Vitascope/Cinématographe: Initial Patterns of American Film Industrial Practice

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The earliest patterns of industrial practice in American film distribution and exhibition have remained obscured by historical inattention. Gordon Hendricks' detailed studies of the invention of the Kinetograph, Kinetoscope, and Biograph leave relatively unexamined the contexts in which these initial cinematic devices were commercially exploited. In most survey histories of the American cinema, discussion of this period focuses on the Koster and Bial exhibition of the Vitascope on 23 April 1896. The reason this event is included in most chronicles of early film history is that it demonstrates the popularity of film as a vaudeville attraction. Yet missing from these histories is the integration of this single event into a systematic analysis of the early film industrial history. What causal factors led up to the Koster and Bial exhibition? What was its full significance as a precedent for the marketing of motion picture technology?

Using data collected from the contemporaneous trade press and the business records of the Vitascope Company (Raff and Gammon) and the Edison Manufacturing Company, this article considers the first year of large-scale commercial exploitation of the cinema as a projected medium: 1896-97. The two principal companies involved, the Vitascope Company (licensees of Edison) and the Lumière Company, represent divergent marketing strategies for the American cinema. The success of the Lumières and the concomitant lack of it by the Vitascope Company attest to the determining influence exerted upon early motion picture industrial practices by vaudeville.

The history of American commercial screen exhibition begins with the invention of the Kinetograph camera in the laboratories of Thomas Edison. Developed between 1887 and 1891, the Kinetograph was the camera with which "every subject known to us up to May 1896" in the United States was shot. The Kinetograph films were not projected, however, but viewed by means of a peep-show device, the Kinetoscope, which was first marketed in April 1894. During the spring and summer of that year, Kinetoscopes were installed in penny arcades, hotel lobbies, summer amusement resorts, and phonograph parlors.[1] By 1895, the Edison Company had 1) demonstrated the practicability of motion photography, 2) begun regular production of films for use in the Kinetoscope, and 3) established the commercial usefulness of the motion picture as a popular entertainment novelty.

It was not until five years after Edison had patented the Kinetograph in 1891 that his laboratory produced its own movie projector. Journalist Terry Ramsaye's widely quoted explanation for Edison's delay was that the Wizard reasoned, "If we put out a screen machine, there will be use for maybe about ten of them in the whole United States. . . . Let's not kill the goose that lays the golden egg."[2] There is reason to doubt that Edison thought in terms of the Kinetoscope as his magic goose and thus discounted the profitability of opening up motion picture exhibition to group audiences. It is much more likely that the Kinetoscope scheme was perceived as a *turkey* rather than a magic goose; records of the Edison Manufacturing Company show that its supply of golden eggs lasted but a few months. Edison probably doubted the commercial value of the Kinetoscope from the beginning, and when returns from the device began to dwindle after a brief success, he turned his attention to the myriad other projects he was working on. Even before the first Kinetoscope had been placed into commercial service, Edison wrote Eadweard Muybridge, "I have constructed a little instrument which I call a kinetograph with a nickel slot attachment and some twenty-five have been made out. I am very doubtful if there is any commercial feature in it and fear that they will not earn their cost."[3]

Ohio businessmen Norman Raff and Frank C. Gammon became exclusive American marketing

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[1] Gordon Hendricks, *The Kinetoscope* (New York: By the Author, 1966), p. 3; Memo, "Kinetograph Case: 1900," Edison National Historic Site, West Orange, New Jersey, hereafter referred to as Edison Archive.

[2] Terry Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1926), p. 119.

[3] Thomas Edison to Eadweard Muybridge, 8 February 1894, Edison Archive.

agents for the Kinetoscope on 1 September 1894.[4] The following May, Raff wrote, "The demand for Kinetoscopes (during 1895) has not been enough to even pay expenses of our company . . . . In fact our candid opinion is that the Kinetoscope business—at least as far as the regular company is concerned—will be a 'dead duck' after this season."[5] Public interest in the peep show was waning, and the owners were selling their machines, further depressing the market for new Kinetoscopes.[6] To make matters worse, by May 1895, news had reached Raff and Gammon that Frenchmen Louis and Auguste Lumière had patented and publicly exhibited a camera/projector, the Cinématographe.[7]

