Esquimaux Village* (1901), both quite possibly stolen, the former from Edison and the latter from Biograph. Did audiences recognize the sets as reconstructed Eskimo communities at the Exposition, or as some other form of fabrication, or even Indigenous authenticity? At the very least, we do know that the original catalogs marketed the films as scenes from the Exposition. Therefore, these films would have seemed more current, as documentations of present-day commodified performances of the past. They served as advertising for the Exposition while also bringing the Exposition to paying motion picture customers in cities throughout the country who could not make it to Buffalo. A similar form of time travel tourism persists today in what Diane Barthel refers to as "Staged Symbolic Communities (SSCs)," which attempt to re-create premodern communities for paying consumers. Examples include Williamsburg, Virginia and Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts. The goal is not authenticity per se but rather "history made digestible" for contemporary tourists.²⁰ Exhibitions of reconstructed Indigenous communities at fairs and expositions around the turn of the twentieth century were nascent forms of SSCs that employed authentic subjects from these communities, removing them from their social contexts and interpolating them into modern urban life, to be viewed by paying customers. Containing

²⁰ Diane Barthel, "Nostalgia for America's Village Past: Staged Symbolic Communities," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 4, no. 1 (Autumn 1990): 84.

and demarcating these communities as consumable commodities, while effacing the colonial violence Euro-American settlers historically inflicted on them, made this history digestible for White audiences.

One potential fabrication might be evident in the catalog description for *Esquimaux Leap-Frog*, alternatively titled *Scene in Esquimaux Village*. The subjects are described to be picking for nickels, which Exposition patrons had presumably tossed to them (a common practice at such cultural sites), but there is no visible evidence of this in the current available print. It could be that this action went missing in the Library of Congress's paper print, or the alternative title is in fact a separate film that was lost. I would, however, speculate that this was a fabricated claim intended to suggest that the scene was filmed during a live performance, with the Exposition crowd watching enthusiastically somewhere off-screen. From this interpretation, we have to assume that these performances were reenactments of the Exposition reenactments, much like the Sioux performances at Edison's Black Maria but in situ. The currency of these reenacted performances does not complicate the narrative of salvaging premodern past but rather reaffirms how this narrative was present in the Exposition itself, which represented these cultures as already archived by modern ethnology.

The currency of the Esquimaux Village films is similarly found in *Serving Rations*, where the present situation of Indigenous communities is underscored. Although the images in this film are symbolically ambivalent, it appears as if the "Indians" are receiving a surplus of rations (even enough for the dogs, according to the catalog description), and the title itself assumes the colonizer's benevolent point of view.

However, Indigenous communities were probably not receiving enough rations, and not frequently enough, which in part led to the Sioux revolt in 1890. One contemporaneous account alludes to a general White sentiment that these Native beneficiaries were ungrateful.²¹ By 1903 the Indian Bureau discontinued providing government rations to individuals on reservations, who were forced to either assimilate to capitalism and work for pay, on government farms and other public works projects, or go hungry.²² A sense of present-day concerns is likewise represented in *Indian Day School* (Edison, 1898), and *Club Swinging, Carlisle Indian School* (Biograph, 1902), which also appear to be ideologically neutral but somehow nevertheless read, at least to this contemporary viewer, as celebrations of assimilation. The Carlisle Indian Industrial School depicted in *Club Swinging* was one of the foremost educational institutions devoted to training Indigenous peoples to assimilate into White culture.²³ Smaller such institutions existed throughout the country, one of which in Isleta, New Mexico is featured in *Indian Day School*. These films clearly situate Indigenous representation in the modern present, albeit one that is not apologetic. But the performative space of the Exposition's Esquimaux Village delegates Indigenous culture to a confined archival location that exists in the present only insofar as it is identified as unequivocally past, a temporal structure which the motion picture reenactments further compartmentalize and catalog. According to Rosalind Morris, "ethnographic film must be understood in relation to museology,"

²¹ "The Indian Outbreak," *The Morning Call* (San Francisco, CA), December 4, 1890, 4.

²² "Introduction." *The Indian Advocate* (Sacred Heart, OK), July 1, 1903, 213.

²³ See, for example, Jacqueline Fear-Segal and Susan D. Rose, eds., *Carlisle Indian Industrial School: Indigenous Histories, Memories, and Reclamations* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2016).

where the salvage ethnography of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was situated.²⁴ This museological element is particularly salient in the amalgam of motion pictures and fairground museum attractions in the Esquimaux Village films. Therefore, a crucial distinction must be emphasized between the impulse to retrieve the past and the presentness of *Serving Rations*, *Indian Day School*, and *Club Swinging*.

Cataloging colonized groups functioned to taxidermically archetype such groups as Other, as Fatima Tobing Rony argues.²⁵ But the impulse to archetype is also linked to a broader encyclopedic desire, one that Tom Gunning associates with early cinema, to create an exhaustive archive of human knowledge.²⁶ Paul Greenhalgh refers to the desire for all-encompassing encyclopedic knowledge as “empirical totality.”²⁷ The impulse to acquire and archive all potentially knowable things is not unlike the pseudo-scientific, yet also entertaining, aesthetic that filmmakers like Curtis and Flaherty would later seek. Part of the fair experience involved the juxtaposition of Indigenous cultural reconstructions and performances with exhibits of modern technological progress, thus reinforcing the primitivity and backwardness of the former.²⁸ The same was true in motion pictures as Indigenous subjects were juxtaposed, through a variety of programming permutations,

²⁴ Rosalind C. Morris, *New Worlds From Fragments: Film, Ethnography, and the Representation of Northwest Coast Cultures* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 12.

²⁵ Fatima Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

²⁶ Tom Gunning, “Early Cinema as Global Cinema: The Encyclopedic Ambition,” in *Early Cinema and the “National”*, eds. Abel, Bertellini & King (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2016), 11-16.

²⁷ Paul Greenhalgh, *Ephemeral Vistas: The Expositions Universelles, Great Exhibitions, and World’s Fairs, 1851-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 87.

²⁸ See Greenhalgh, 107.

with actualities depicting the modern experience. This juxtaposition did not necessarily situate Indigenous peoples and cultures within modernity but more emphatically demarcated them as not modern. Cataloging in this manner was part of modern culture. And audiences were not necessarily obliged to assume a strict dichotomy but could instead experience some semblance of pre-modernity from the relative safety of their modern position. I use the term “relative” because live performers often assaulted fairgoers. One contemporaneous report claimed that the United States government deported the Esquimaux Village performers after one attempted “to kill fat spectators.”²⁹ Alison Griffiths’s notion of “Wondrous Difference” stresses both amazement with, and estrangement from, the subject in such contexts. The image and/or subject is both fetishized and Othered: “what unites the experience of the museumgoer, fairground visitor, and early cinema spectator is a recurring ambivalence between the spectator’s desire for immersion on the one hand and for separation and distance from the threat of alterity on the other.”³⁰ The ambivalence regarding modernity—fascination with a premodern past alongside a desire to remain in the modern present—also reflects anxieties about modern integration and concomitantly reifies racism. Early filmmakers supplemented these salvage narratives with films like *Indian Day School* and *Club Swinging*, where the threat of the racial Other is mitigated through disciplined assimilation.

²⁹ “Telegrams in Brief,” *Iowa County Democrat* (Mineral Point, WI), September 5, 1901, 2. This account was notably published only one day before President McKinley was assassinated at the Exposition.

³⁰ Alison Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference: Cinema, Anthropology, and Turn-of-the-Century Visual Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 73.

Rony traces the etymological link between the terms “race” and “nation,” which coincided in the late eighteenth century, demonstrating a poignant connection between discourses of race and nationalism/imperialism. The idea of “race” was established through constructed categories of difference and history, and “film would inscribe race through the body (human difference) and would be evidence of history (which was also a race).”³¹ Robert Rydell observes how fair exhibits progressed in a way that spectators would progressively see darker-skinned Indigenous subjects toward the end, thus compartmentalizing, categorizing, and Othering visual attributes as race.³² With regard to these exhibits, Griffiths asserts, “through repetition, cultural performances thus become ‘routinized and trivialized,’ the trope of performance providing the perfect representational vehicle for containing and diffusing this threat of difference.”³³ Jacques Lacan regards gaze as the act of being looked at and identifies it as pluralistic, pre-existing the act of seeing by the seer: “our relation to things, in so far as this relation is constituted by the way of vision, and ordered in the figures of representation... something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree eluded in it.”³⁴ Gaze is not seen but rather imagined and relies on an acknowledging seer. While Indigenous peoples turned ethnographic subjects became reconstructed through White gaze, fair performers could interact with the crowds and return their gaze, thus producing

³¹ Rony, 26-28.

³² Robert Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at the American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 65.

³³ Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference*, 52.

³⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Miller, trans. Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998, originally published, 1973), 73.

their own typification of White colonizers. This return gaze is less tangible in motion pictures. The cinematic performer can only solicit the gaze of the camera. The actual spectator is both abstract and omnipresent, thus empowering the colonizer to look without the fear of being looked at or physically assaulted.

Despite the colonial gaze, perpetuation of the vanishing Indian trope, and representations of Native performers in wild west shows as violent antagonists, by the 1890s Indigenous peoples had much to gain from participation in these modern performative roles. Performing may have been preferable to reservation life, Indian School trade labor, or jail in the case of Wounded Knee victims, and it allowed at least some degree of cultural preservation in the face of inevitable assimilation.³⁵ In their study of Mohawk performer Princess White Deer, Ruth Phillips and Trudy Nicks note that individuals from a variety of different Indigenous communities performed as plains warriors or Indian princesses, utilizing the reenactment formula as a transgressive practice.³⁶ Drawing from Bakhtin, they argue for performative reenactment as “doubleness and ironic unmasking” that calls attention to the cultural interaction between Indigenous North Americans and Europeans, highlighting their “cultural position between two worlds,” and constructing a “co-modernity.”³⁷ Moreover, the specific act of dance is

³⁵ See Joy S. Kasson, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West: Celebrity, Memory, and Popular History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), 211.

³⁶ Ruth B. Phillips & Trudy Nicks, “‘From Wigwam to White Lights’: Popular Culture, Politics, and the Performance of Native North American Identity in the Era of Assimilationism,” in *Historical Reenactment: From Realism to the Affective Turn*, eds. Iain McCalman & Paul A. Pickering (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 160.

³⁷ Phillips & Nicks, 175-76.

an empowering enactment of temporal discontinuity and contingency on the part of the performer. With regard to ethnographic film, Katherine Groo describes dance as a

cultural hieroglyph and a historical document... suggesting that these bodily formations conceal secrets that need to be recovered and deciphered...

Ethnographic cinema offers up the hieroglyph of dance for inspection and study. It seemingly confers stability and stasis onto the practice by indexing its shapes in celluloid and regulating the irregularity of unfamiliar dances with the rhythms of mechanical reproduction. In other words, these films showcase the “wild” movements of the body and cinema’s remarkable capacity to represent those movements while simultaneously endeavoring to bring the contingencies of dance under control.³⁸

The attempt to control these contingencies would begin around 1905. By shifting representational strategies to fictional stereotypes controlled by White male story producers, the potentially resistant or subversive improvisational act of dance was held at bay. As I shall outline later in this chapter, although *Head Hunters* is a film that draws heavily from the traditions of melodrama, the temporally disruptive moments of ritual dance call attention to the history of physical colonization in North America. In this sense, the film is an outlier among American cinema, which had become more fictional and more stereotypical by the 1910s. *Head Hunters* is therefore more aligned with the proto-ethnographies produced at the beginning of the twentieth century’s first decade, particularly films representing Hopis.

In 1901 Edison cameraman James H. White, who also filmed at the Pan-American Exposition that same year, travelled to the Hopi Reservation in Walpi, Arizona. The existing films from that trip include *Moki Snake Dance by Wolpi Indians* (Edison, 1901)

³⁸ Katherine Groo, *Bad Film Histories: Ethnography and the Early Archive* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 107-08.

as well as five films included in the *Indian Snake Dance Series in Moki Land*: *Panoramic View of Moki Land* (Edison, 1901), *Parade of Snake Dancers Before the Dance* (Edison, 1901), *The March of Prayer and Entrance of the Dancers* (Edison, 1901), *Carrying Out the Snakes* (Edison, 1901), and *Line-up and Teasing the Snakes* (Edison, 1901). It is significant that the first film in the series contains a panorama shot. As noted in previous chapters, panoramas were primarily employed for nonfictional purposes (White filmed *Execution of Czolgosz with Panorama of Auburn Prisoner* in the same year). By opening the *Snake Dance Series* with a panoramic image of a vast landscape that could not have been re-created in a studio, viewers would have been immediately encouraged to interpret the images as authentic. This technique became a staple in the travel film genre. For example, *Panoramic View of the White Pass Railroad*, filmed by Edison cameraman Thomas Crahan in the same year as the *Snake Dance Series*, is a landscape-only image that reveals the picturesque mountains of Northwest Canada from a stationary position aboard a moving train. By today's standards it is less a panning camera shot, where the operator physically moves the camera horizontally, than a tracking shot in which the camera is mounted to a mobile apparatus. The effect is nevertheless similar. Viewers are visually transported to a natural premodern setting, albeit one in which modernity, represented by the visible railroad tracks, is inevitably encroaching. The same aesthetic is at play in the *Snake Dance Series*. Natural western landscapes and Indigenous culture are conflated into one archetypal realm of faraway, both geographically and temporally, premodern exoticism.

Stage Leaving Hoppi House and Panorama of Grand Canyon (1902) is non-extant, but its description in the original Selig catalog elucidates a great deal. It recalls the Edison *Snake Dance Series* as the title alludes to representations of Hopis and panoramic camera angles. The catalog describes a specific chronology from the perspective of White tourists, opening with a view of a Hopi family, then tourists leaving for the “Bright Angel Trail,” followed by a panorama of the canyon.³⁹ Walpi was a frequent stop for White tourists traveling to the Grand Canyon, and the Hopi reservation became a museum-like attraction, both a visual spectacle and an economic exchange in which Hopi arts and crafts were commodified. The Moki Snake Dance was performed for visitors free of charge until 1903 when the Hopi implemented a \$1 admission fee.⁴⁰ Viewers of *Stage Leaving Hoppi House* would have been privileged with a similar experience as the tourists depicted, seeing the Hopi reservation before hitting the Bright Angel Trail in the canyon. Like the *Snake Dance Series*, western landscapes and Indigenous culture exemplified similar visual desires. But the presence of actual tourists, or at the very least the presumption of their presence in the stagecoach, would have revealed modernity much more visibly, encouraging viewers to identify with the tourists and see themselves as empowered colonizers. The threat of Native transgression, through dance or otherwise, was effectively suppressed.

While the representational strategy of juxtaposing Euro-America with Native America for the purpose of demarcation would have primarily been a programming

³⁹ Musser, *Motion Picture Catalogs*.

⁴⁰ “The Modern Indian Charges White Man an Admission Fee if He Wants to See Moki Snake Dance,” *Waterbury Evening Democrat* (Waterbury, CT), October 26, 1903, 7.



Figure 4.2: *Hopi Indians Dance for Theodore Roosevelt at Walpi, Arizona* (Edison, 1913), what appears to be a Snake Dance



Figure 4.3: *Hopi Indians Dance for Theodore Roosevelt at Walpi, Arizona* (Edison, 1913), Roosevelt and his family spectating

decision in 1902, it became more normalized in travelogues and western fictions later in the decade and into the 1910s. Edison's staff returned to Walpi in 1913 to film what would become *Hopi Indians Dance for Theodore Roosevelt at Walpi, Arizona*. The existing film is relatively short (approximately four minutes) compared to the increasingly longer multi-reel films that were dominating the industry in the early 1910s. It depicts a Hopi dance that is primarily shown from a wide high angle view looking down at the Hopi performers. Encircling them is a crowd of tourists, though it is likely that some are Hopis in modern dress, including then ex-President Theodore Roosevelt, whom we only see close-up halfway through the film. The final few images display the Hopi performers from a much closer eye-level view, which is intercut with two panoramic shots of the crowd and neighboring Arizona scenery. While the potential for performative resistance is not necessarily erased, the presence of a United States leader amid this reenacted Indigenous ceremony authoritatively contains any potential threat. The motion picture spectator is encouraged to assume the point of view of the on-looking crowd. Additionally, a rope clearly demarcates the performers from the crowd of spectators, and the encircling pattern of the latter visually, and psychologically, imprisons the Hopi performers.

Along with *Stage Leaving Hoppi House and Panorama of Grand Canyon*, beginning in 1902 Selig produced a variety of films recorded by cameraman Harry Hale Buckwalter on location in Indigenous communities, all of which, to my knowledge, are

unfortunately non-extant.⁴¹ Buckwalter was also responsible for *Tracked by Bloodhounds* (aforementioned in Chapter Two) and *The Hold-up of the Leadville Stage* (1905), both filmed on location in Colorado, the latter a response to the ongoing popularity of *The Great Train Robbery*. *Navajo Blanket Weaving* (Selig, 1902) was described as two Navajo women weaving, and *Navajo Blanket Weaving* (Selig, 1902) depicted the process of making a bracelet. Like *Stage Leaving Hoppi House*, though with a less visible modern presence, these films are examples of the touristic desire to interact with Indigenous culture. Jane Simonsen asserts the intersectional connection between Native crafts and domestic women's work, as well as their distinguishability from industrialized wage labor. Indigenous women artists appealed to antimodern sensibilities: "Their crafts were regarded with nostalgia and placed within the sentimental economy of the middle-class home, where their alleged authenticity could evoke the images of community, maternalism, and pastoralism that, for whites, were associated with prehistory."⁴² However, the appeal for premodern pastoralism was manifested through a modern market economy that commodified craft aesthetics:

Praise for the primitive celebrated the authentic productions of native artists while eliding the real economic relations that governed their production—emphasizing love over money, and connection to nature over labor. The growing market for native arts and crafts, according to Ruth Phillips and Christopher Steiner, "signal[ed] the entry of colonized people into industrial-age consumerism" through cottage industries that used factorylike systems of production.⁴³

⁴¹ My analysis of these films will, therefore, be based on the original Selig catalog descriptions, available in Musser, *Motion Picture Catalogs*.