Their Kinetoscope business a bust and the prospects of a successful commercial projector imminent, Raff and Gammon pleaded with the Edison Company to develop its own projector during the summer and fall of 1895, but to no avail. Just when the partners were trying to sell their business and cut their losses, they learned of a projector, the Vitascope, invented by two Washington, D.C. men, Thomas Armat and Francis Jenkins. In January 1896, they concluded negotiations by which Raff and Gammon received the license to market the device on a territorial rights basis. To avoid potential patent litigation and to assure a supply of films, they also contracted for the Edison Company to manufacture the projector and provide films.[8]

The marketing plan devised by Raff and Gammon for the Vitascope was based upon that initially used for the Edison phonograph. In June 1888, the North American Phonograph Company was formed for the purpose of exploiting the Edison phonograph and a competing machine, the graphophone. This company was authorized by Edison to grant exclusive territorial licenses for the lease of the phonograph and the purchase of recording cylinders. Within two years, North American had issued franchises to thirty-three state or regional companies. This territorial-rights marketing scheme was based on the assumption that the phonograph would be used primarily as a piece of office machinery: a stenographic aid. Within a short time, however, it was discovered that the phonograph, as then designed, was not particularly useful as a dictating machine. Rights holders resorted to attaching coin-in-the-slot devices to their phonographs in an effort to recoup their investment. By 1892, most phonographs were being used not in offices, but in saloons and penny arcades, a development which made the territorial-rights plan outmoded.[9] Rights-holders discovered that as the demand for phonographs increased with their popularity as entertainment devices, their clients began purchasing cheap copies of the Edison machine rather than leasing the original from them.

There is no discussion of the merits of the territorial-rights marketing scheme among the Raff and Gammon correspondence; its dubious usefulness in marketing entertainment devices did not deter them from resorting to it. The scheme devised for marketing the Vitascope called for the selling of franchises in the United States and Canada. For an initial advance payment, an agent could purchase the exclusive rights to the Vitascope for a state or group of states, giving this person the right to lease projectors (for $25-$50 monthly per machine) and buy Edison films. The manner and location of the exhibitions were left entirely to the franchise holder. The agents could exploit the Vitascope themselves, or, as Raff and Gammon repeatedly pointed out in their correspondence, the territories could be further divided and subfranchised.[10]

The exhibition context Raff and Gammon had in mind for the Vitascope is unclear from their correspondence with prospective rights purchasers. In their initial catalogue, they suggest that a twenty-five or fifty-cent admission charge could be made for a brief program of Vitascope subjects.[11] What they do not seem to have had in mind was the use of films in vaudeville theatres on a regular basis. The films were to be sold, not rented. Raff and Gammon told prospective customers that the films could be used "for a long time." With a stock of only fifteen to twenty films at the beginning of their marketing campaign, Raff and Gammon were not in a position to supply vaudeville managers with the regular change of program their audiences had come to expect. The two types of exhibition outlets Raff and Gammon envisioned for the motion picture seem to have been the penny arcade or phonograph parlor and presentations by itinerant showmen. Several people who bought territorial rights were operators of phonograph parlors. A.F. Reiser, the Vitascope agent for Pennsylvania (exclusive of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh), operated a publishing company that specialized in providing books for public libraries. If the community did not have the funds, Reiser would help them raise the money by sponsoring musical concerts. He wanted to use the Vitascope in rural Pennsylvania to assist him in these fund-raising efforts.[12]

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[4] Hendricks, p. 79.

[5] Raff to Thomas R. Lombard, 31 May 1895, Raff and Gammon Collection, Baker Library, Harvard University, hereafter referred to as Raff and Gammon Collection.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Georges Sadoul, *Louis Lumière* (Paris: Editions Seghers, 1964), p. 148.

[8] Raff to Mssrs. Daniel and Armat, 17 January 1896, Raff and Gammon Collection.

[9] Oliver Read and Walter L. Welch, *From Tin Foil to Stereo* (New York: Bobbs Merrill, 1959), p. 110.

[10] Raff and Gammon to M. Hendersholt, 4 April 1896, Raff and Gammon Collection.

[11] Vitascope Company Catalogue, 1896, Crawford Collection, Museum of Modern Art.