⁴² Jane E. Simonsen, *Making Home Work: Domesticity and Native American Assimilation in the American West, 1860-1919* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 184.

⁴³ Simonsen, 198-99.

Lears similarly notes how Arts and Crafts ideology—which was initially a Protestant movement that emphasized making, not simply consuming—inadvertently informed “the revitalization and transformation of capitalist cultural hegemony.”⁴⁴ Selig’s motion pictures not only represented commodity fetishism but also participated in it by commercializing these films.

Buckwalter was primarily based in Colorado during this period, collecting footage at several reservations across the Southwest and in Wyoming. He also exhibited his own films in this region, quite possibly on the reservations as well. However, the primary target audience was likely not Indigenous communities. Andrew Brodie Smith argues that Buckwalter’s Selig films were intended to be historical, instructional, and entertaining, while likewise demonstrating that White urbanites from the East could travel safely to Colorado.⁴⁵ The catalog description for *Ute Indian Snake Dance* (Selig, 1903) claims their photographer (presumably Buckwalter) had a long-established relationship with a Ute Sub-Chief. It is also advertised as entertaining and scientific/ethnological. Although there is scarce evidence to elucidate more about this particular non-extant film, its producers’ promotional strategy suggests that it was a proto-pseudo-ethnographic attraction, which purported to be educational but more accurately served as a visual spectacle and commercial commodity for a predominantly White audience.

⁴⁴ Lears, 73.

⁴⁵ Andrew Brodie Smith, *Shooting Cowboys and Indians: Silent Western Films, American Culture, and the Birth of Hollywood* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2003), 18-20.

Representations of prohibited Indigenous practices in Selig films would have also performed both a salvage function, archiving these practices while allowing Indigenous peoples to continue performing their culture, and an attraction-based function for White spectators. Both *Indian Fire Dance* (Selig, 1903) and *Shoshone Indians in Scalp Dance* (Selig) claim to depict rituals outlawed by the United States government. We should assume that some exhibitors, and probably Buckwalter himself, informed audiences that these rituals were outlawed in order to maintain ethnological verisimilitude but also to promote the films as curious taboos. On the one hand, the illegality of such acts undermined the authority of White colonial rule. On the other hand, if contextualized as ethnological (archived premodern past), as the catalog advertised, and as exhibitors would have concomitantly been encouraged to disseminate, these films would have more easily been interpreted as reaffirmations of the fact that exotic Indigenous rituals were no longer part of the modern present.

One potential outlier to Smith's model of Selig films as confirmations of Indigenous containment is *Indians Charging on the Photographer* (Selig, 1903). According to the original catalog, the scene was arranged in order for the subjects to charge past the camera, much like the heroics of United States military cavalry charges that became popular in the late 1890s. But instead of conforming to this White archetype, the "Indians" attempt to run over the photographer. Was this a staged scene or an authentic transgressive act performed by the film's subjects? While we can never know, I am inclined to consider the plausibility that this was in fact staged. At the very least, it was a happy accident. Otherwise, why include it in the catalog? Either way, colonial

resistance may have been thematized but inevitably only from the perspective of the White filmmakers and exhibitors. White audiences would have been more likely to interpret the event as a stereotypical form of Native aggression.

In 1905 Biograph cataloged at least nine films, all non-extant, related to Indigenous subject matter. Since Biograph had established a reputation for filming authentic live actualities, not reenactments, with their war-related material, it is reasonable to assume that these films were recorded on location. They included *Crow Indian Festival Dance*, *Crow Indian War Dance*, *Crow Indians Harvesting*, *Moqui Indian Rain Dance*, *Navajo Indian Foot Race*, *Navajo Indian Horse Race*, *Navajo Indian Tug-of-War*, *Navajo Indians Wrestling*, and *Rain Dance at Orabi*. The Navajo subjects demonstrate an interest in athletic competition, not present in most proto-ethnographic films. In fact, Navajos competing athletically was one of the more popular fair attractions in the Southwest during this period.⁴⁶

As the popularity of the western genre escalated later in the decade, these forms of ethnological actuality became significantly less prevalent but nevertheless continued to be produced. Kevin Brownlow identifies several such films produced throughout the early 1910s, including *Life and Customs of the Winnebago Indians* (Selig, 1912), *See America First* (Pathé, 1912), *Indian Dances and Pastimes* (Bison, 1912), and the thirteen reel *History of the American Indian* (Wanamaker, 1915), which filmed on location at the Crow Reservation in Wyoming and depicted ceremonies like “the medicine stick and the

⁴⁶ For example, see “Final Meeting of the Fair Executive Committee Last Night,” *Albuquerque Evening Citizen*, September 15, 1905, 2.

ceremonial steam bath,” and staged pre-European contact battle scenes that the Crow performers “ensured were scrupulously accurate.”⁴⁷ Department store magnate Rodman Wanamaker hired filmmaker Joseph K. Dixon to produce this and several other film projects; a compilation of which is currently archived as *Indian Communication: Sign Language of the North American Indian* (1908-1913) at the American Museum of Natural History, which helped spawn the Northwestern Film Corporation in the latter 1910s. Most of this footage is missing. However, there is extant footage of Dixon’s expedition to the Crow Agency in 1908, which the Smithsonian Institution has preserved and is available online.⁴⁸ The extant material contains a reenactment of the Battle of Little Bighorn, played by Crow, not Sioux, though, as previously noted in reference to Phillips and Nicks, this inaccuracy was quite common. Dixon’s expeditions were intended to create educational programming for Wanamaker’s department store patrons. The architecture of Wanamaker’s was based on fairs and exhibits of the late nineteenth century and became an amalgamated site for consumerism and education/news dissemination.⁴⁹ The films were exhibited in the department store to middle-class consumers, crowds significantly larger than typical Nickelodeon audiences, and Dixon performed lectures alongside his motion pictures.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Kevin Brownlow, *The War, the West, and the Wilderness* (New York: Knopf, 1978), 335.

⁴⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wubt3-lrO0I&feature=youtu.be>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CtsWPQsn-Tw&feature=youtu.be>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CDo9l1TxOFY>

⁴⁹ Caitlin McGrath, “‘A Vanishing Race’? The Native American Films of J.K. Dixon,” in *Screening Race in American Nontheatrical Film*, eds. Allyson Nadia Field & Marsha Gordon (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 33.

⁵⁰ McGrath, 40.

Griffiths argues that Wanamaker's and Dixon's films were primarily assimilationist.⁵¹ However, Caitlin McGrath suggests that we should view the extant material in the context of Wanamaker's and Dixon's broader body of work, which was later committed to Native American advocacy.⁵² One image in the series depicts Crows attending a Christian mass; they exit the church in a military-like single-file line that is bookended by two Christian Nuns. It is not entirely clear whether these images are celebrating religious assimilation or pointing out its inherent problems. However, the positioning of these films within the context of a consumer space would have conflated educational value with commodification. It is therefore difficult to assume that Indigenous culture was presented purely for its intrinsic educational value. Although the exhibition of proto-ethnographic films provided middle-class audiences an opportunity to view ostensibly higher brow motion pictures outside of the predominantly working-class nickelodeons, viewers were ultimately immersed in an environment of consumption, watching Indigenous subjects on screen while being encouraged to shop.

Brownlow also asserts that James Young Deer, whose career will be outlined in greater detail in the following section, recorded documentary footage of Yumas in 1912.⁵³ Additionally, Jennifer Peterson has identified another Selig film from this period, *The Taos Indians at Home—New Mexico* (1912).⁵⁴ The Selig films were quite possibly the

⁵¹ See Alison Griffiths, "Science and Spectacle: Native American Representation in Early Cinema," in *Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the Indian in American Popular Culture*, ed. S. Elizabeth Bird (Boulder: Westview Press, 2018), 86.

⁵² McGrath, 41.

⁵³ Brownlow, 331.

⁵⁴ Jennifer Lynn Peterson, *Education in the School of Dreams: Travelogues and Early Nonfiction Film* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 251.

most widely distributed. Several contemporaneous accounts note that many public school superintendents throughout the country adopted *Life and Times of Winnebago Indians* for educational screenings.⁵⁵ The film was also regarded as a “picturesque educational picture,” where Winnebagos had been displaced from Illinois to Wisconsin but are “not a vanishing race, and their standards of morality and education place them among the highest type of modern Indians.”⁵⁶ These representations of cultural interaction seem bent on celebrating modern assimilation. Indeed, conspicuous emphasis on Indigenous relationships with modernity seems to have magnified by the 1910s, as opposed to the archetypal pre-modernism more common in the films of the previous two decades. Therefore, antimodernism seems to have become less prevalent by the mid-1910s, at least in the context of nonfiction, though I intend to demonstrate how antimodern themes persisted in Curtis’s work.

As western travelogues developed throughout the 1910s, it became increasingly more common to see indigeneity juxtaposed with commercial tourism, as a way to clearly dichotomize perceived primitivity from modernity. While these films purported to be authentic, Peterson observes that the emphasis on authenticity obfuscated the fact that they were ultimately constructed fantasies of reality. This fantasy creation involved “a form of subjectification... that requires authentication by native participation and performance,” according to Peterson, who also contends that Indigenous peoples could

⁵⁵ For example see “Julia Murdock Explains Educational Value of Antarctic Moving Pictures,” *The Washington Times* (Washington, D.C.), May 9, 1913, 10.

⁵⁶ “‘A Man in Making’ Big Feature at Royal,” *Bisbee Daily Review* (Bisbee, AZ), November 15, 1912, 5.

“maintain a small amount of control in this dynamic, for they are the ones enacting their performance, even if this performance is framed, edited, titled, and marketed by nonindigenous filmmakers out to make a profit.”⁵⁷ But the empowered position maintained by the filmmakers, and White tourists/spectators, cannot be overlooked. The colonial narrative is never substantially subverted in these films, and I would argue that it is more visible in films depicting tourists, as in *Stage Leaving Hoppi House* and *Hopi Indians Dance for Theodore Roosevelt*.

Another example of the distinction being drawn between perceived primitivity and modernity is the widely distributed *Picturesque Colorado* (Rex, 1911). The film’s advertising included poster art that foregrounded Indigenous subjects, alluding to them as the main attraction. However, Indigenous representations comprise a small portion of screen time in the film overall. And despite the title, picturesque landscapes are a secondary concern. The focus is primarily on White tourism and the emergence of the modern West. Natural landscapes and Indigenous culture merge into one overarching stereotype of primitivity, serving merely as supplements to counterpoint the modern experience of controlling these objects and subjects through commodity tourism.

Picturesque Colorado opens with a high angle “bird’s eye view” of a busy Denver street, a space that would have seemed familiar to contemporary viewers in other urban centers throughout the country while also teaching them that modern urbanity exists in Colorado. The viewer is then transported to the rural setting of Mt. Corona, where a group of tourists throw snowballs toward the camera. The elicitation of the audience’s gaze

⁵⁷ Peterson, 251.

encourages one to join the fun, as if the spectator were at Mt. Corona engaging in the snowball fight. All of the “picturesque” scenes that follow reveal some semblance of modernity, with a conspicuous emphasis on transportation technologies like trains and automobiles juxtaposed with tourists on horseback. It is clearly a representation of the present, where premodern activities are not historicized but rather exist only as modern touristic desires.

The print of *Picturesque Colorado* that I have access to does not contain the Indigenous subjects represented in the poster art.⁵⁸ The film is comprised of short vignettes, generally containing only one image, of approximately fifteen seconds each. Griffiths reads one of these scenes as depicting a giggling Native woman who forces the camera operator to pan away to a nearby cliff, thus erasing her voice.⁵⁹ I am inclined to assume that the filmmakers were not so self-conscious, particularly since the pan away could have simply been removed. It seems more plausible to consider that the camera operator intended to depict the Native woman alongside the adjoining natural landscape. According to one reviewer, “Artists have vainly attempted to translate on canvas a picture of picturesque Colorado. Rex has accomplished in motion pictures, with the aid of science, what artists have failed to produce.”⁶⁰ While the ethnological impulse may have remained present in Indigenous representations, there is a striking difference here, which

⁵⁸ The film is available at the Library of Congress, which I am currently unable to access due to the Covid-19 pandemic. A 3-minute version is available on DVD. The existing archival print runs 765 feet, the equivalent of 8:30 at 24 frames per second, or 11:30 at 18 frames per second (a more common speed in 1911).

⁵⁹ Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference*, 194.

⁶⁰ “Picturesque Colorado,” *The Evening Times* (Grand Forks, ND), October 4, 1911, 10.

is also evident in *Hopi Indians Dance for Theodore Roosevelt* and may allude to a shift in representational strategies by the 1910s (*Stage Leaving Hoppi House* serving as an early progenitor). Like all of the tourist attractions in *Picturesque Colorado*, Indigenous culture becomes a visual spectacle of the past that, like the natural landscape itself, could be commodified in the present. The tourist copes with modernity by temporarily detaching from modern life to experience the (reconstructed) American West of the past. The cinema's transition to more reflexive representations of tourism by the 1910s, however, fails to comment on Native life in the modern world while also denying Indigenous subjects the cultural dignity to preserve their heritage in some way, as they had to a greater degree in earlier films, like *Sioux Ghost Dance*, where Native agency and mobility is possible and White tourism is less visible, albeit still present.

I began this chapter by noting how a narrow perspective of colonized early motion picture subjects is problematic. There is a certain degree of contextual nuance that might attribute autonomy to such individuals while also marginalizing them, but neither wholeheartedly. Genre categorization is similarly complicated. These films almost unequivocally sought to be both entertaining and ethnographic, a synthesis that might at first seem unusual or inappropriate to twenty-first century audiences but ultimately is not significantly different than many contemporary documentaries. My discussion, however, has admittedly been more critical than celebratory. After more than a decade of formal experimentation, the colonial narrative appears to have gained even more momentum, as the motion picture industry was increasingly colonizing the West, both figuratively and literally. At the same time, the western, which relied on a set of associations developed in

early actualities and travelogues, was flourishing as one of several popular genres by the 1910s. The associations that most Euro-Americans have with Indianness is premised on a variety of cultural forms, but perhaps the greatest influence on the broader perception of Indigenous peoples can be found in Hollywood westerns, which built on the foundation created in the first two decades of cinema.⁶¹

Early Westerns: Closing the Frontier

In one of the earliest book-length studies on motion pictures Vachel Lindsay observes how “the whirlwind of cowboys and Indians with which the photoplay began” demonstrates that “this instrument, in asserting its genius, was feeling its way toward the most primitive form of life it could find.”⁶² The impulse toward primitivity, or pre-modernity, aligns with the aforementioned films here and in previous chapters. A brief and admittedly incomplete overview of early westerns shall therefore provide further evidence for my overarching argument that antimodern impulses motivated the practice of reconstructing the past on film, which in turn ironically informed some of the defining cultural features of American modernity.

A variety of terms were used to describe what we would call “the western” today, including not only the general term “western” but also “cowboy and Indian pictures,” “Wild-West films,” “frontier melodramas,” “shoot-‘em-ups,” and the less common subgenres “settler subjects,” “frontier military films,” “western comedies,” “all Indian

⁶¹ See Rosenthal, 347.

⁶² Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture* (New York: Macmillan, 1915), 261-63.

stories,” and “ranch pictures.”⁶³ In my research, I have also found “western drama” used frequently in the 1910s. Some critics invoked the pejorative designation “Jersey Scenery” to describe western subjects filmed in rural areas of New Jersey that did not resemble the American West.⁶⁴ This phrase disappeared from the cultural lexicon as production migrated to southern California. Many accounts cite *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) as the first motion picture western. However, by 1903 audiences would have been quite familiar with the western mythologies told through dime novels and wild west shows as early as the 1880s. But 1903 was nevertheless a pivotal moment, with the recent publication of Owen Wister’s *The Virginian* (1902), often considered the first non-pulp western novel, and Jack London’s *Call of the Wild* (1903). Several motion picture companies began producing western-esque content during this year, including Biograph’s *Discovery of Bodies* and *Firing the Cabin*, as well as their take on a real historical figure of the West in *Kit Carson*. Bioscope also addressed a historical figure in their (presumably loose) adaptation of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855). Bioscope’s *Hiawatha* (1903) inspired at least four additional adaptations over the following decade: one produced by Joseph Dixon in 1908, another by Kalem in the same year, one by Carl Laemmle’s Independent Movie Pictures (IMP) in 1909, then two in 1913 by Colonial and Kinemacolor. To claim *The Great Train Robbery* as the first motion picture western seems somewhat dubious, but it was unquestionably one of the most popular films of the decade. I have discovered several contemporaneous accounts

⁶³ Andrew Brodie Smith, 6.

⁶⁴ Smith, 54.

indicating that *The Great Train Robbery* continued screening in parts of the country until at least 1909. It is also noteworthy that, despite the dawn of nickelodeons in urban centers, the film was frequently exhibited as part of carnival attractions or live wild west shows.⁶⁵

Over the course of the decade following the release of *The Great Train Robbery*, westerns would become one of the most popular American film genres. Western subjects continued to be produced in 1904, with films like *Brush Between Cowboys and Indians* (Edison), *Cake-Walk* (Biograph), *Cowboys and Indians Fording River in Wagon* (Edison), and *Indians and Cowboys* (Pathé). But despite the continued popularity of *The Great Train Robbery*, there may have been a brief gap in western production between 1904 and 1907 as Pathé took over American nickelodeons with more European-centered themes. However, it cannot be overstated how immensely popular the genre was between 1907 and 1914. According to Abel, 1/5 of pictures produced by American film companies in 1910 were western subjects.⁶⁶ While this period can easily be generalized as the Griffith Biograph years, and Griffith did produce many westerns, all American film producers, including Pathé's production outfit in the United States, participated in this trend.

Representations of Indigenous peoples in early westerns oscillated between romanticized visions of premodern ways of life, parody, and explicit racism toward Natives. Vitagraph produced several westerns: *Indian Bitters; or, The Patent Medicine Man* (1908), *An Indian's Honor* (1908), *Children of the Plains* (1909), *Red Wing's*

⁶⁵ For example, see "The Carnival," *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, ND), July 18, 1907, 2.

⁶⁶ Abel, *Red Rooster Scare*, 172.

Gratitude (1909), and *The Halfbreed's Daughter* (1911).⁶⁷ The catalog description for the non-extant *Indian Bitters* provides an interesting example of a formula for Indigenous representation that never became conventional. White actors reenacted Indigenous dances for this film, and evidence suggests that the film was intended to be comedic.⁶⁸ Parodic reenactment functioned to control and master the past; or, more specifically in this case, as a representational tool for subjugation and the erasure of Indigenous cultural dignity. Another example is *The Call of the Wild* (Biograph, 1908), which despite the title is not based on London's book. George Redfeather (played by White actor Charles Inslee) is a Carlisle graduate who, after a White love interest rejects him, disavows his own assimilated whiteness and returns to the "wild."⁶⁹ This is first illustrated through the motif of alcohol, as Redfeather goes straight for the bottle, then by costume, as he tears off his formal attire and replaces it with a Native headdress. After returning to his people, an unspecified Native tribe of exclusively men, they continue drinking and perform a dance, which seems to parody what would have been a common visual trope in popular entertainment at the time. The familiar image of dancing Indians conflates with a White-constructed, explicitly racist stereotype. Jacqueline Stewart notes a similar formula at play in films representing African American dance as both parodic and conflated with

⁶⁷ Interestingly, Albert E. Smith does not even mention these in his autobiography, *Two Reels and Crank*. In fact, he skips over this period entirely.

⁶⁸ See Musser, *Motion Picture Catalogs*. Also see "Amusements," *Alexandria Gazette* (Alexandria, VA), July 23 1908, 3.

⁶⁹ My synopsis is based largely on that of *Moving Picture World*, available online at <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0000654/>. Because the current print lacks intertitles (not uncommon in 1908), it is difficult to contextualize the entirety of the plot simply by viewing the film, and contemporaneous viewers likely experienced narrational assistance from exhibitors in this regard.

degenerate behavior such as gambling.⁷⁰ In *The Call of the Wild*, the potential contingencies of dance are subdued through a comedic representational strategy that also demonizes the Indigenous characters who drink excessively then later attempt to rape a White woman (played by Florence Lawrence).

Films like *The Call of the Wild* illustrate how early western producers were somewhat ambivalent in their politics. While it is difficult to look past the explicit racial stereotypes this film reproduces, throughout the pre-1914 western period, the Indian as comedic relief never became a standardized trope. As Joy Kasson observes, “The ‘stage Indian’ might be a figure of terror but was rarely one of humor,” as opposed to the more slapstick-oriented stereotypes of African Americans and the Irish.⁷¹ By turning these groups, which also included Jews and Italians, into figures of comic relief, early filmmakers helped curtail the perceivable threat that they seemed to pose, particularly in urban areas, in the present. By contrast, as a colonized enemy of the past, Indigenous peoples served as representational, no longer real, antagonists. Drawing from prior media forms like dime novels and wild west shows, there was a conspicuous attempt to side with Native characters in early westerns. In *The Call of the Wild*, George Redfeather ultimately saves the potential victim and thus maintains some semblance of personal dignity, despite in turn being alienated by both the White and Native communities. The film therefore reads as a halfhearted attempt to problematize assimilation and apologize for colonialism more generally.

⁷⁰ Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 54.

⁷¹ Joy S. Kasson, 213.

While “Indians” were often depicted as villains in early westerns, Smith notes that, prior to 1911, they were occasionally represented as heroes.⁷² Philip Deloria likewise describes the “noble savage” stereotype as “characterized more by sympathy than by violence.”⁷³ This sympathy often motivated assimilationist politics, which assumed that Indigenous peoples were gracious to their colonial benefactors. The overwhelming, and of course not necessarily accurate, sentiment of gratitude is evidenced in many of the film titles themselves: *An Indian’s Gratitude* (Selig, 1908), *Dove Eye’s Gratitude* (Bison, 1909), *Red Wing’s Gratitude* (Vitagraph, 1909), *An Indian’s Gratitude* (Pathé, 1910), *Young Deer’s Gratitude* (Bison, 1910), *The Squaw’s Debt of Gratitude* (Pathé, 1912), as well as numerous titles alluding to Indian “honor” or “devotion.” Before the industry more commonly normalized negative stereotypes, White relationships with Natives were not necessarily antagonistic but rather served to dichotomize what was perceived as civilized from what was perceived as primitive, much like the aforementioned tourism films.⁷⁴ In *An Indian’s Friendship* (Lubin, 1907), for example, the “Indian” serves as an accomplice to the White hero against the “greaser.”⁷⁵ Here the Native character is elevated racially above the pejoratively categorized working-class antagonist of Hispanic or southern European descent. Yet the “Indian” never attains the status of whiteness. Rather, he functions as a sidekick, allowing the White character to invoke, or appropriate, his noble traits in the pursuit of White heroics. Huhndorf suggests

⁷² Andrew Brodie Smith, 57.

⁷³ Philip J. Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 83.

⁷⁴ See Verhoeff, 65.

⁷⁵ The film is non-extant. See Musser, *Motion Picture Catalogs* for a description.

that this appropriation of identity has historically been “a widespread European-American (frequently male) fantasy... going native articulates and attempts to resolve widespread ambivalence about modernity as well as anxieties about the terrible violence marking the nation’s origins.”⁷⁶ This desire on the part of Whites to appropriate Native characteristics has permeated American culture in a variety of ways. One example is *Dances with Wolves* (Tig, 1990), where Union Army Lieutenant John Dunbar (Kevin Costner) escapes his disenchantment with the post-Civil War Euro-American world to live among a group of Lakota Sioux. Distancing oneself from the colonial history of North America allows one to seemingly purge responsibility, though colonialism is inevitably reaffirmed in the process. Additionally, Indigenous cultural appropriation assumes White Americans to be “the proper heirs of ‘Indianness’... Natives could only occupy a subordinate position, in part because they functioned primarily as a means for Westerners’ self-realization.”⁷⁷ Therefore, the “Indian” sidekick character in *An Indian’s Friendship*, and others that would come after, functions less as a representation of Native assimilation or social mobility than an assertion of colonial power through appropriation. But it is also important to recognize a semblance, albeit one cloaked in self-uplift, of colonial shame and regret, a common sentiment in early westerns and rare with regard to representations of other marginalized groups at the time.

Like *The Call of the Wild*, *The Indian Runner’s Romance* (Biograph, 1909) problematizes the assault of women, though in this case it is the cowboys who are the

⁷⁶ Huhndorf, 2.

⁷⁷ Huhndorf, 5, 104.

aggressors. According to the Biograph Bulletins, the film is set around 1867 during the Black Hills Gold Rush (though, historically, the peak of the rush was later in the 1870s).⁷⁸ Blue Cloud, the “Indian Runner,” is made privy to a gold claim, and a group of cowboys kidnap his wife in exchange for the information. Blue Cloud manages to rescue his wife, and their love and ability to overcome the White antagonists is celebrated. Rape and the possibility of miscegenation are seemingly not a concern. *Comata, the Sioux* (Biograph, 1909)—also set in Black Hills, though both films were shot in Cuddebackville, NY⁷⁹—more directly addresses miscegenation, though with the same character archetypes as *The Indian Runner’s Romance*. In *Comata*, the White settler is demonized through his infidelity to Clear Eyes, a Native woman who bears his child. Miscegenation leads to controversy, and the White antagonist is to blame, while a benevolent man of Clear Eyes’s own race, Comata, is the savior, much like Blue Cloud in *The Indian Runner’s Romance*. While these films seem to strive for progressive-minded treatment of indigeneity and colonial history—though in this sense alone, *The Indian Runner’s Romance* inverts the traditional cowboy/Indian roles somewhat successfully—the treatment of women is troubling. As commonly portrayed in Griffith films, women are sympathized with but not empowered. They represent a traditional image of pristine femininity, perhaps associated with virginity, which is threatened in some way, thus reducing them to damsels in distress to be rescued by men. In *Comata*, the White female love interest seeks consolation in her father, a comforting paternal figure who affords her

⁷⁸ Eileen Bowser & Paolo Cherchi Usai, *The Griffith Project* (London: British Film Institute, 1999-2008), vol. 3 p. 6.

⁷⁹ Bowser & Usai, vol. 3 p. 39.

sympathy. Clear Eyes, embodying the “poor squaw” stereotype, has no such figure other than Comata who, in the end, may or may not father her mixed-race child. Similar to George Redfeather, Clear Eyes and her child find themselves in a position between the White and Indigenous worlds, displaced from both communities. Comata’s role in this family seems ambivalent and not particularly optimistic. In fact, according to the Biograph Bulletins, Clear Eyes takes the child alone to her home in the mountains but will inevitably die along the way.⁸⁰

The ambivalent politics of early westerns remained until more explicitly sexist and racist cowboy heroes became the norm in the 1920s. Pointing to the Broncho Billy films of the 1910s, Smith observes how early westerns were generally kind to women, albeit in the guise of Victorian values like domesticity and religion.⁸¹ This ambivalence was also present in the representation of gun violence. There is an interesting moment in *Comata* when the unarmed hero, Comata, confronts the armed White settler yet somehow prevails. The film denounces the use of firearms to solve conflicts, an uncommon representational strategy in later Hollywood westerns. There are, however, early examples of the American fascination with gunplay, present in war pictures (see Chapter Three) as well as westerns referred to as “shoot-‘em-ups.” *The Great Train Robbery*, for example, ends with a climactic shootout, as well as the famous image of the bandit firing directly toward the camera. There is also a moment during the chase sequence in which the bandits fire their guns into the air, for apparently no purpose other than visual

⁸⁰ Bowser & Usai, vol. 3 p. 39. This could either be an alternate ending or a more fully contextualized narration of the film’s conclusion.

⁸¹ Andrew Brodie Smith, 134.

spectacle. Representations of firearms have also historically served to dichotomize colonizers with guns from Indigenous peoples without guns. While guns are literal weapons for colonial violence, they also figuratively connote modern weaponry and ironically distinguish White settlers as civilized.

However, early westerns frequently de-romanticized gun violence, often in an apparent attempt, albeit one that is haphazard and not entirely successful, toward colonial apologism. In *The Redman's View* (Biograph, 1909), “The Conquerors,” who all carry rifles, disrupt the rural bliss of Indigenous life. Natives mediate a dispute non-violently, though only because they agree to migrate elsewhere, leaving behind one of their women for the gun-toting settlers. Another group of colonists displaces them yet again. As their “Chieftain” lies dying, they perform “The Song of Death.” This brief song and dance ritual is somewhat reminiscent of earlier proto-ethnographic films. However, the all-White cast’s attempt to reconstruct an authentic ethnological scene seems haphazard and trite, premised on stereotypes, not authenticity. Upon attempting to save the female love interest left behind, one young Native boy faces certain death, but at the last moment, the benevolent leader of the White settlers saves him. Yet the question remains... where will they go? It is not necessarily a hopeful conclusion. Drawing from contemporaneous reviews that categorized *The Redman's View* as “editorial,” Gunning praises the film for its social commentary and innovative style.⁸² Any potential social commentary, however, is complicated by a host of racist and sexist allusions. The film’s title, perhaps most conspicuously, is not only pejorative but also assumes that the White filmmakers and

⁸² See Bowser & Usai, vol. 3 pp. 124-26.

performers can adequately re-create an authentic Indigenous perspective. Additionally, the Native characters are peaceful and sympathetic but antiheroic. The leader of the White settlers becomes the benevolent patriarch. On the one hand, it is important to recognize these early Griffith westerns as attempts to problematize America's colonial past, but on the other hand, Griffith's films inevitably re-narrativize colonial rhetoric while also reifying patriarchy.

Smith observes that around one hundred actors of Indigenous descent were living in New York and unemployed around this time, however, White actors were often used to perform Native characters.⁸³ The use of White actors playing Native characters had doubly racist undertones. Not only did this casting practice deny work to real Indigenous descendants who had already experienced a history of subjugation, but it was also often justified by the assumption that White actors were superior performers and thus better at re-creating Indianness.⁸⁴ Nonetheless, as previously mentioned, there remained a space for Indigenous artists to participate in the nascent medium. Popular figures such as Red Wing, James Young Deer, William Eagleshirt, Chief Dark Cloud, Dove Eye Dark Cloud, Luther Standing Bear, Red Eagle, and Standing Horse had assimilated into White culture, and many had already established theatrical careers in wild west shows. James Young Deer—who claimed to be Winnebago but was later discovered to be of mixed-race descent, possibly including Nanticoke—made his directorial debut in 1909 with *The Falling Arrow* (Lubin), a non-extant film summarized in the Lubin catalog as a

⁸³ See Andrew Brodie Smith, 84.

⁸⁴ See Verhoeff, 62.

protagonist (played by Young Deer himself) receiving consent to marry a White woman.⁸⁵ Unlike in Griffith's films, an interracial relationship is embraced in this story line. Young Deer would go on to marry Red Wing (Lillian St. Cyr), one of the more widely visible film stars of Indigenous (Winnebago) descent, who attended Carlisle and later starred in the important cinematic milestone (and Cecil B. DeMille's directorial debut) *The Squaw Man* (Lasky, 1914). Young Deer and Red Wing collaborated regularly in a variety of theatrical performances from 1906 to 1909 and subsequently continued to do so on screen. Deloria often refers to them as if they were a directorial team.⁸⁶ Yet Red Wing had a far more prolific acting career, and Young Deer directed several films without her. The visibility of their names in film titles like *Young Deer's Bravery* (Bison, 1909) *Young Deer's Gratitude* (Bison, 1910), and *Red Wing's Gratitude* (Vitagraph, 1909), the latter of which was particularly well-received, helped promote their brand of authentic Indianness and, temporarily at least, elevated them to stardom. This landed Young Deer in the employ of American Pathé, where he would serve as the head of their West Coast office in Edendale, CA from 1911 to 1914.

Before migrating West in 1911, Pathé produced several westerns in New Jersey. Despite the "red rooster scare" Abel alludes to, by 1910 Pathé acknowledged the need to cater to more Americanized themes. *White Fawn's Devotion: A Play Acted by a Tribe of Red Indians in America* (Pathé, 1910), directed by Young Deer and starring Red Wing, was among one of these attempts. White Fawn (Red Wing) is married to a White settler

⁸⁵ Musser, *Motion Picture Catalogs*.

⁸⁶ See Deloria, 94-103.

who discovers that he has inherited a fortune and announces that he will be leaving her and their mixed-race daughter. After White Fawn fails to commit suicide, the child assumes her father to be a murderer and seeks assistance from a nearby Indigenous community. A shootout ensues, followed by a chase sequence in which the “Indian Chief” captures the settler. The child is then forced, rather aggressively, to execute her father. However, as an intertitle reads, “White Fawn arrives in time to save him.” His life is spared, and the family reconciles, acknowledging White Fawn’s devotion to her husband despite his intent to leave and seek his inheritance. While the film assumes similar patriarchal themes as Griffith’s oeuvre, there are noticeable differences. The “Indian Chief,” though victorious in the Griffithian chase and capture sequence, is ultimately villainized, not sympathized with, a curious representational strategy for *Young Deer* and *Red Wing*. The conclusion feels neither melancholic nor apologetic. As the Indigenous community, to which they no longer belong, banishes the family, it is assumed (at least by this viewer) that they will remain together, inherit the Husband/Father’s fortune, and head East to integrate into White society. It is a unique western narrative, albeit one produced at a time when there were few standard narrative formulas, that does not elicit nostalgia for the past but rather optimism for an assimilationist future. Indigeneity is not disavowed outright, but the premodern lifestyle of this particular community certainly is. As a modern citizen of Indigenous descent, it makes sense that *Young Deer* would position his characters within a framework of assimilation in the present, not a yearning for “going native” as was more commonly felt from a middle-class White perspective.

As Young Deer and Red Wing headed West with Pathé, the New York Motion Picture Company hired Mona Darkfeather (Josephine Workman) in response. Despite her Indian-esque pseudonym, Workman was White. The use of trans-racial pseudonyms was not particularly common but certainly aligned with the pervasiveness of performative appropriations like blackface and yellowface. The competition between Red Wing and Workman was ultimately one that Red Wing could not keep up with. Throughout the early 1910s, Young Deer's films negotiated the boundaries between assimilation and resistance, negative stereotypes and dignified representations, perhaps due to industry pressures to be more White-centric. On some level, though, this ambivalence may have been part of Young Deer's transgression. With regard to *An Up-to-Date Squaw* (Pathé, 1911), Joanna Hearne argues that the presence of stereotypes encouraged audiences to recognize them.⁸⁷ It is important to contextualize how the "squaw man" stereotype became popularized beginning around 1905 with the play *The Squaw Man*, written by Edward Milton Royle & Julie Opp Faversham, which was adapted for the screen in 1914. White men seek intimate relationships with Native women in similar narratives. Daniel Bernardi describes this paradigm as "the white male is motivated by loneliness and lust... the non-white female is motivated by love and the desire to assimilate."⁸⁸ Young Deer was responding to these stereotypes in a way not dissimilar from Oscar Micheaux's prolific body of work that, beginning in the late 1910s, attempted to counter the

⁸⁷ Hearne, *Native Recognition: Indigenous Cinema and the Western* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 62.