Raff and Gammon did not aspire to a relationship with vaudeville; it was thrust upon them. The public and commercial debut of the Vitascope at Koster and Bial's Music Hall in New York on 23 April 1896 was a result of a hurriedly-made decision, arrived at in the face of news that several vaudeville managers were attempting to secure the Lumière Cinématographe for their theaters.[13] Realizing the adverse publicity value of having another machine open in New York ahead of the Vitascope, and, no doubt, the potential economic advantages of a combination between vaudeville and foreign motion picture interests, Raff on 7 April wrote to Abraham Bial, offering him the use of the Vitascope "at a largely reduced compensation," out of consideration for "a certain benefit to us from your advertising, etc."[14]

The interest of vaudeville managers in the movies was by no means coincidental. For decades, vaudeville, with its modular program of brief, self-contained acts, had featured visual novelties of all sorts: pantomime, shadowgraphy, puppetry, *tableaux vivants,* and lanternry, among others. By 1896, vaudeville was rapidly becoming the preeminent American popular entertainment form, with competition among theaters growing intense—especially in New York. Two seasons before (1894-95), New York vaudeville managers had begun an all-out battle for patronage. F.F. Proctor presented opera stars at his Twenty-Third Street Theater. B.F. Keith countered by securing the state luminaries to appear in condensed dramatic vehicles at his Union Square Theater. The warfare intensified when Oscar Hammerstein opened his Olympia Theater in the fall of 1895, importing French chanteuse Yvette Guilbert at a cost of $3000 per week.[15] By April 1896, the five major New York vaudeville entrepreneurs were frantically trying to surpass each other with more lavish theater environments, more acts on the bills, and especially, novel attractions. It was perhaps the most auspicious moment in the history of vaudeville for the introduction of a new visual curiosity.

Raff and Gammon, however, were much less interested in providing vaudeville with its latest sensation than in generating publicity on the eve of distributing the first Vitascopes to the state-rights holders. The Koster and Bial exhibition was preceded by three weeks of press coverage, beginning with a press screening at the West Orange Laboratory of Thomas Edison on 3 April.[16]

The only thing Edison had contributed to the development of the Vitascope was the imprimatur of his name, yet Raff and Gammon promoted the projector as the latest marvel from the Wizard's workshop—a ruse which, no doubt, was largely responsible for the generous publicity given the Vitascope.

The second purpose of the Koster and Bial exhibition was to attempt to preempt foreign competition. In this, Raff and Gammon failed for several reasons: 1) it was already too late; 2) by demonstrating that the motion picture could be adapted successfully to form a vaudeville act, they helped to spawn a demand from vaudeville managers which benefitted not only them but also the exploiters of other machines; and 3) the tremendous demand for motion picture demonstrations which arose after the Koster and Bial exhibition was premature for Raff and Gammon—they were not able to satisfy it, leaving a growing market ripe for competition.

Despite Raff and Gammon's assurances to actual and prospective franchise holders that they would be protected from competing projectors entering the market, competition with the Vitascope developed almost immediately. In May, the Lumière Cinématographe opened at Keith's Union Square Theater, where for several weeks each performance was "wildly applauded."[17] Even with New York sweltering in a June heat-wave, the Cinématographe enabled the Union Square to double its weekly box office receipts.[18]

During the summer and fall of 1896, Raff and Gammon's Vitascope Company fared badly. Their first problem was that their marketing strategy militated against a strong connection between vaudeville and the Vitascope in that their state-based franchise plan conflicted with the institutional structure of vaudeville. By 1896, vaudeville was in a period of inter-state circuit building—growth which ignored the political boundaries at the very basis of the Raff and Gammon scheme. Unlike other vaudeville acts, the Vitascope could be booked only into a circuit of theatres with great difficulty. Separate deals had to be negotiated with rights holders in each state. The state-rights arrangements explains why no franchises were sold to vaudeville circuits. The Lumières, on the other hand, used no such territorial plan. All engagements for the Cinématographe in the United States were booked through a single New York office.

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[12] A.F. Reiser to Edison Kinetoscope Co., 29 February 1896, Raff and Gammon Collection.

[13] Raff and Gammon to Armat, 21 March 1896, Raff and Gammon Collection.

[14] Raff and Gammon to A. Bial, 7 April 1896, Raff and Gammon Collection.

[15] Maxwell F. Marcuse, *This Was New York* (New York: Carlton Press, 1965), p. 199.

[16] *New York Journal,* 4 April 1896, clipping in Raff and Gammon Collection.

[17] *Dramatic Mirror,* 4 July 1896, p. 17; 11 July p. 17; 18 July p. 17.

[18] Robert Grau, *Theatre of Science* (New York: Broadway Publishing Co., 1914), p. 9.