⁸⁸ Daniel Bernardi, "The Voice of Whiteness: D.W. Griffith's Biograph Films (1908-1913)," in *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema*, ed. Daniel Bernardi (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 117.

undignified representation of African Americans in mainstream cinema, particularly *Birth of a Nation*, while also including negative representations of African Americans in his films. For Young Deer, like Micheaux after him, assimilation works but if, and only if, based on mutual respect. As Andrew Brodie Smith argues, “In having his Indian characters seek to marry white women, Young Deer insisted that these protagonists be seen not merely as noble savages but as manly heroes who through their bravery have earned the right of full and equal citizenship.”⁸⁹ But *White Fawn* seems to revert back to the “squaw man” stereotype. Perhaps the film’s ambivalence is an assertion of anti-assimilationist politics, or at least one in which assimilation is problematized and not simply celebrated. Hearne alludes to this possibility:

In Young Deer’s films, visualizing interracial contestation over Native familial continuity and national identity—in ways that the boarding school portrait sequences mask—also signals Indigenous resistance to dominant images and narratives of assimilation as progress, underscoring instead Indigenous counterclaims to both children and future civic identity... In reworking the ‘squaw man’ narratives of Native disinheritance, these filmmakers tell stories that locate Native presence from within the very generic forms that try to erase them.⁹⁰

Rather than attempt to reconcile Young Deer’s films entirely, I would suggest that the sense of representational ambivalence across his relatively short-spanning oeuvre may be an indication of industry transitions that were happening rapidly, which hindered his ability to truly voice Indigenous perspectives.

More importantly, perhaps, by the 1910s the western film had developed into more of a visual attraction of the West than a genre bent on character development.

⁸⁹ Andrew Brodie Smith, 93.

⁹⁰ Hearne, *Native Recognition*, 96-99.

Although preceding theatrical traditions had some degree of influence, the ability to actually record western landscapes transformed the western film into a unique attraction. From 1909 to 1910 Selig adopted wild west show themes—for example, the United States cavalry rescuing settlers being attacked by Indians—with *Boots and Saddles*, *In the Bad Lands*, *On the Warpath*, and *Across the Plains*. Working in southern California under the New York Motion Picture Company, Thomas Ince later attempted this format in a manner more like documentaries of historical reenactments. Bill Cody himself even produced and starred in a motion picture adaptation of his Wild West show with *The Life of Buffalo Bill* (Buffalo Bill & Pawnee Bill, 1912). As the popularity of wild west shows waned, this format never became as dominant as the fictional western. Of course, “fictional” may not necessarily be the best way to describe westerns from this period. Nanna Verhoeff astutely observes that landscape (and indeed, the term “western,” eventually adopted wholeheartedly, alludes to the essentiality of place), as well as the ambivalence regarding whether western events were distant or recent past, demonstrates how early westerns were hybrid fictions/nonfictions.⁹¹ By employing strategies of realism, these films attempted not so much to be slices of life, like actualities, but to reconstruct an authentic past distinguishable from the present.⁹² While initially drawing from carnival and wild west show attractions to some degree, as well as the nascent forms of both fiction and nonfiction motion pictures that came before, the western genre would inevitably become a genre associated with on location realism.

⁹¹ Nanna Verhoeff, *The West in Early Cinema: After the Beginning* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 19.

⁹² See Verhoeff, 102.

Among other factors, the industry's migration to southern California was due to an increasing desire for western authenticity. Helen Hunt Jackson's 1884 novel *Ramona* became a cultural symbol associated with this geographical region. According to Chon Noriega, tourists often confused this historical fiction with real history: "tourism would mediate between the mythical and the historical, and the past and the present," and the film adaptation encouraged viewers "to visit the 'real' sites and people who now served as a marker for the past and the fictional text."⁹³ Jackson also wrote *A Century of Dishonor* (1881), a treatise on the history of Indigenous subjugation in the North American West. Biograph adapted *Ramona* for the screen in 1910.

Set in the aftermath of the Mexican-American War (1846-48), *Ramona* presents an inversion of the "squaw man" plot, though this was not a familiar literary formula when Jackson wrote the novel in 1884. The female love interest, Ramona (Mary Pickford), discovers that she has Native blood. As in *The Redman's View*, White conquerors with guns continually displace Ramona and her lover, Alessandro (Henry B. Walthall). The subtitle of the Biograph version is "A Story of the White Man's Injustice to the Indian." However, there is no heroic redemption narrative. Alessandro is killed, and Ramona plays the "poor squaw" role toward an ambiguous, but certainly tragic, end (though in the novel she does return to her previous lover). It is one of the first films to identify the location—Camulos, Ventura County—where it was actually filmed. The mountainous landscape is conspicuously present, particularly in the tragic concluding

⁹³ Chon A. Noriega, "Birth of the Southwest: Social Protest, Tourism, and D.W. Griffith's *Ramona*," in *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema*, ed. Daniel Bernardi (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 214.



Figure 4.4: *Ramona* (Biograph, 1910),
Mary Pickford among the mountains of Ventura County, CA

scenes. Verhoeff observes that western landscapes were often painted backgrounds, and contemporaneous accounts indicate that audiences easily spotted these and did not desire them.⁹⁴ As the motion picture medium developed, producers were continually implored to seek verisimilitude, and due to the demand for western subjects, an industry-wide migration to the American West began to take place. Selig and Essanay may have set the standard for landscape authenticity, but it was a standard that most motion pictures inevitably sought.⁹⁵ At first, films were shot on location throughout the West, but for a variety of reasons, southern California became the epicenter.

Along with landscape authenticity, motion picture producers were also occasionally interested in employing real western personas, including Native actors, but

⁹⁴ Verhoeff, 197-98.

⁹⁵ See Andrew Brodie Smith, 64.

the industry quickly neglected this form of verisimilitude. Abel notes that several early film producers—including Bison-101, Kay-Bee, Broncho, and Bison—used real Native subjects at first but jettisoned the practice in favor of White leads as the industry shifted more toward multi-reel features.⁹⁶ Biograph regularly cast Dark Cloud, an Algonquin Carlisle graduate, who later performed as an uncredited general at the Appomattox Surrender depicted in *Birth of a Nation*. But the industry's colonization of Hollywood did not coincide with a decolonization of what was, and has continued to be, a White-centric profession. In fact, it appears as if the formal structuring of the motion picture industry in the early 1910s authoritatively silenced Indigenous voices. Young Deer's abilities became increasingly restricted after 1910, and he had to rely more on stereotypical "Indian" depictions to maintain support. Moreover, these stereotypes, and Indian subjects in general, may have fallen out of favor with audiences by 1914.⁹⁷ This decline in popularity might explain *Head Hunters*' poor reception. The "vanishing Indian" would become the predominant stereotype, which meant that they had to appear as reconstructions of the past, not authentic subjects in the present. And although Curtis's film seems to fall within this paradigm, as a premodern reconstruction of Kwakwaka'wakw life, the presence of real Kwakwaka'wakw actors may have felt too authentic, or too dissimilar from their stereotypical expectations. Smith deduces that, in 1909, approximately half of Essanay's westerns addressed racial conflict in some way, whereas less than 10% of their westerns

⁹⁶ Abel, *Americanizing the Movies* 121.

⁹⁷ See Andrew Brodie Smith, 97.

did this by 1913.⁹⁸ The careers of Young Deer, Red Wing, and many others faded, and the western that would influence the classical Hollywood model began to emerge.

Visually epic battles scenes were increasingly part of this Hollywood model. For example, Selig's "Wild-West" films generally involved a typical narrative in which the United States cavalry rescues a group of White settlers from hostile Natives. Similarly, the New York Motion Picture Company drew heavily from wild west show themes, particularly retaliatory attacks to Native aggressors, and even devised their western subdivision "101 Bison," based on the 101 Ranch Wild West Show in Oklahoma (a location that many film producers considered before settling in California). Thomas Ince oversaw Bison films and filmed in an oversized studio backlot along the Pacific Coast known as Inceville. *Blazing the Trail* (Bison, 1912), starring G.M. Anderson (Broncho Billy), involves a standard wild-west-style plot in which a wagon train of cowboys track down a group of "Indians" who have burned one of their wagons and stolen a White girl. The cowboys defeat the Indians and rescue the girl. The patriarchal damsel in distress trope was a widespread representational pattern. Selig, Bison, and others may have adopted this from Griffith's earlier films, but Griffith was also probably influenced by the Bison-style epic shootout.

Like earlier Griffith films, *The Massacre* (Biograph, 1912) elicits a certain degree of sympathy for the Native characters. Although the White settlers are the protagonists, they are also the aggressors who, unprovoked, ambush the Natives. There are two major battles, the initial ambush and the retaliation. Arguably, "the massacre" is the former, not

⁹⁸ Smith, 59.

the latter, which is most conspicuously suggested by an elongated image of dead Native bodies. *The Battle of Elderbush Gulch* (Biograph, 1913) is a similar film, but Native sympathy is utterly absent. The conflict arises after the “Indians,” who speak an unknown language that is probably entirely fictional, attempt to eat the young heroine’s (Mae Marsh) dogs. This might suggest that Biograph and Griffith were attempting to cater to a different audience than they had previously, one that by 1913 was more interested in seeing Indians as savage antagonists, not sympathetic figures, or perhaps audiences were never particularly interested in sympathetic Indians, and the industry quickly adapted its representational strategy. Gunning has elaborately analyzed *The Battle of Elderbush Gulch* for its innovative alternation between extreme wide panoramas and intimate close-ups, arguing that “Griffith’s dramaturgy picks up both the sweep of action and the vulnerable human detail and interrelates them.”⁹⁹ This pattern is present in *The Massacre* but in a significantly less elaborate form. It is interesting that this sophisticated technique met its fruition in what may have been Griffith’s most explicitly racist film up to that point. The epic nature of the battle sequences in these films draws ideological connections to earlier war pictures. The visual spectacle of such battles is evidence for a sustaining tendency, one that seems to maintain the imperative of earlier attractions and their proclivity toward racist narratives of American colonial exceptionalism.

Cecil B. DeMille’s directorial debut, *The Squaw Man* (Lasky, 1914), was among the first feature films shot in Hollywood and, due to its popularity, is suggestive of where

⁹⁹ Tom Gunning, *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 272.

the dominant culture stood in terms of their perceptions of Indigenous representation. Notably, DeMille's extensive oeuvre has been theorized as an antimodern aesthetic of civic pageantry.¹⁰⁰ In *The Squaw Man*, Nat-u-Ritch (Red Wing) enters into a romance with a renegade Englishman fleeing a false allegation, and they have a child together. Fearing for the life of her mixed-race son, she commits suicide as an act of purging him of his Ute association. This is symbolically represented through an Indigenous cultural relic, a pair of moccasins that she takes with her to death. For the sake of White prosperity, not only does she vanish but her culture vanishes as well. The film leans on two problematic stereotypes. The "poor squaw" was not altogether new, but the "vanishing Indian" trope feels more concretized here than in earlier westerns where Indigenous continuity, or at the very least assimilation, seemed possible. *The Squaw Man* is not about fetishizing Indigenous culture or encouraging Native peoples to assimilate. It is a representational scheme that assumes Indigenous erasure in the present.

The attempt to erase indigeneity was also inherent in production practices. Many Indigenous actors' names were not included in credits, despite the fact that they made up a rather large population in the wild-west-show-style battle films. The reality of enforced Indigenous invisibility, as a White-constructed cultural value, was synonymous with the perceived reality of Native disappearance in western films. The authenticity of the western became based on its repetition of White-constructed cultural values, not its historical reality. In other words, the western created its own simulated reality of the

¹⁰⁰ Sumiko Higashi, "Antimodernism as Historical Representation in a Consumer Culture," in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modern Event*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (New York: Routledge, 1996), 91-112.

nineteenth century American West for twentieth century audiences.¹⁰¹ Many Indigenous actors sought a more authentic, documentary-like formula. In his book *My People the Sioux*, Luther Standing Bear recalls a lengthy conversation with Thomas Ince about making “real Indian pictures,” a proposal Ince never developed.¹⁰² This shift continued into the 1920s, as flashier cowboys like Tom Mix eclipsed William S. Hart’s brand of rugged western primitivity. Richard Slotkin observes: “Hart’s sincere devotion to creating a Western cinema of perceived authenticity and realism paradoxically demanded that he offer only those versions of truth that conformed to the expectations generated by a ‘false’ but culturally prepotent mythology.”¹⁰³ Ironically, the same may have been true for Bill Cody, whose waning popularity in the 1910s could have been buoyed by a more effective use of the motion picture, which had arguably become the most popular entertainment medium. *The Life of Buffalo Bill* (Buffalo Bill and Pawnee Bill Film Co., 1912)—which follows the real Bill in the present as he recollects, and reenacts through a dream sequence, the famous duel between himself and Yellow Hand, one that almost certainly did not happen—consists of a banal series of extremely long takes, not as cinematically savvy as the numerous other “cowboy and Indian pictures” on the market at that time. Joy Kasson suggests, “With so many short, dramatic, fictional film Westerns to choose from, theaters and audiences were not persuaded by the production’s claims to

¹⁰¹ For example, Al Jennings, a real Oklahoma-based bandit turned western actor, struggled in the 1910s as his accurate depictions of Oklahoma in the 1890s did not align with audience’s expectations of western iconography. See Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 236.

¹⁰² See Brownlow, 93.

¹⁰³ Slotkin, 244.

historical authenticity.”¹⁰⁴ It is, however, striking that Cody’s film was released at a moment when wild-west-show-style elements were becoming more prevalent in movies. Themes consistent with Buffalo Bill’s Wild West might have seemed out of place in the cinema between 1908 and 1911, when colonial apologism was more common. While the Buffalo Bill/dime novel mythology created its own simulation of the American West, motion pictures reconstructed this myth into something slightly different but not altogether new. The myth of the West was first imagined as a place in the present. Cinema, along with tourism and other forms of modernity, transformed the West from a historical period of the past to an exotic place of the present imaginary. After all, we refer to this genre as “western,” not “nineteenth-century American history.”

The American cultural idea of the frontier is innately connected to motion pictures and the industry they created. The frontier’s closing, or perhaps more accurately its shift toward something new in the twentieth century, was to a large extent concurrent with the establishment of Hollywood as the film industry’s manufacturing epicenter. The American idea of “going West” transformed into a yearning for stardom, though the drive for individual reinvention and economic success remained its founding principles. Mired in this cultural imaginary was the presumed erasure of indigeneity, the sense that colonization of the West had reached its apotheosis and the “Indian” was gone forever. The development of Hollywood cinema as the closing of the frontier not only physically colonized the West and its peoples, it metaphorically and psychologically colonized the West through racist representational strategies and production practices. The documentary

¹⁰⁴ Joy S. Kasson, 261.

impulse pivoted from these strategies and practices in some ways but ultimately reinforced the false notion of Native disappearance, defining the White point of view of Indigenous modernity as a reclamation of the past, neglecting the realities of Indigenous life in the present.

Pictorialism Erases Modernity: *The North American Indian*

Before moving on to *Head Hunters*, it is useful to outline Curtis's photographic work and how his aesthetic influences and ideological approach framed his overarching oeuvre in both forms of media. He is primarily known for the monumental undertaking pursued in *The North American Indian* (1907-30) (hereafter referred to as *NAI*). In fact, Christopher Lyman's extensive study on Curtis, *The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions:*

Photographs of Indians by Edward S. Curtis, does not even mention his filmmaking endeavors. While the aesthetic sensibility in Curtis's photography is often ambivalent, there is no doubt that contemporaneous pictorialists like Gertrude Käsebier and Alfred Stieglitz influenced him. Pictorialism assumes that the indexical quality of photography can be transformed into art through the photographer's aesthetic intervention, much like Grierson's later assertion about documentary as the creative treatment of reality.

Pictorialism's earliest pedagog was Henry Peach Robinson. Written in 1869, Robinson's *Pictorial Effect in Photography: Being Hints on Composition and Chiaroscuro for Photographers* is a polemical textbook for the aspiring photographer. Robinson asserts that photographs should not be abstracted from reality but also should not empirically represent the real world: "The highest aim of art, therefore, is to render

nature, not only with the greatest truth, but in its most pleasing aspect... Truth may be obtained without art. The exact representation of unselected nature is truth; the same of well-selected nature is truth and beauty. The former is not art, the latter is.”¹⁰⁵ The core of Robinson’s aesthetic was illusion, not realism, but illusions that were nevertheless true to nature. Miles Orvell asserts, “The pictorialist compromise was to place the answer somewhere in between the extremes, and to develop a practice that understood the photographic representation to be a *type* of reality.”¹⁰⁶ To some extent, art in the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries invoked methods, or at least appropriated ideologies, associated with scientific experimentation. Pictorialism was no different but was also never fully empirical. Rather, it concerned itself with not merely recording reality but using the camera to discover something deeper.¹⁰⁷

Additionally, Robinson stresses the importance of opposition to balance an image, much like Sergei Eisenstein’s theories on montage, which were written six decades later. Eisenstein’s montage involves an oppositional conflict between images, as well as within a single image itself—for example, line patterns, eye lines, and lighting contrast—which may be technical or metaphorically abstract.¹⁰⁸ One of Robinson’s more well-known photographs, *Fading Away* (1858), strikingly demonstrates this oppositional aesthetic

¹⁰⁵ Henry Peach Robinson, *Pictorial Effect in Photography: Being Hints on Composition and Chiaroscuro for Photographers* (Pawlet, VT: Helios, 1971, originally published, 1869), 59.

¹⁰⁶ Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 85.

¹⁰⁷ See Orvell, 203.

¹⁰⁸ For example, see Sergei Eisenstein, *The Film Sense*, trans. & ed. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, 1947).

through stark, moody contrast between blacks and whites, what he refers to in his book as “chiaroscuro,” drawing from traditions in Renaissance painting.¹⁰⁹ Chiaroscuro lighting is prevalent in Curtis’s photographic work, perhaps most notably in the Puget Sound landscapes published in *NAI* Volume 9 (1913), and often serves to obfuscate human figures in silhouette from the surrounding natural environment.

Robinson argues that photographers should emphasize either figures *or* landscapes, neither equally.¹¹⁰ But Curtis often demonstrates their oneness. His photographs depict objects—including a variety of Indigenous architecture, art mosaics and rock painting—as well as landscapes and human subjects that are treated both autonomously and in unison. Subjects photographed in nature are enveloped by their surroundings. Conspicuous examples include “Among the Oaks - Apache” (Vol. 1, 1907), “Nature’s Mirror - Navaho” (Vol. 1, 1907), and “Paqusilahl Emerging from the Woods - Qagyuhl” (Vol. 10, 1915). Paqusilahl roughly translates from Kwak’waka as “man of the ground embodied.” The Paqusilahl wears a mask and costume that blends into the natural environment, much like camouflage, though the goal is not to hide from one’s enemies but to immerse oneself in nature. In “Nature’s Mirror,” a reflection along the surface of a body of water duplicates the adjoining scenery, which includes a Navajo figure staring down at the water, who is included within the “mirror.” Curiously, however, the chiaroscuro lighting in many Curtis photos, like the aforementioned Puget Sound landscapes, distinguish human subjects from their surroundings. High contrast creates an

¹⁰⁹ Robinson, *Pictorial Effect in Photography*, 24.

¹¹⁰ Robinson, 51.

oppositional aesthetic between the well-lit natural environment and the dimly-lit, barely visible human subjects. I would argue that this strategic use of lighting serves to deemphasize human subjectivity in favor of nature. Indeed, despite numerous portrait photographs, there is a sense throughout *NAI* that the focus is ultimately on the land and cultural objects, both seemingly of the past, not on the individual people who survive in the present.

In his later writings, Robinson praised impressionism for its mastery of a reconceptualized vision of reality.¹¹¹ Stieglitz likewise supported an impressionistic emphasis on “the mood of a spontaneous moment through atmosphere and light.”¹¹² Käsebier was a contemporary of Stieglitz and one of the first photographers to work with Sioux subjects. Between 1898 and 1901 Käsebier photographed 40 Sioux performers from Buffalo Bill’s Wild West while they were touring in Brooklyn, NY, along with at least nine images of the young Sioux activist Zitkala-Sa.¹¹³ One of Käsebier’s more famous photographs, *The Red Man* (c. 1900), demonstrates the centrality of her subjects’ faces while deemphasizing their costume. This approach counterpointed how Indigenous peoples were being represented in visual and performance culture around the turn of the twentieth century. Barbara Michaels argues that “simplifying the background of portraits was one way that Käsebier saw to bring studio portraiture out of the overstuffed Victorian

¹¹¹ Henry Peach Robinson, *The Elements of a Pictorial Photograph* (New York: Arno Press, 1973, originally published, 1896), 68.

¹¹² Editor’s note in Alfred Stieglitz, “Pictorial Photography,” in *Stieglitz on Photography: His Selected Essays and Notes*, ed. Richard Whelan (New York: Aperture, 2000, originally published, 1899), 116.

¹¹³ Barbara L. Michaels, *Gertrude Käsebier: The Photographer and Her Photographs* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1992), 29.

era into the age of the Arts and Crafts movement.”¹¹⁴ But contrary to the ethos of Arts and Crafts, there is an absence of premodern craftsmanship, with which Indigenous peoples were often associated, in Käsebier’s photographs. By contrast, Curtis’s photographs efface modernity by focusing on traditional Indigenous cultural objects and natural landscapes, in an effort to catalog these things for posterity, while also failing to comment on their reality in the present. Käsebier’s photographs seek truth through the erasure of materiality, to reveal something authentic about the human condition of her subjects, at the risk of neglecting their cultural heritage entirely.

According to Michaels, “Curtis emphasized his subjects’ connection to nature, whereas Käsebier revealed the disparity between the traditionally costumed figures and contemporary life.”¹¹⁵ A good example is *Indians Drawing in Käsebier’s Studio* (c. 1900), which depicts two subjects sitting near a window in a modern urban apartment with visible skyscrapers in the background. This is an important distinction that demonstrates an absence in Curtis’s approach, namely the lack of commentary on the relationship between indigeneity and the modern present. Curtis did, however, photograph portraits of Indigenous subjects. But the portraits in *NAI* are often generalized as “types,” with proper names presented only in the context of important figures, such as Chiefs, Sub-Chiefs, and Medicine Men. Women and children are almost always referred to as “types.” On the one hand, this choice of language may be reflective of the patriarchal structure within specific Indigenous communities. Indeed, there are distinctions between the representational

¹¹⁴ Michaels, 28.

¹¹⁵ Michaels, 38.

patterns in each series, which indicates not necessarily Curtis's authorial touch but rather how each particular community engaged with the White photographer. For example, the abundance of portraits in certain volumes suggests that those groups were more willing to collaborate with Curtis. Subjects are frequently depicted with their backs turned to the camera, perhaps in an attempt to capture authentic action live and not appear staged in the way portraits often do, but nevertheless elicit an unwelcoming reception. Several Apsaroke subjects (Vol. 4, 1909) even closed their eyes as their pictures were taken. The reference to an individual as a "type" may demonstrate the Indigenous participants' dissemination of their own cultural hierarchy that Curtis is simply underscoring. Typification nevertheless plays into the overarching strategy of *NAI* to catalog presumably vanished races.

Images of Native dances are infrequent throughout *NAI*, and when they are pictured it is more common to see dancers in costume posing for the camera in immobile positions. The contingencies of dance that empower the performers to author their own work is therefore eradicated. This immobility is partially a consequence of the static medium, but it does seem like there is a conscious effort to not only disengage, or not engage at all, with dance or to intentionally fragment it. It is unclear whether this effort is on the part of the photographer or the subjects. In "Piegan Dancers" (Vol. 6, 1911), for example, *all* of the dancers have their backs turned to the camera. In the same volume, the Cheyenne Sun Dance is seen only from a distance outside of the lodge ("Sun Dance in Progress") or through an extreme wide angle at a great distance ("Sun Dance Encampment"). This is possibly due to a lack of access to light in the interior settings, but

the camera's distance from the action suggests otherwise. These examples illustrate the alterity of the photographer, and thus the White audience, rather than the alterity of the Indigenous subjects. Whether this act of disengagement from the White world was a conscious form of resistance is unclear, but ultimately the White photographer authored the narrative, and White audiences—who would have more likely interpreted these fragmented scenes of Native culture as synecdochal artifacts of the past, not subjective expressions of self-identity in the present—consumed it.

One of the more extensive dance sequences in *NAI* is the Hopi Snake Dance published in Volume 12 (1922). As in earlier films like *Stage Leaving Hoppi House* and *Hopi Indians Dance for Theodore Roosevelt*, spectators are present, but it is unclear whether they are exclusively Hopis or if White tourists are also in attendance. Curtis makes no allusion to the latter, though Lyman seems to suggest that there were in fact White tourists present. In the 1890s several photographers published images of the Snake Dance with tourists clearly visible.¹¹⁶ Curtis, however, made a deliberate attempt to obscure their appearance. Mick Gidley observes that Curtis was not averse to producing images for publicity and to promote tourism of Native reservations, but notes *NAI* was specifically not intended for commercial advertising, tending instead “to conceal its own composition, as if to convey that it was in fact produced by human beings might reduce its imperial authority, so the image of Curtis the practicing photographer and

¹¹⁶ Christopher M. Lyman, *The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions: Photographs of Indians by Edward S. Curtis* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982), 119.



Figure 4.5: “Snake Dancer and ‘Hugger,’” Edward S. Curtis, *The North American Indian* (Volume 12, 1922), courtesy of Northwestern University Library, Hopi Snake Dance with shallow focus to obfuscate spectators in the background

anthropologist making a representation of his subjects was not allowed into the text.”¹¹⁷

“Spectators at the Snake Dance” is the only photograph in *NAI* that focuses specifically on spectators; all seem to be Hopis, though in modern dress. Otherwise, Snake Dance spectators are only seen from behind or, more commonly, in the background and out of focus. According to Lyman, “Curtis used a very large lens opening to shorten his range of focus so that the observers appear only as distinct blurs.”¹¹⁸ Lyman also alludes to the possibility that White tourists were removed entirely from some of these photographs.

¹¹⁷ Mick Gidley, “Edward S. Curtis’ Photographs for the North American Indian: Texts and Contexts,” in *Iconographies of Power: The Politics and Poetics of Visual Representation*, eds. Ulla Haselstein, Berndt Ostendorf & Peter Schneck (Heidelberg, Germany: Universitätsverlag Winter GmbH, 2003), 75.

¹¹⁸ Lyman, 124.

It was not beyond Curtis's capabilities to perform this kind of retouching (or "photoshopping" in today's language). "In a Piegan Lodge" (Volume 6, 1911) was edited to remove a modern clock framed centrally between two Blackfoot men in their cultural environment. Interior depictions like this, aside from formal portraits staged with an empty background, are rare in *NAI*. Perhaps this is why Curtis's eye was not trained well enough to spot the trace of modernity present in the lifestyle of current Piegans. Shamoon Zamir suggests that the two Blackfoot subjects intentionally placed the clock in this manner, but it seems more likely that this artifact was simply part of their modern reality, a reality that Curtis wanted to conceal but was not perceptive enough to notice at the moment the picture was taken.¹¹⁹ Curtis did copyright both the original photo and the doctored version, which suggests that he may have intended to use the former in some context other than *NAI*.¹²⁰ Thus, Curtis was not necessarily blindly naive in his approach to *NAI*, but rather carefully considered and employed a representational strategy that erased modernity, often literally. But there are allusions to modernity throughout *NAI*. Zamir deduces that modern civilization is visible in 1/4 of the images.¹²¹ They seem to become more evident in later volumes. For example, Comanche subject Wilbur Peebo (Volume 19, 1930) is clearly in modern dress. And an abundance of architectural structures depicted in Volume 15 (1926) are typified as "modern." But the clock, as a

¹¹⁹ Shamoon Zamir, "Image of Time: Portraiture in *The North American Indian*," in *Return to the Land of the Head Hunters: Edward S. Curtis, the Kwakwaka'wakw, and the Making of Modern Cinema*, ed. Brad Evans & Aaron Glass (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 65.

¹²⁰ See Gidley, "Edward S. Curtis' Photographs for the North American Indian: Texts and Contexts," 77.

¹²¹ Zamir, 76.

representation of not only modern technology but also standardized time, would have been a particularly egregious encroachment of modernity on Curtis's salvage ethnography. It is therefore tempting to conclude that the Blackfoots deliberately placed this object centrally as a form of ironic commentary. What we do know is that Curtis did not want the clock in the photo, at least for the purposes of *NAI*.

Notwithstanding the sporadic but infrequent traces of modern life scattered throughout *NAI*, there is a consistent representational pattern that demarcates the images as either part of the past or as the present tinged with a nostalgia for the past. The latter is illustrated in "Thinking of the Old Days - Klamath" (Volume 13, 1924), which depicts a man staring down despondently, the title insinuating his pre-colonial yearning. Another interesting example of the project's temporal ambivalence is "Before the White Man Came - Palm Cañon" (Volume 15, 1926), a typical landscape photo with a Native woman present in the foreground and a title that suggests it is not a representation of 1926. These particular images recall Barthes's notion of the photograph as a message without a code. The titles are essential in expressing the photographer's intended connotative meaning. Does "Before the White Man Came" presume to be an authentic representation of a moment in the past? Or is it intended to be interpreted more as a reenactment of the past in present? While the White photographer is not self-reflexively visible, we have to assume his presence. Yet the image does not seem to be reaching for this degree of irony. Rather, the photographer's absence, as well as the erasure of any semblance of modernity, is an attempt to conceal the technological apparatus and genuinely catalog the past. More

specifically, by reconstructing the peoples, objects and lands of the past, Curtis reinforces the idea that they no longer exist in the present.

The impulse to catalog Indigenous culture as something that has vanished precipitates a consciousness of the colonial history that caused these cultures to presumably disappear, which is evident throughout *NAI*. Several images of the Mission San Xavier del Bac in Volume 2 (1908) show signs of colonial Spanish rule. “Custer Monument” (Volume 3, 1908) and “Custer Battle-field Map” (Volume 3, 1908) memorialize the late Lieutenant Colonel’s “last stand” at the Battle of the Little Bighorn, while “Planning a Raid” (Volume 3, 1908) and “Morning Attack” (Volume 3, 1908) serve as reenactments, with real Sioux subjects, of the Battle of Wounded Knee. An allusion to earlier cultural contact is rather obvious in “Lewis and Clark’s Landing Place at Nihhluidih” (Volume 8, 1911). These images are ideologically neutral to some degree. They function more as encyclopedic historical knowledge than as part of a clear overarching narrative. But there is a sense that these events relate to a common story of Native disappearance. One poignant example is “A Decaying Houseframe - Haida” (Volume 11, 1916), where an abandoned and deteriorating home, as well as the absence of humans, suggests that the inhabitants have long since vanished. Because the Haida people we do see in other images of this series are placed in the context of history, not currency, there is an insinuation that their vanishing is irrecoverable.

Architecture is conspicuously highlighted throughout *NAI*, often with no human subjects present, insinuating that these structures are now vacant. The most extensive examinations of architecture can be found in the Hopi (Volume 12, 1922) and

Kwakwaka'wakw (Volume 10, 1915) sections. These two volumes are also among the longest in the entire project. Curtis probably spent more time with the Kwakwaka'wakw than any other community, with Volume 10 published shortly after *Head Hunters* was released in late 1914. The fact that this volume marks the halfway point in the 23 year study is probably significant. At the very least it suggests that *Head Hunters*, despite being Curtis's only remaining accessible cinematic work, should be contextualized as part of the *NAI* project at a moment when the photographer's aesthetic sensibilities were quite seasoned yet still ambitious. Indeed, Curtis had recorded motion pictures before working with the Kwakwaka'wakw and intended to complete a larger project like *NAI* on film but was unable to sustain interest from audiences and investors. With the absence of any conspicuous overarching narratives across the volumes, *NAI* has an encyclopedic quality. *Head Hunters* invokes this encyclopedic impulse while also fusing it with melodrama, a synthesis that to a large degree would come to define documentary cinema.

In the Land of the Head Hunters

Mick Gidley deduces that Curtis worked with motion picture film on at least two occasions prior to *Head Hunters*. In 1904 he filmed various dances and rituals in the Pacific Northwest, one possibly titled "Dance of the Mummy," and in 1906 he filmed the Oraibi Snake Dance, a ritual that Curtis claimed to have served in as a priest.¹²² Throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century, Curtis conducted lecture

¹²² See Mick Gidley, "From the Hopi Snake Dance to 'The Ten Commandments': Edward S. Curtis as Filmmaker," *Studies in Visual Communication* 8.5, no. 3 (1982): 71-73.

performances with both photos and films. The “Musicale” (1911) was a nationwide tour that included magic lantern slides, accompanying narration by Curtis himself, and motion picture footage captured several years earlier.¹²³ *Head Hunters* was an attempt to produce a feature-length version of some of these earlier short films using Kwakwaka’wakw subjects. It is interesting that these films, including *Head Hunters*, underscored the importance of dance in Indigenous cultures, since *NAI* represented dance in a fragmented, incomplete manner. One therefore wonders how the medium itself may have afforded Curtis the ability to represent dance’s mobility more comprehensively.

It is also interesting that the subject of his longest and only extant motion picture project is the Kwakwaka’wakw, whose ceremonial dances are themselves historical reenactments, and whose historical relationship with White colonists is rather unique. According to Joseph Masco, two factors fundamentally changed Kwakwaka’wakw culture following British colonization in the mid-nineteenth century, the period immediately following that in which *Head Hunters* is set: the small pox pandemic and the influence of capitalism.¹²⁴ The pandemic began in 1862 in a ghetto of Victoria, BC inhabited by many displaced Natives. Those infected were then further displaced after British colonists burned their shanty towns, and thus carried the virus back to rural tribal

¹²³ See Mick Gidley, “Edward S. Curtis and *In the Land of the Head Hunters*: Four Contexts,” in *Return to the Land of the Head Hunters: Edward S. Curtis, the Kwakwaka’wakw, and the Making of Modern Cinema*, eds. Brad Evans & Aaron Glass (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 53.

¹²⁴ Joseph Masco, “‘It Is a Strict Law That Bids Us Dance’: Cosmologies, Colonialism, Death, and Ritual Authority in the Kwakwaka’wakw Potlatch, 1849 to 1922,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37, no. 1 (1995): 42.

villages further north.¹²⁵ But they responded to capitalism with integrity. Through a process of “creativity and resistance,” their cultural practices shifted not through blind assimilation to White society but in ways that sustained traditional Kwakwaka’wakw values within a capitalist economic infrastructure.¹²⁶ In fact, the Potlatch, a Kwakwaka’wakw ceremony involving the exchange of possessions, actually increased (at least at first, before the Canadian government banned it in the 1880s) as a result of colonialism, allowing participants to expand the degree of wealth exchanged. This expansion also facilitated inclusive participation as more individual Kwakwaka’wakw—not only Chiefs, as had traditionally been practiced—found themselves with greater access to wealth.¹²⁷

Research also suggests that the Kwakwaka’wakw people responded creatively in their performances at the World’s Columbian Exposition in 1893, through a playful combination of both tradition and modernity, in an attempt to destabilize this dichotomy. Paige Raibmon notes how the Kwakwaka’wakw performed “both traditional ritual and modern labour - a manifestation of colonial displacement and an assertion of Aboriginal mobility.”¹²⁸ By participating in their own form of unique cultural production, one that did not conform to White-prescribed primitivity, these Kwakwaka’wakw performers deconstructed the traditional/modern binary. It is interesting then that there is little

¹²⁵ See Masco, 55.

¹²⁶ Masco, 45.

¹²⁷ See Masco, 51.