Secondly, even before the Koster and Bial exhibition, Raff and Gammon had begun making commitments to their agents on delivery of Vitascopes. But Raff and Gammon could not control the manufacture of the machines at the Edison factory, and late deliveries were a problem almost from the start.[19]

Even prompt delivery of the projector did not assure that the Vitascope would be able to debut as advertised. The Vitascope arrived at Ford's Theater in Baltimore the day of its scheduled opening. The manager had sold out his house long in advance. But when the electrician sent along to set up the Vitascope saw that the house electricity operated on alternating current and the projector on direct, he refused to install the machine. The franchise-holder, who had arranged the exhibition with the theater manager, blamed the problem on the ineptitude of the electrician, but the problem was in the design of the Vitascope:[20] all the early Vitascopes were made to work only on direct current and in 1896, municipal lighting systems were a hodge-podge of incompatible currents and voltages. Throughout the summer and fall, exasperated Vitascope agents complained to Raff and Gammon about the situation, the agent for the Maritime Provinces writing, "If the small towns of the continent are to be worked, a radical change will have to be made in the construction of the machines so that exhibitions can be utterly independent of electric power companies." Otherwise, he said, "It is simply working for nothing."[21] The Cinématographe needed no electrical current, being hand-cranked and illuminated by limelight or another non-electrical source.[22] While Raff and Gammon provided a trained projectionist to set up and operate the Vitascope for early exhibitions at Foster and Bial's, they offered no such assistance to their agents, only "detailed instructions" on the operation of the machine. In many instances, the success of a Vitascope exhibition depended far less on the projector itself than on the skill of its operator.[23]

The most serious obstacle facing the Vitascope agents, and, in turn, Raff and Gammon, was obtaining a regular supply of new films. The franchise holders needed to be able to count on regular shipments of new films whose contents were as appealing as those of the Lumière films. Raff and Gammon's inability to meet this demand resulted in a rising chorus of frustration and anger from their agents. The Pennsylvania franchise holder chided them, "the museum people were so much disappointed that they stopped the Vitascope. They expected eight new subjects and I only had three and they were poor."[24] The Wisconsin agents wrote in August, "It seems singular to us that our orders are so long about being filled. We are not safe in promising anything. . . . With . . . the cinématographe and others menacing us, we ought to be accomodated [*sic*] promptly."[25]

The design of the Cinématographe gave it a considerably wider range of subject matter than the Edison camera. The latter, still called the Kinetograph, was a bulky, electrically driven apparatus weighing several hundred pounds.[26] The production situation devised for its operation was the famous Black Maria open-air studio behind the Edison works in West Orange. The principal components of the Edison repertoire were condensations of vaudeville turns, circus acts, and minute extracts from popular plays. These reenactments had limited popular appeal, however, and there is evidence that their popularity as Kinetoscope peep-show subjects had begun to decline even before the Vitascope appeared.[27]

The Lumière Cinématographe was both camera and projector, hand-cranked, and weighed slightly over sixteen pounds. The Lumières sent cameramen all over the world and could offer their patrons scenes of the Czar's coronation, Venice as seen from a moving gondola, and Trafalgar Square. These travel films were so popular that in August 1896, Raff and Gammon resorted to having the English agents for the

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[19] A.F. Reiser to Raff and Gammon, 8 May 1896, Raff and Gammon Collection.

[20] P.T. Kiefaber to Raff, 11 June 1896, Raff and Gammon Collection.

[21] A. Holland to Raff, 9 September 1896, Raff and Gammon Collection.

[22] Sadoul, p. 67.

[23] Hixom and Wollam to Raff and Gammon, 23 June, 1896, Raff and Gammon Collection.

[24] A.F. Reiser to Raff and Gammon, undated but filed with 1896 letters, Raff and Gammon Collection.

[25] Hixom and Wollam to the Vitascope Company, 28 August 1896, Raff and Gammon Collection.

[26] Sadoul, p. 41.

[27] Hendricks, p. 140.

Vitascope surreptitiously purchase Lumière films shot in Russia, Italy, and France for use with the Vitascope in the United States.[28] Also with camera/projector/printer in one, the Lumière operator could take, develop, and show films while on tour. The ability to take these "local actualities," as they were called, was of no small benefit to the Lumières. It also speaks to fundamental differences in business organization between the Lumières and the Vitascope Company—differences that gave the Lumières significant advantage in the vaudeville market.

Raff and Gammon had control over only one part of the Vitascope operation. The Edison factory manufactured the machines and films; these were distributed by Raff and Gammon, who did not engage themselves in exhibition, but often sold off parts of their territory to others. As the Raff and Gammon correspondence shows, the route from source of supply to its final destination could be, and too often was, a long and uncertain one. Exhibition was separated from production by distance, business and legal arrangements, and technology—the Vitascope was not able (without substantial and illegal modifications) to serve as a camera.

With the Cinématographe, although the distance from the Lyons factory to the exhibition site in the United States was certainly greater, this problem was alleviated to a large extent by the collapsing of some of the functions of filmmaker, distributor, exhibitor, and projectionist into a single individual: the "operator" sent out from Lyons to tour in the United States. Felix Mesguisch, the first Lumière operator to arrive in the United States, stated that in the first six months of exploitation there were some twenty-one projectionists/cameramen/developers on tour with the Cinématographe.[29] The Lumière representative in New York was an employee of the Lumière Company, not a rights speculator. He arranged for exhibitions, scheduled tours, and distributed films to the operators, acting very much like the booking agent for a vaudeville act. The operator with his Cinématographe and films was not *like* a vaudeville act, he *was* one—a self-contained unit which could travel an interstate circuit as easily as an acrobat or trained dog act.

The marketing scheme for the Vitascope failed because it did not anticipate the use of the motion picture as a popular entertainment device exhibited in a theatrical setting. Moreover, the territorial rights plan could not be easily adapted to the institutional structure of vaudeville. All the blame for the demise of the Vitascope Company cannot be attributed to the unsuitability of its marketing plan, however. Certainly design limitations of the Vitascope itself contributed to Raff and Gammon's troubles. Another part of the problem was Raff and Gammon's desire to reap short-term profits through rights speculation rather than engaging in exhibition themselves. Edison's lack of foresight regarding the motion picture is well known, and the Edison Manufacturing Company did its share toward placing the Vitascope in an impossible position within the vaudeville exhibition market. Films were slow in being delivered, and the subjects prepared at West Orange were unsuitable for urban vaudeville performances. Clearly Edison did not anticipate the relationship between vaudeville and film.

He did see, however, that Raff and Gammon's attempt to market the Vitascope was a failure. Thus, when the Edison laboratory developed its own projector, the Projecting Kinetoscope, Edison sold the machine outright with no territorial restrictions. He further undercut Raff and Gammon by selling films for the Projecting Kinetoscope at a lower price than Raff and Gammon were offering to their Vitascope customers.[30] Raff and Gammon's agreement with Edison and Armat prohibited their selling the Vitascope, and they had sold the rights to it for most of the United States for five years. By the end of 1896, the Vitascope enterprise was no more.

Clearly, the Lumière operation was better adapted to servicing the American vaudeville market, but their victory was short-lived. In the spring of 1897, the Lumières left the American market, presumably under the threat of patent litigation from Edison.[31] But they left behind them a pattern of industrial practice that survived for the next decade: the providing of vaudeville theaters with a complete "act" consisting of projector, films, and operator. This marketing plan formed the basis for much of the success by the Edison and Vitagraph film companies prior to 1905.

The Lumière approach to marketing we might call "pre-industrial." The Lumières, Biograph, and Vitagraph were providing a service to vaudeville. This dependency upon vaudeville temporarily obviated the need for the American cinema to develop its own exhibition outlets, but it also prevented film from achieving industrial autonomy. The industrial structure of vaudeville did not call for a division of labor in the usual sense. Rather, the division came within the vaudeville presentation itself: each act was merely one of eight or more functional units, one cog in the vaudeville machine. Hence it is not surprising that a machine would quite literally replace the acrobat, animal act, or magician on vaudeville bills. Neither did the use of films in vaudeville require a division of the industry into distinct production, distribution, and exhibition units. In fact, it favored the collapsing of these functions into the "operator," who, with his projector, became the self-contained vaudeville act. It was not until the American cinema achieved industrial autonomy with the advent of store-front movie theatres that a clear separation of functions becomes the dominant mode of industrial organization, and film enters its early industrial phase.

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[28] Raff and Gammon to Maguire and Baucus, 25 August 1896, Raff and Gammon Collection.

[29] Sadoul, p. 134.

[30] Reiser to Vitascope Company, 24 November 1896; Hixom and Wollam to Raff and Gammon, 9 December 1896, both in Raff and Gammon Collection.

[31] Sadoul, pp. 135-6.

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