¹²⁸ Paige Raibmon, “Theatres of Contact: The Kwakwaka’wakw Meet Colonialism in British Columbia and at the Chicago’s World’s Fair,” *Canadian Historical Review* 81, no. 2 (2000): 160.

evidence of this deconstructive response to White culture in *Head Hunters*. Curtis is extremely careful to avoid interrupting the depiction of premodern traditions with modern realities, as was the case in *NAI*. Raibmon further speculates that most White audiences at the World's Columbian Exposition would not have picked up on the irony in the Kwakwaka'wakw performances. With little or no knowledge of Kwakwaka'wakw culture, these performances probably seemed like traditional rituals. Thus, the performers ultimately reinscribed themselves in the colonial narrative.¹²⁹

The Canadian government instituted a prohibition on Hamat'sa and potlatching ceremonies in 1884, which was not repealed until 1951. Kwakwaka'wakw communities continued to practice it discreetly as the ban was not strictly enforced until 1913, coincidentally around the time that *Head Hunters* was in production. During the Alert Bay trials of 1922, many ranking Kwakwaka'wakw members were jailed for potlatching. However, because authorities were relatively ignorant and conflated the cannibal dance (Hamat'sa) with gift-giving (potlatching), Kwakwaka'wakw were able to divorce the two and continue practicing the latter.¹³⁰ It was not the exchange of goods that threatened White society but rather the contingencies inherent in dance and the presumed primitivity of cannibal dancing. In reality, the cannibal dance invoked cannibalism as a synecdoche for the pleasures of the flesh in order to rid oneself of such desires. In other words, it was the antithesis of what Canadian authorities presumed it to be. Curtis's performers were able to legally perform these ceremonies as historical reenactments for cultural

¹²⁹ See Raibmon, 191.

¹³⁰ See Masco, 71.

preservation. By doing so, modern Kwakwaka'wakw were able to subvert the law and continue their traditions, albeit through the guise of a White photographer. Yet *Head Hunters* never explicitly identifies the Hamat'sa or the potlatch. It is possible that the legality of such performances for cultural posterity was ambiguous. And we do know that a substantial amount of original footage is missing from the current versions. The film nonetheless seems utterly uninterested in addressing the poignant relationship these historical reenactments have with Kwakwaka'wakw life in 1914.

The UCLA Film and Television Archive restored the currently available version of *In the Land of the Head Hunters* in 2008 based on existing footage, primarily from the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, with still images and intertitles added based on contemporaneous synopses. It is a reconstruction of a reconstruction of pre-contact Kwakwaka'wakw life. However, unlike the reconstruction project by Bill Holm and George Quimby in 1972, *In the Land of the War Canoes* (the only available version of the film prior to 2008), the more recent restoration was not an attempt to recontextualize the footage for anthropological purposes but rather re-create the original film experience as closely as possible. An opening title card in the restoration claims that "Text for missing titles was derived from preliminary title lists found in an early synopsis of the film." Because a large portion is missing, still images were added to complete the film's narrative as coherently as possible. Color tinting based on primary sources was also applied to many of the shots, and the entirety of the original score, composed by John J. Braham and performed live during 1914 screenings, was recorded by the Turning Point Ensemble.

Brad Evans speculates that the Kwakwaka'wakw performers in *Head Hunters*, though residing at least several hours from the nearest urban center, may have attended the movies prior to 1914. At the very least, they knew what motion pictures were and had a sense of what the moviegoing experience was like.¹³¹ Because the Kwakwaka'wakw were traditionally “masters of drama,” according to Bill Holm, they were likely receptive to making Curtis’s film, certainly more so than other Indigenous groups depicted in *NAI*.¹³² Therefore, the melodramatic aspect of *Head Hunters*, which might appear sensationalized to non-Kwakwaka'wakw viewers, is actually an authentic part of their reality. And while the story itself is a sensational melodrama, the mise-en-scène is primarily nonfictional. Wide shots emphasizing authentic British Columbia locations recall images from *NAI*, suggesting verisimilitude. The fact that the sets are often proscenium framed, with totem poles bookending the screen, indicates an authentic performance with little authorial intervention by the filmmaker. As Groo suggests, “When the dancers and their movements are in fact visible—present to the spectator—they are meant to be the ‘document’ in the divided expression of docufiction, the index of a ‘real’ Kwakwaka'wakw ritual or ceremony that balances the film’s indulgence in fictional worlds or, by contract, the site of a manifold resistance.”¹³³ Although early cinema commonly employed techniques from the theater, and the fly-on-the-wall aesthetic of actualities had been pervasive throughout the medium’s first decade, narrative filmmakers were increasingly moving toward highly stylized formulas by 1914. Curtis’s

¹³¹ Evans, 197.

¹³² Quoted in Raibmon, 190.

¹³³ Groo, 146.



Figure 4.6: *In the Land of the Head Hunters* (Seattle, 1914), “Thunderbird Dancer”

film can be interpreted, at least to some degree, as an invocation of earlier nonfictional formulas. The spectacle of dance serves as an attraction that disrupts the otherwise integrative narrative.¹³⁴ The reference to earlier forms of cinema is perhaps most evident in the staged performances of the “Wind Dancer” and the “Thunderbird Dancer,” which take place in an unknown location in front of a blank background, as was the case in Edison’s *Black Maria*. Notwithstanding the location’s lack of verisimilitude, compared to the visibility of authentic landscapes throughout the film, the presence of the stage reinforces the idea that the performances are real and not simply part of some melodramatic plot. Yet similar to the *Black Maria* films, the contingencies of dance as a

¹³⁴ For a similar argument, see Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 115.

potentially resistant form of expression are not necessarily underscored. Rather, the motion picture medium functions as a disciplinary device, transforming performative contingency into a taxidermic archetype.

The sense of verisimilitude conveyed by the film could conceivably suggest to the viewer, particularly one with little knowledge of Kwakwaka'wakw history, that the representation of these cultural practices is intended to reflect Kwakwaka'wakw life in 1914. Indeed, in the anthology *Return to the Land of the Head Hunters*, Chief William T. Cranmer, on behalf of the Kwakwaka'wakw and the U'mista Cultural Society, thanks Curtis for documenting and preserving their traditions.¹³⁵ The U'mista Centre has been operating since 1980 in an effort to preserve the cultural heritage of the Kwakwaka'wakw. U'mista is roughly translated as “the return of something important.” While Curtis’s film does serve an important preservational function, it never explicitly comments on, or even alludes to, the function of cultural rituals, like potlatching and the Hamat'sa, in modern Kwakwaka'wakw life. Unlike other contemporaneous representations of Indigenous peoples—for example, *Hopi Indians Dance for Theodore Roosevelt*—and consistent with *NAI*, Curtis intended to represent a pre-contact era, sometime in the late eighteenth century. This is not entirely obvious in the existing film footage but is clearly explicated in the book adaptation, *In the Land of the Head Hunters*, published in 1915 shortly after the film’s release.¹³⁶ Modernity, Euro-American culture,

¹³⁵ See Brad Evans & Aaron Glass, eds., *Return to the Land of the Head Hunters: Edward S. Curtis, the Kwakwaka'wakw, and the Making of Modern Cinema* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), xi.

¹³⁶ The book is the second of two books in the “Indian Life and Indian Lore” series authored by Curtis, the first being *Indian Days of the Long Ago*.

and the stereotypes of civilized colonizers and primitive Natives are not present. Curtis and his crew created a reconstructed village on Deer Island, off the coast of Fort Rupert on Vancouver Island, where the modern Kwakwaka'wakw performers resided. Props and costumes were also reconstructed. While the use of an all-Native cast was uniquely authentic at the time, the hero-centered story of Motana (played by Stanley Hunt, son of George Hunt, Curtis's directorial assistant and Kwakwaka'wakw liaison) and his spiritual journey are fictional and set at a historical moment at least a century in the past, more crucially a moment in Kwakwaka'wakw history prior to European contact. And the historical veracity is often questionable, most conspicuously in the whale hunting scene as Kwakwaka'wakw never hunted whale. Potlatching and the Hamat'sa are not specifically identified, and they are mostly deemphasized in favor of head hunting and vision quests, which were not as important to Kwakwaka'wakw life.¹³⁷ The film does tend to follow a three-act structure, though this formula had not yet been standardized, particularly as multi-reel feature-length films were still quite new in 1914. Despite narrative deviations, the structure does reflect a basic beginning, middle, and end that was common at the time. Similarly, the love triangle plot—Motana is charged with rescuing his love interest, Naida, from the head-hunting antagonist Yaklus—was common in pre-World War I melodramas. While sensationalized performativity was an authentic component of Kwakwaka'wakw life, both in pre-contact eras and in the present moment in which *Head Hunters* was produced, it is difficult to disregard this context. In other

¹³⁷ See Joanna Hearne, "Telling and Retelling in the 'Ink of Light': Documentary Cinema, Oral Narratives, and Indigenous Identities," *Screen* 47, no. 3 (Autumn 2006): 315.

words, the melodramatic aspects of *Head Hunters* can be attributed both to the authentic lifestyle of Kwakwaka'wakw people and the contemporaneous standards of American cinema.

What is *In the Land of the Head Hunters*? How can we generically categorize it, particularly with an incomplete version? There is no doubt that the film was an important cinematic milestone, one that Robert Flaherty knew and was probably influenced by, but it was not widely disseminated at the time. And it is strikingly unique compared to its contemporaries. Even *Nanook of the North*, a similar type of salvage ethnography, is set in a post-contact environment. The absence of any sign of modernity is what differentiates Curtis's work. Catherine Russell asserts that *Head Hunters* is more generically aligned with the fictional western subjects popular between 1908 and 1913, rather than the ethnographic travelogues of the 1910s and 1920s. Beyond the banality and simplicity of travelogues, *Head Hunters* presents a "discourse of desire" in its plot, a "fantasy of otherness... nothing less fantastic than *Voyage dans la Lune*," which also thematizes indigeneity, albeit in a very different context.¹³⁸ For Russell, Curtis's film is fictional but not necessarily in the same vein as the work of Griffith and others in the early 1910s. Like *Voyage* over a decade earlier, it sustains a certain degree of the cinema of attractions. Contrarily, Griffiths argues that Curtis sought an ethnographic aesthetic similar to the films of Wanamaker and Dixon. These differing perspectives suggest the film's formal ambivalence rather than a clearly defined synthesis of ethnography and sensationalism. *Head Hunters* does not possess the hyperbolic theatricality of most

¹³⁸ Russell, 106-08.

fictional motion pictures at this time. The film's sensationalism is present more in the title card descriptions, which are not originals, than in the actual images. Visually the film seems aligned with the aesthetics found in *NAI*. But these images are nevertheless infused within a melodramatic plot that is not present in *NAI*. Groo offers the most holistic assertion, assuming the film as neither real nor fake "but a gesture that is *always* a repetition with differences and deviations, an index of a historical origin that we cannot see."¹³⁹ In other words, *Head Hunters* is rather definitively an attempt to sustain the premodern in the present, but it is both drama and encyclopedia, neither explicitly documentary nor explicitly fiction.

This ambivalence may have ultimately deterred audiences. Because *Head Hunters* was screened in newly emerging movie palaces, it is safe to assume that it sought to be associated with higher-class European art, such as *Cabiria* (Itala, 1914).¹⁴⁰ Perhaps this was the wrong demographic, particularly if we contextualize the film as a cinema of attractions. There is evidence to suggest that the scientific community generally perceived Curtis's work as entertaining spectacle, not ethnology.¹⁴¹ The film was critically well-received and may have been popular for a short period of time, but overall, it was a box office failure. Vachel Lindsay praised *Head Hunters*' salvage aesthetic and differentiated the film's poetic and artistic function.¹⁴² W. Stephen Bush offered a

¹³⁹ Groo, 147.

¹⁴⁰ See Brad Evans & Aaron Glass, "Consuming the *Head Hunters*: A Century of Film Reception," in *Return to the Land of the Head Hunters: Edward S. Curtis, the Kwakwaka'wakw, and the Making of Modern Cinema*, ed. Brad Evans & Aaron Glass (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 151.

¹⁴¹ Evans & Glass, 155.

¹⁴² Lindsay, 86 & 271.

positive review in *Moving Picture World*. What struck Bush was the realism of the acting, under the assumption that “The Indian mind is, I believe, constitutionally incapable of acting; it cannot even grasp the meaning of acting as we understand it.”¹⁴³ Bush also concluded that the film was meant for an upper-class audience. It is conceivable that this perceived class dichotomy contributed to the film’s waning popularity by the spring of 1915.

Head Hunters was generally well-received by its first audiences at both the Casino Theater in Manhattan and the Montauk Theater in Brooklyn, and it was expected to run at these locations through the end of 1915.¹⁴⁴ It continued successfully through February at the Belasco Theater in Washington, D.C., where it was likewise expected to have continued screenings.¹⁴⁵ But somehow the film fell out of favor rather quickly. It is possible that there were flaws in the marketing and distribution strategy. Both Bill Quimby and Barbara Davis suggest that the dawn of World War I may have been a factor, an interpretation that deserves attention.¹⁴⁶ The Savoy Theater in New York cancelled the film in late May 1915 due to “bad business.”¹⁴⁷ While the United States remained neutral overseas during this time, the Savoy’s cancellation of *Head Hunters* came immediately after the RMS Lusitania sank on May 7, presumably due to a German U-boat attack that

¹⁴³ Bush, 1685.

¹⁴⁴ “Indian Picture Makes Big Hit,” 59.

¹⁴⁵ “‘Headhunters’ Film to be Shown Again Today,” *The Washington Times* (Washington, D.C.), February 26, 1915, 4.

¹⁴⁶ George I. Quimby, “The Mystery of the First Documentary Film,” *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 81, no. 2 (1990): 53. Barbara Davis, *Edward S. Curtis: The Life and Times of a Shadow Catcher* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1985), 68.

¹⁴⁷ “The Savoy,” *Variety* (New York, NY), May 21, 1915, 21.

killed 128 American citizens on board. With this very real modern event in mind, Americans may have been less attracted to the premodern fantasies of Kwakwaka'wakw life in the late eighteenth century. The Lusitania sinking would have amplified sentiments of Euro-American exceptionalism. *Head Hunters* not only deliberately conceals Euro-American culture but also, on some level, disavows its perceived exceptionalism through the assertion of Indigenous voices that Euro-America colonized.

In a modern war-torn world, themes of indigeneity probably failed to attract audiences, and Curtis's ability to continue his cinematic endeavors ultimately suffered. Curtis went on to work in Hollywood in secondary roles and as a still photographer—notably for *The Plainsman* (Paramount, 1936), a fictional reenactment of the events surrounding the Battle of Little Big Horn, directed by Cecil B. DeMille and starring Gary Cooper as Wild Bill Hickok—but ultimately he was unable to pursue his own directorial ambitions.¹⁴⁸ Among a host of other likely factors, the potential effect of World War I on *Head Hunters*' failure is particularly striking if we counterpoint it with the immense success of *Birth of a Nation*, which can also be viewed as a historical reenactment that was designed to elicit premodern nostalgia, but one that celebrated American exceptionalism and was not apologetic with regard to colonialism. Although *Head Hunters* typifies Indigenous culture as primitive and fails to address Kwakwaka'wakw modernity, it does nevertheless encourage viewers to recall the genocide that Indigenous peoples have experienced at the hands of Euro-American settlers; this would have likely

¹⁴⁸ A letter written by Curtis is cited in Gidley, "From the Hopi Snake Dance to 'The Ten Commandments,'" 77-78, which provides evidence for Curtis's involvement on the film. Otherwise, he is uncredited.

been an unsettling resonance amid global conflict. Additionally, while “Indian” pictures had fallen out of favor in the context of western fictions, Indigenous themes probably seemed insignificant and irrelevant in the modern world. *Head Hunters* plays into this sensibility, itself failing to demonstrate how its reconstructed histories inform the present. *Birth of a Nation* is significantly more conscious of this.

I am therefore somewhat skeptical of Evans’ and Glass’s argument that *Head Hunters* should be viewed “not as failed attempts at documentary realism—inauthentic portraits of the presumably vanishing races—but as visual evidence for the social relations of image coproduction, as authentic documents of ongoing intercultural encounter even if under conditions of political inequality.”¹⁴⁹ While we can apply this framework to the film, it is difficult to overlook the fact that Curtis does not comment on intercultural contact. But the film is conscious of modernity in two ways that are intimately connected: the preservational impulse is fundamentally modern, and motion pictures are a uniquely modern technology. Drawing from Anthony Giddens, Glass contends that part of modernity involves selectively preserving, or documenting, tradition and heritage in a manner that is reflexive, acknowledging its status in the present, often archived through written documents but also modern technologies like photography and

¹⁴⁹ Brad Evans & Aaron Glass, “Edward Curtis Meets the Kwakwaka’wakw: Cultural Encounter and Indigenous Agency *In the Land of the Head Hunters*,” in *Return to the Land of the Head Hunters: Edward S. Curtis, the Kwakwaka’wakw, and the Making of Modern Cinema*, eds. Brad Evans & Aaron Glass (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 13.

motion pictures.¹⁵⁰ While *Head Hunters* reinforces the “vanishing Indian” trope, the ideological lens does not necessarily present a colonial fantasy of having contained a threat to modernity that is past and no longer visible, as in many earlier films. Rather, it demonstrates a nostalgia for the premodern that manifests an impulse to preserve and document. Ironically, this manifestation through the mechanically reproductive means of motion pictures exemplifies the modern experience. The antimodern impulse is made modern through the cinematic apparatus itself.

It is therefore interesting that in the book adaptation of *In the Land of the Head Hunters* a White-operated steamship arrives temporarily in Yaklus’s village, though they eventually leave peacefully. Did Curtis become more interested in the moment of cultural encounter after making the film? Or was he inclined to represent modernity more visibly in book form, as opposed to the already modern technology of motion pictures? The performances on screen, which may be acts of resistance to modernity, are inevitably modern insofar as they are inescapably engaging dialogically with modernity. Drawing from Miriam Hansen’s notion of “vernacular modernism,” Evans demonstrates how cinema and art both exemplified and mediated modernity, often through a rejection or disavowal of it:

One of the defining characteristics of high modernism of this period was its reaction against what was understood to be the standardizing effects of routinized, industrial capitalism. The turn to the “primitive,” like analogous interests in the “handmade” and “arts and crafts,” registered in contradistinction to what were

¹⁵⁰ Aaron Glass, “The Kwakwaka’wakw Business of Showing: Tradition Meets Modernity on the Silver Screen and the World Stage,” in *Return to the Land of the Head Hunters: Edward S. Curtis, the Kwakwaka’wakw, and the Making of Modern Cinema*, eds. Brad Evans & Aaron Glass (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 350-52.

perceived to be the flattening and sterilizing tendencies of the new economy of consumption. Taken in this light, it would seem uncontroversial to suggest that the relentless antimodernism of Curtis's oeuvre epitomizes at least some of the aesthetic and market dynamics of modernism itself... In aligning itself in this way, Curtis's film used the associative fantasies of primitivism and the expanded sensorial experiences of the motion picture to settle *In the Land of the Head Hunters* neatly into the rift between modernity and tradition, crass entertainment and high-art spectacle.¹⁵¹

This synthesis of antimodern fantasy and modern commercial consumption, however, occurs in *Head Hunters* only indirectly, through the medium itself. It might make more sense to read the film as *an attempt* to comment on the modern condition, one that is inadequate, or more precisely incomplete in its contemporary contextualization. A useful counterpoint presents itself in the Indigenous production *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (Kunuk, 2001). The end credits reveal production footage, which Hearne asserts “foregrounds the technological apparatus of cinematic storytelling, a revelation of modernity that Curtis worked hard to conceal.”¹⁵² The filmmaking process not only becomes part of the visible narrative but reveals modern technology as essential in telling this story. Curtis rather deliberately, and in some cases painstakingly, worked to conceal the conspicuousness of modern technology. It is, however, possible for viewers to reconstruct Curtis's vision and apply a modern lens to the film, to some degree effacing the filmmaker's authorship, a contingency that is innately part of the motion picture reception process.

The 1972 reconstruction of *Head Hunters*, entitled *In the Land of the War Canoes* (Holm & Quimby), exemplifies the original film's ongoing dialogue. Wakeham argues

¹⁵¹ Evans, 201-204.

¹⁵² Hearne, “Telling and Retelling,” 322.

that the Holm and Quimby attempt was an example of recontextualizing the film through a process of “becoming documentary,” as a means toward seemingly greater verisimilitude and authenticity than what was perceived to be in the existing footage, while also more clearly demarcating modernity’s presence through the anthropologist’s voice in the new intertitles.¹⁵³ The film does seem to be an attempt to jettison the original filmmaker’s colonial mindset and reevaluate the images for their ethnological value. There is an obvious change of title. The head hunters are the antagonists in the original film but also occupy a great deal of screen time. Most of the original marketing posters emphasized the words “Head Hunters” in the title, suggesting that they were the primary attraction.¹⁵⁴ More specifically, the perceived primitivity associated with head hunting, and the implied exoticism and violence that this concomitantly suggests, was the ideological selling point. “War Canoes” denotes a less pejorative treatment of the film’s Indigenous subjects. However, I would argue that *War Canoes* is not significantly more ethnological than the 2008 restoration, and it probably only seems this way based on the differing soundtracks.

War Canoes includes a rather ambitious soundscape, including dubbed voices, sound effects, and original Kwakwaka’wakw music. Gidley asserts that the score, produced by contemporary Kwakwaka’wakw, is in “utter concordance” with the dance movements of their ancestors in the original film.¹⁵⁵ And the music is infrequent

¹⁵³ Wakeham, 303-05.

¹⁵⁴ See Evans & Glass, eds., *Return to the Land of the Head Hunters: Edward S. Curtis, the Kwakwaka’wakw, and the Making of Modern Cinema* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), Appendix 1.

¹⁵⁵ Gidley, “Edward S. Curtis and *In the Land of the Head Hunters*: Four Contexts,” 59.

compared to the constancy of the original score, paving the way for the natural sound environment to take over. Synchronous sound effects add verisimilitude, particularly in the context of the natural environment as seagulls and waves crashing create an ambience not present in the 2008 restoration. These effects almost seem anachronistic for something produced during the silent era. Yet a variety of sound accompaniment was a crucial part of *Head Hunters*' original exhibitions. Along with John J. Braham's rather typical pre-World War I melodramatic score, the original orchestral accompaniment at the Casino Theater in New York also included phonograph recordings from Kwakwaka'wakw songs, as well as "special scenery, designed from photographs of the totem pole country."¹⁵⁶ It is conceivable that many 1914-15 screenings included sound effects similar to what we hear in *War Canoes*. However, Holm and Quimby reconstructed the footage exclusively for anthropological purposes, whereas Curtis's original intentions were not as clear cut. *Head Hunters* therefore serves as a perfect example of the variable contexts in which cultural texts are consumed and reconstructed.

Conclusion

While the films of Curtis and Flaherty are uniquely difficult to classify, to some extent they are descendants of both proto-pseudo-ethnographies and early westerns. It is curious that *Nanook of the North* would become so immensely popular by the early 1920s, since Curtis's film had flopped less than a decade prior. Flaherty intended to release a film like

¹⁵⁶ "World Film to Present 'Head Hunters' at Casino, New York," *New York Clipper*, December 5, 1914, 12.

Nanook more contemporaneously with Curtis, but this footage was, perhaps luckily, accidentally burned. There was an apparent resurgence of interest in Native subjects in nonfictional travelogues after World War I, such as the extensive *The Vanishing Indian* (Sioux Super Films, 192-?) series. Huhndorf observes that *Nanook* spawned a marketing craze that produced a variety of trademarks involving Eskimos and Arctic culture.¹⁵⁷

Huhndorf speculates that the popularity of Eskimos may have been based on the erroneous perception that, because of their lighter skin, they were descendants of northern Europeans.¹⁵⁸ *Nanook* (Allakariallak) is also presented more amiably, with frequent smiling close-ups, as opposed to the distant archetypal representations of Indigenous peoples in earlier films. *Nanook* nevertheless subscribes to the same salvage ideology that motivated Curtis, where Indigenous communities are perceived as vanishing. The presumed disappearance of Eskimos is made strikingly poignant in the final image of *Nanook*, a prolonged immobile image of the Eskimo family sleeping.

Flaherty did, however, distinguish himself from earlier ethnographic filmmakers through a methodological practice similar to what contemporary social scientists refer to as participant observation. Flaherty lived among Hudson's Bay region Eskimos for prolonged periods of time, an approach French documentarian Jean Rouch later adopted. But the fetishization of indigeneity as a relic of the past problematically denies cultural dignity in the present, as Russell asserts:

If primitivism is a fetishistic means of representing the absence of "aura," or authenticity, in modern life, the body of the Other serves as the vehicle of this

¹⁵⁷ Huhndorf, 82.

¹⁵⁸ See Huhndorf, 101.

denial. The failures of modern progress are displaced onto the spectacle of the body of the Other, collected and preserved within the technologies of modernity... As the image becomes an allegorical form of colonial discourse... it renders otherness both desirable and different, and always *prior* to the time of viewing... The double structure of copy and contact is an allegory of the distancing of the (lost) auratic experience that is so central to Benjamin's conception of the twentieth-century artwork.¹⁵⁹

The history of documentary film and its ancestors cannot be divorced from the overarching themes that have been outlined in this project. Documentary aesthetics are innately tied to an impulse to preserve the past or discover something about the past. The desire to return to Indigenous pasts, as represented in modern forms of representational media like motion pictures, did not necessarily counter colonialism but rather reaffirmed it in a new way for the modern era.

The Kwakwaka'wakw have been the subject of several documentaries since *In the Land of the Head Hunters*, including *A Documentary on the Kwakiutl* (Franz Boas, 1930), *Blunden Harbour and Dances of the Kwakiutl* (Gardner, 1951), *Potlatch... A Strict Law Bids Us Dance* (U'mista, 1975), *Box of Treasures* (U'mista, 1983), *Coming to Light: Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indians* (Bullfrog, 2000), and *In Search of the Hamat'sa: A Tale of Headhunting* (Glass, 2004). Kathryn Bunn-Marcuse argues that Curtis and Boas's films, "despite the participation of Native actors, insist on a historical reconstruction that denied contemporary realities of Kwa-gulth life," as opposed to the films U'mista produced later, which emphasize "continuity of tradition—with the

¹⁵⁹ Russell, 56-58.

specificity of individual experience and contemporary realities.”¹⁶⁰ In *Itam Hakim, Hopiit* (1984), Victor Masayesva uses Hopi images from the early twentieth century to reclaim them for Hopis in the present.¹⁶¹ Hearne cites George Burdeau’s *Backbone of the World: The Blackfeet* (Rattlesnake, 1997) as an example of the politics of looking resulting in recognition as opposed to the traditional narrative of vanishing: “Vanishing becomes visibility, absence becomes presence, when an image once symbolic of Indian finality instead elicits tribal recognition and supports discourses of contemporary political sovereignty.”¹⁶² For Russell, “experimental ethnography” involves precisely this form of placing back the lived reality of these images, providing a multicultural perspective, and removing, or deconstructing, them from their White-centric representational system. Experimental ethnography is synonymous with Faye Ginsburg’s assertion of a “parallax effect,” a transgressive act of Indigenous filmmaking that produces an oppositional dialogue.

We have seen how reenacting the past in the early silent film era promoted racism, colonialism, imperialism, and American exceptionalism. In some cases these dominant ideologies were challenged, though often with some degree of ambivalent conformity. In

¹⁶⁰ Kathryn Bunn-Marcuse, “Kwakwaka-wakw on Film,” in *Walking a Tightrope: Aboriginal People and Their Representations*, eds. Ute Lischke & David T. McNab (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005), 326-27.

¹⁶¹ See Channette Romero, “The Politics of the Camera: Visual Storytelling and Sovereignty in Victor Masayesva’s *Itam Hakim, Hopiit*,” *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 64.

¹⁶² Hearne, *Native Recognition*, 5. It is also worth mentioning that Chris Marker’s *Sans Soleil* (Argos, 1983) reappropriates images from *Head Hunters*, but the effect is somewhat different than the U’mista, Masayesva, and Burdeau films. While *Sans Soleil* is an exercise in deconstruction, it contains a voice-of-God narration that reconstructs the images through a Eurocentric lens.

a postmodern era, it has become clearer how similar forms of reconstruction can serve a transgressive function, reclaiming the voices that mainstream reenactments have traditionally silenced. However, this history demonstrates the need for conscious awareness of reenactment's deleterious impulses and effects. In the following conclusion chapter, I shall summarize how the documentary arose from a tradition of antimodern, fictionalized reconstructions of reality and subsequently became a fascist disciplinary tool, a function that is evident throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

CONCLUSION

By narrativizing the past through an antimodern lens, motion picture pioneers created a fictionalized form of reality that precipitated the documentary. Forms of antimodernism—similar to the movements Lears outlines, the general sensibility of which involved disenchanted yearnings for premodern modalities—influenced the reconstruction of events in early motion pictures. This project has outlined a variety of early film reenactments—particularly those that represented executions, war, and Indigenous peoples—in order to draw a connection between antimodernism and the documentary. Reconstructions of current events in cinema before 1914 elucidate cultural desires and aesthetic trends that would eventually develop into the documentary genre. While pivoting from canonical histories, it is nevertheless important to be mindful of the historical moment when a term became part of a particular culture or group’s lexicon, as well as when it was properly defined; in the case of the term “documentary,” as it regards motion pictures, beginning in France in the 1910s then elucidated by Grierson in the 1920s. From this historical starting point we can retrospectively work our way back and outline the circumstances leading to this moment.

The racist, imperialistic discourses produced in the films analyzed throughout this dissertation possess a sense of White paternalistic benevolence that is inherent in Grierson’s work. John Tagg reminds us that Grierson produced films under state-sponsored guidance, and coined the term “documentary” in the context of a specific practice of representation that involved governance, and therefore discipline, equating

realism with the paternal state.¹ This reminder is strikingly poignant in relation to the disciplinary function or earlier film reconstructions. Tagg claims that documentary realism functions to construct the world and one's subjectivity within it, "as a rhetoric of recruitment whose mobilization seeks to incorporate its targeted audience in an identification with the imaginary coherence of its system."² Tagg does, however, seem to neglect Grierson's fascination with Flaherty's work, and there are no conspicuous ideological connections between Flaherty and state-sponsored documentary realism. So to some extent Grierson was drawing from a different form of realism to propose his particular brand of authoritarian control over what constitutes reality. But despite his praise for Flaherty, Grierson was also critical of the fact that his work did not relate to the modern world.³ The paternalism present in Grierson's work, which is present in many documentaries produced globally in the 1920s and 1930s—ideologies associated with power, discipline, and the appropriation of historical events—is also present in earlier photographic traditions and proto-documentary films, particularly films that reenacted events.

There is a relationship between antimodern discontent and the rise of fascism. Lears argues that antimodernism paved the way for fascism in Europe, whereas in the United States it transformed into hegemonic consumer capitalism, different forms politically but similar in terms of their disciplinary control.⁴ Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi propaganda documentaries were pioneering works. The documentary therefore arose

¹ Tagg, xxxii-xxxiii.

² Tagg, 57.

³ Quoted in Tagg, 62.

⁴ Lears, 137.

from a tradition of antimodern, fictionalized reconstructions of reality and became a fascist disciplinary tool, redefining and recontextualizing the present while also functioning as a disciplinary apparatus for the state. Yet although Riefenstahl's work continues to be revered, despite its political disdain, it is primarily observational, not reconstructive. Contemporary documentaries tend to invoke ethnographic methods of observation and interviewing. I would argue that the beginning of the documentary as we know it occurred in the post-World War II period, when portable synchronous sound equipment allowed interviewing in the field, and the actuality aesthetics of newsreels and voice-of-God narration became increasingly jettisoned. But we find a similar shift during the silent period, as nonfiction transitioned from actualities to fictionalized reconstructions of the past. This shift began in the late 1890s and arguably took at least 50 years to fully materialize.

Jean Rouch was very much influenced by Robert Flaherty and referred to his method as "shared anthropology," which involves a certain degree of co-authorship between filmmakers and subjects. Like Flaherty, Rouch held "feedback screenings" with his subjects, as seen at the conclusion of *Chronique d'un été* (Argos, 1961).⁵ According to Rouch, "when people are being recorded, the reactions that they have are always infinitely more sincere than those they have when they are not being recorded."⁶ His idea of *cinéma vérité* was similar to Vertov's *kino pravda*, but rather than transforming how viewers would see the world, Rouch attempted to actually transform the world with the

⁵ See Henley, 107-09.

⁶ Quoted in Henley, 242.

camera, provoking subjects to perform in a manner unlike their everyday behavior in order to reveal an inner truth. I argue that this impulse was present in early film reenactments, which sought to reconstruct, or simulate, what may have been perceived as a more authentic version of reality than observational actuality.

The fact that motion picture pioneers attempted to use the camera not just to record but to reveal is evident in some of the earliest motion studies, such as Muybridge's horse galloping photographs, which attempted to unearth truths not perceivable by the naked eye. Such endeavors seem unequivocally worthwhile and positive, yet early filmmakers reconstructed reality to reclaim the past and reinforce premodern ideologies associated with law and order, racism, foreign imperialism, and domestic colonialism, not necessarily to reveal something truthful about the present. The documentary impulse present in early film reenactments—particularly those that reconstructed executions, battle scenes, and Indigenous performances that went against the grain of modern progress—sought to cope with the present by invoking elements of the past. The impulse to either recontextualize the past anew or repeat it for posterity is fundamentally premised by a dissatisfaction with the way things are. Documentaries today continue the push and pull dynamic between present and past, attempting to reveal the former through an investigation of the latter. However, while we have to consider the impulse to reconstruct and document as a potentially productive one pursued by many contemporary documentary filmmakers, the particular sample of media texts analyzed throughout this dissertation lacks such potential and demonstrates the deleterious effects of narrowly minded reclaiming and repeating the past.

I began this study by citing the 2020 reenactments of the deaths of George Floyd and Elijah McClain. The desire to repeat such actions, whether jokingly or not, is a political message, one that at the very least disavows the culture that denounces such actions. In rhetorical forms of protest, the act becomes less of a tangible embodied experience than an abstract concept that represents little more than simply the antithesis to the change being sought by Black Lives Matter. Repetition enables practitioners to cope with, and potentially stunt, change. Katherine Johnson theorizes historical reenactment as an act that seeks to revive an authentic embodied reality of the past, where “re-enactors might develop an experiential relation to past bodies.”⁷ Reenactments of the deaths of George Floyd and Elijah McClain serve as a form of solidarity with, perhaps even appreciation for, the murderers. Concomitantly, this mindset reifies the power of the state to execute its citizens by any means necessary, like the neomedievalism associated with lynchings and other forms of execution outlined in Chapter Two.

The ambivalence of antimodernism informs the obfuscation of authenticity that is innately part of reenactments. While Curtis may have failed to comment on the present through his historical study, I encourage the reader to consider how this history of the early film reenactment might inform the present. How have reenactments, both in the context of cinema and in general performative practice, developed over the past century? Do antimodern sensibilities inform them? Is the practice of reenactment somehow inherently linked to a desire for the past in the midst of a disenchanting present? There

⁷ Katherine M. Johnson, “Rethinking (Re)Doing: Historical Re-enactment and/as Historiography,” *Rethinking History* 19, no. 2 (2015): 200.

seems to be a similar yearning for medieval modalities among certain far-right-wing political groups in the twenty-first century, particularly in the United States, as the violence inflicted on Floyd, McClain, and numerous other Black and Indigenous people of color continues to demonstrate. But what is perhaps more troubling is the fact that those in positions of power normalize such behavior and promote it as acceptable. Former President Donald Trump's 2016 campaign slogan "Make America Great Again," itself a reenactment of Ronald Reagan's 1980 campaign slogan, was foundationally antimodern. Much like the paradoxical antimodernism Lears identifies between 1880 and 1920, resistance to cultural transformations, some potentially positive and some potentially negative, devolves into rhetorical and physical forms of archaic violence, racism, colonial thinking, and a disciplinary apparatus fundamentally linked to fascist impulses. The ruling class ideological facade of law and order, mired through the guise of a resistance to the bureaucracy of the formal legal system, is perhaps the greatest antimodern paradox embodied by the far right. Anyone who sincerely respects modern legal institutions should be appalled by the celebration of law enforcement officials breaking the law, as well as by presidential cronies receiving pardons for committing crimes. Peter King romanticizes antimodernism but does not contextualize it: "Modernists believe in change for a purpose. They wish to create a better world. Postmodernists believe in change for its own sake. They seek to transgress and do so because they can. Antimodernists believe in keeping things pretty much as they are."⁸ A narrow acceptance of King's antimodernism

⁸ Peter King, *The Antimodern Condition: An Argument Against Progress* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 11.

is potentially dangerous. The past is irretrievable and modernity is irrevocable. Capital punishment has inevitably been transformed since the late nineteenth century, albeit in fragmented ways. Militaristic impulses persist but are performed very differently. Indigenous peoples have adapted to modernity while continuing their traditional cultural practices. Change is inevitable and essential, and we should be suspicious of forms of antimodernism that perpetuate deleterious trends around the turn of the twentieth century, whether they be conspicuously obvious or cloaked in our cultural discourses and media texts.

FILMOGRAPHY

NOTE: Alternate titles and films that are assumed to be copies of other producer's films have been omitted from this filmography. Readers may refer to the main text to reference these.

- 1891 *Men Boxing* (Edison)
 Newark Athlete (Edison)
- 1894 *Annie Oakley* (Edison)
 Buffalo Dance (Edison)
 Corbett and Courtney Before the Kinetograph (Edison)
 Fire Rescue Scene (Edison)
 Indian War Council (Edison)
 The Kiss (Edison)
 Sandow (Edison)
 Sioux Ghost Dance (Edison)
- 1895 *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots* (Edison)
 A Frontier Scene (Edison)
 Indian Scalping Scene (Edison)
 Pocahontas (Edison)
- 1896 *L'Arrivée d'un Train en Gare de La Ciotat* (Lumière)
 Bryan Train Scene at Orange (Edison)
 Empire State Express (Biograph)
 Hard Wash (Biograph)
 Major McKinley at Home, Canton, Ohio (Biograph)
 McKinley and Hobart Parade at Canton, Ohio (Biograph)
 Monroe Doctrine (Edison)
 A Morning Bath (Edison)
 New York Fire Department (Biograph)
 Stable on Fire, Niagara Upper Rapids (Biograph)
 The Watermelon Contest (Edison)
- 1897 *Corbett-Fitzsimmons Fight* (Veriscope)
 Execution of a Spy (Star)
 The Hanging of William Carr (Edison)
 Lynching Scene: A Genuine Lynching Scene (International Photographic Film)
 Massacre in Crete (Star)
 Russian Dragoons—Charge and Dismount (Lumière)
 Sea Fighting in Greece (Star)
 The Surrender of Tournavos (Star)

War Episodes (Star)

1898

After the Battle (Lubin)
American Cavalry Charging with Drawn Sabres (Lubin)
Battery Charge (Selig)
Battle of San Juan Hill (Amet)
Battle of Santiago Bay (Vitagraph)
Behind the Firing Line (Biograph)
The Blowing Up of the "Maine" in Havana Harbour (Star)
Bombardment of Mantanzas (Amet)
Brave Cubans Firing at the Spanish Soldiers with a Dynamite Canon (Lubin)
Buck Dance, Ute Indians (Edison)
Capture of a Spanish Fort Near Santiago (Lubin)
Charge at Las Guasimas (Selig)
Charge by Rushes (Biograph)
Circle Dance, Ute Indians (Edison)
Cuban Ambush (Edison)
Danse Indienne (Lumière)
The Defence of the Flag (Biograph)
Divers at Work on the Wreck of the Maine (Star)
A Duel to the Death (Biograph)
Dynamite Cruiser "Vesuvius" (Amet)
Eagle Dance, Pueblo Indians (Edison)
An Execution by Hanging (Biograph)
Execution of the Spanish Spy (Lubin)
Explosion of the Merrimac (Gaumont)
Firing Broadside at Cabanas (Amet)
A Great Picture (Edison)
In the Trenches (Biograph)
An Incident in the Spanish-American War (Gaumont)
Indian Day School (Edison)
Infantry Charge (Selig)
A Landing Fight (Biograph)
The Last Stand (Biograph)
Old Glory and Cuban Flag (Edison)
Repulse of Spanish Troops at Santiago by the American Forces (Lubin)
Serving Rations to the Indians (Edison)
Shooting Captured Insurgents (Edison)
Spanish Infantry Attacking American Soldiers in Camp (Lubin)
Tearing Down the Spanish Flag (Vitagraph)
U.S. Troops Landing at Daiquiri, Cuba (Edison)
Wand Dance, Pueblo Indians (Edison)
What Our Boys did at Manila (Biograph)

- 1899 *Advance of Kansas Volunteers at Caloocan* (Edison)
Attack on a Picquet (Paul)
Capture of Trenches at Candaba (Edison)
Cendrillon (Star)
Colonel Funstan Swimming the Baglag River (Edison)
The Early Morning Attack (Edison)
Fighting With Our Boys in Cuba (Vitagraph)
Filipinos Retreat from Trenches (Edison)
Love and War (Edison)
Raising Old Glory Over Morro Castle (Edison)
Rout of the Filipinos (Edison)
Shooting the Spy (Paul)
Skirmish of Rough Riders (Edison)
U.S. Infantry Supported by Rough Riders at El Caney (Edison)
U.S. Troops and Red Cross in the Trenches Before Caloocan (Edison)
- 1900 *25th Infantry* (Biograph)
The 4.7-inch Gun in Action at the Battle of Pretoria (Warwick)
The 5-inch Siege Guns in Action at the Battle of Pretoria (Warwick)
The Assassination of a British Sentry (Mitchell & Kenyon)
Attack on a China Mission (Williamson)
Attack on a Mission Station (Mitchell and Kenyon)
Battle of Colenso (Biograph)
Battle of Mafeking (Edison)
The Battle of Mt. Ariat (Biograph)
Battle of the Upper Tugela (Biograph)
Beheading a Chinese Boxer (Pathé)
Beheading the Chinese Prisoner (Lubin)
Boer War Films (Vitagraph)
Bombardment of a Port (Edison)
Bombardment of Taku Forts by the Allied Fleets (Edison)
Bryan at Home (Selig)
Capture of Boer Battery by British (Edison)
Charge of Boer Cavalry (Edison)
Chinese Massacring Christians (Lubin)
Dick Croker Leaving Tammany Hall (Edison)
The Dispatch Bearer (Mitchell & Kenyon)
English Lancers Charging (Edison)
Execution of Six Boxers (Amet)
Naval Sham Battle at Newport (Edison)
A Prize Fight or Glove Fight Between John Bull and President Kruger (Warwick)
A Railroad Wreck (Paul)

- Red Cross Ambulance on the Battlefield* (Edison)
Sham Battle on Land by Cadets at Newport Naval Training School (Edison)
Shelling the Red Cross (Mitchell & Kenyon)
A Skirmish With the Boers Near Kimberley (Warwick)
A Sneaky Boer (Mitchell & Kenyon)
W.J. Bryan (Biograph)
The Yellow Peril (Paul)
- 1901 *Assassination of President McKinley* (Pathé)
Carrying Out the Snakes (Edison)
Demolishing and Building Up the Star Theatre (Biograph)
The Electrocution of Anarchist Czolgosz, Murderer of President McKinley (Pathé)
Esquimaux Game of Snap-the-Whip (Edison)
Esquimaux Leap-Frog (Edison)
Esquimaux Village (Edison)
Esquimaux Village (Lubin)
The Esquimaux Village (Biograph)
Execution of Czolgosz With Panorama of Auburn Prison (Edison)
Funeral of President McKinley (Biograph)
Line-up and Teasing the Snakes (Edison)
The March of Prayer and Entrance of the Dancers (Edison)
Moki Snake Dance by Wolpi Indians (Edison)
Pan-American Exposition by Night (Edison)
Panoramic View of Moki Land (Edison)
Panoramic View of the White Pass Railroad (Edison)
Parade of Snake Dancers Before the Dance (Edison)
Sham Battle at the Pan-American Exposition (Edison)
Terrible Teddy, the Grizzly King (Edison)
The War in China (Biograph)
- 1902 *6th Cavalry Assaulting South Gate of Peking* (Biograph)
Burning of Durland's Riding Academy (Edison)
Burning of St. Pierre (Edison)
Capture of the Biddle Brothers (Edison)
Club Swinging, Carlisle Indian School (Biograph)
The Coronation of Edward VII (Star)
The Eruption of Mount Pelee (Star)
Eruption of Mt. Pelee (Lubin)
Firemen Fighting the Flames at Paterson (Edison)
Landing of U.S. Troops Near Santiago (Biograph)
Mt. Pelee in Eruption and Destruction of St. Pierre (Edison)
Mt. Pelee Smoking Before Eruption (Edison)
Navajo Blanket Weaving (Selig)

Navajo Indian Silversmith (Selig)

A Representation of a Rehearsal of the Coronation of Their Majesties King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra (Biograph)

Reproduction, Coronation Ceremonies—King Edward VII (Star)

Stage Leaving Hoppi House and Panorama of Grand Canyon (Selig)

The Terrible Eruption of Mt. Pelee and Destruction of St. Pierre, Martinique (Star)

Le Voyage Dans la Lune (Star)

1903

Academy of Music Fire (Biograph)

The American Soldier in Love and War (Biograph)

Assassination of the King of Serbia (Gaumont)

Capture of a Boer Spy (Pathé)

Discovery of Bodies (Biograph)

Electrocuting an Elephant (Edison)

Episode During the Battle of Spion Kop (Pathé)

Execution of the Same (Pathé)

Filipino War Dance (Lubin)

Firing the Cabin (Biograph)

The Great Train Robbery (Edison)

Hiawatha (Bioscope)

Indians Charging on the Photographer (Selig)

Indian Fire Dance (Selig)

Indian War Dance (Lubin)

Kit Carson (Biograph)

Life of an American Fireman (Edison)

Panoramic View of St. Pierre, Martinique (Edison)

Pope in His Carriage (Biograph)

Pope Passing Through Upper Loggia (Biograph)

President Roosevelt and the Rough Riders (Biograph)

Roosevelt's Rough Riders (Biograph)

Shoshone Indians in Scalp Dance (Selig)

Theodore Roosevelt Leaving the White House (Biograph)

Ute Indian Snake Dance (Selig)

1904

Assassination of the Russian Minister Plehve (Pathé)

Avenging a Crime; or, Burned at the Stake (Paley and Steiner)

The Battle of Chemulpo Bay (Edison)

The Battle of the Yalu (Biograph)

Brush Between Cowboys and Indians (Edison)

Cake-Walk (Biograph)

Capture and Execution of Spies, by Russians (Paul)

Capture of "Yegg" Bank Burglars (Edison)

The Chicken Thief (Biograph)

Cowboys and Indians Fording River in Wagon (Edison)

- Decapitation* (Lubin)
- The Execution (Beheading) of One of the Hunchuses (Chinese Bandits) Outside the Walls of Mukden* (Star)
- Fighting the Flames, Dreamland* (Biograph)
- The Hero of Liao-Yang* (Biograph)
- Indians and Cowboys* (Pathé)
- Japanese Warriors in Ancient Battle Scene* (Edison)
- Judge Parker Receiving the Notification of His Nomination for the Presidency* (Edison)
- Lookout at Port Arthur* (Pathé)
- Military Maneuvers, Manassas, VA.* (Edison)
- Naval Battle, St. Louis Exposition* (Biograph)
- A Nigger in the Woodpile* (Biograph)
- Railroad Smashup* (Edison)
- Revolution in Odessa* (Pathé)
- Skirmish Between Russian and Japanese Advance Guards* (Edison)
- Spy's Execution* (Pathé)
- The Terrible Turkish Executioner* (Star)
- Tracked by Bloodhounds; or, A Lynching at Cripple Creek* (Selig)
- The Watermelon Patch* (Edison)
- 1905
- Assassination of Grand Duke Sergius* (Pathé)
- The Boer War* (Biograph)
- Coney Island at Night* (Edison)
- Crow Indian Festival Dance* (Biograph)
- Crow Indian War Dance* (Biograph)
- Crow Indians Harvesting* (Biograph)
- The Hold-up of the Leadville Stage* (Selig)
- Moqui Indian Rain Dance* (Biograph)
- Mutiny on the Black Sea* (Biograph)
- Navajo Indian Foot Race* (Biograph)
- Navajo Indian Horse Race* (Biograph)
- Navajo Indian Tug-of-War* (Biograph)
- Navajo Indians Wrestling* (Biograph)
- The Nihilists* (Biograph)
- An Execution by Hanging* (Biograph)
- Rain Dance at Orabi* (Biograph)
- Reading the Death Sentence* (Biograph)
- Reprieve from the Scaffold* (Biograph)
- Russo-Japanese War Programme* (Various)
- The White Caps* (Edison)
- 1906
- The Black Hand* (Biograph)
- Capital Executions* (Pathé)
- A Desperate Crime* (Star)

- San Francisco Disaster* (Biograph)
San Francisco Earthquake (Edison)
The San Francisco Earthquake (Vitagraph)
The San Francisco Earthquake (Lubin)
Thaw-White Tragedy (Biograph)
- 1907 *An Indian's Friendship* (Lubin)
 A New Death Penalty (Star)
 Tenderloin Tragedy (Biograph)
 The Unwritten Law (Lubin)
- 1908 *Call of the Wild* (Biograph)
 Dixon-Wanamaker Expedition to Crow Agency (Dixon & Wanamaker)
 Hiawatha (Dixon)
 Hiawatha (Kalem)
 Indian Bitters; or, The Patent Medicine Man (Vitagraph)
 Indian Communication: Sign Language of the North American Indian (Dixon & Wanamaker)
 An Indian's Gratitude (Selig)
 An Indian's Honor (Vitagraph)
 The Redman and the Child (Biograph)
- 1909 *Big Game Hunting in Africa* (Selig)
 Boots and Saddles (Selig)
 Children of the Plains (Vitagraph)
 Comata, the Sioux (Biograph)
 Dove Eye's Gratitude (Bison)
 The Falling Arrow (Lubin)
 Hiawatha (IMP)
 In the Bad Lands (Selig)
 The Indian Runner's Romance (Biograph)
 Mimic Battle on Whale Island (Urban)
 On the Warpath (Selig)
 The Redman's View (Biograph)
 Red Wing's Gratitude (Vitagraph)
 Young Deer's Bravery (Bison)
- 1910 *Across the Plains* (Selig)
 An Indian's Gratitude (Pathé)
 Ramona (Biograph)
 Roosevelt in Africa (Pathé)
 White Fawn's Devotion: A Play Acted by a Tribe of Red Indians in America (Pathé)
 Young Deer's Gratitude (Bison)

1911	<i>The Halfbreed's Daughter</i> (Vitagraph) <i>Picturesque Colorado</i> (Rex) <i>The Squaw's Love</i> (Biograph) <i>An Up-to-Date Squaw</i> (Pathé)
1912	<i>Blazing the Trail</i> (Bison) <i>The Life of Buffalo Bill</i> (Buffalo Bill & Pawnee Bill) <i>Life and Customs of the Winnebago Indians</i> (Selig) <i>Indian Dances and Pastimes</i> (Bison) <i>The Massacre</i> (Biograph) <i>See America First</i> (Pathé) <i>The Squaw's Debt of Gratitude</i> (Pathé) <i>The Taos Indians at Home—New Mexico</i> (Selig)
1913	<i>The Battle of Elderbush Gulch</i> (Biograph) <i>Hiawatha</i> (Colonial) <i>Hiawatha</i> (Kinemacolor) <i>Hopi Indians Dance for Theodore Roosevelt at Walpi, Arizona</i> (Edison)
1914	<i>Cabiria</i> (Itala) <i>In the Land of the Head Hunters</i> (Seattle) <i>The Indian Wars</i> (Essanay) <i>The Squaw Man</i> (Lasky)
1915	<i>The Birth of a Nation</i> (Griffith) <i>History of the American Indian</i> (Wanamaker)
1916	<i>Intolerance</i> (Triangle)
1918	<i>Hearts of the World</i> (Griffith)
192-?	<i>Flashes of the West</i> (Northern Pacific Railway) <i>The Vanishing Indian</i> (Sioux Super Films)
1920	<i>Within Our Gates</i> (Micheaux)
1922	<i>Nanook of the North</i> (Les Frères Revillon) <i>Kino-Pravda</i> (Vertov)
1926	<i>Moana</i> (Famous Players-Lasky)
1930	<i>A Documentary on the Kwakiutl</i> (Boas)

1936	<i>The Plainsman</i> (Paramount)
1951	<i>Blunden Harbour and Dances of the Kwakiutl</i> (Gardner)
1961	<i>Chronique d'un été</i> (Argos)
1972	<i>In the Land of the War Canoes</i> (Holm & Quimby)
1975	<i>The Shadow Catcher</i> (McLuhan) <i>Potlatch... A Strict Law Bids Us Dance</i> (U'mista)
1975-79	<i>The Battle of Chile, I-III</i> (Guzmán)
1983	<i>Sans Soleil</i> (Argos) <i>Box of Treasures</i> (U'mista)
1984	<i>Itam Hakim, Hopiit</i> (Masayesva)
1988	<i>America's Most Wanted</i> (Fox)
1990	<i>Dances with Wolves</i> (Tig)
1991	<i>JFK</i> (Warner Bros.)
1997	<i>Backbone of the World: The Blackfeet</i> (Rattlesnake)
2000	<i>Coming to Light: Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indians</i> (Bullfrog)
2001	<i>Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner</i> (Kunuk)
2004	<i>In Search of the Hamat'sa: A Tale of Headhunting</i> (Glass)

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