**A Tale of Two Companies, Pt. 1**

**Video Script**

**Fa20/Sp21**

**Introduction**

Hello, and welcome to our first full week of lectures.

Last week, we started to think about the very early days of motion pictures—

From ancient inventions to cameras and projectors invented in the 1890s.

This week, we’ll take a few different looks at the period from the 1890s to the early 1900s,

But we’ll do it through a few different lenses.

As you can see, today’s lecture is called A Tale of Two Companies, Part One.

Today and Wednesday, we’ll look at two of the earliest film studios,

Each of which approached this burgeoning industry with a very different set

Of strategies and assumptions

**Quick review**

But first!

Play along at home, and see what you can remember from last week.

**[ANIMATION]**

Can you name an optical toy? We looked at a whole bunch of them.

**[ANIMATION]**

Who was Eadweard Muybridge?

And more specifically, how did he contribute to the history of motion pictures?

**[ANIMATION]**

And finally, who invented motion pictures?

Hint: it’s a trick question.

**Key Concepts**

Okay, let’s move on to new business!

Here are your key concepts for today.

Remember, these are the things I hope you’ll be able to define and contextualize

When you walk away from this lecture.

**Diagram**

As I mentioned at the top of the lecture, we’ll be looking this week at the early history of the film industry

Through a couple of different lenses.

This diagram is a very, *very* simplified visualization of how media scholars see the world.

We see technology, society and culture, and the media industry in a relationship with each other;

But different lenses focus on different relations of cause and effect between these factors.

**Technology (diagram)**

On Friday, we talked about technological determinism.

That’s the idea that you see highlighted here: that technology causes changes in society and culture

And that technology causes changes in media industry practices and products.

**Media Industries (diagram)**

Looking at media history through the lens of media companies, as we’ll do for the next two lectures,

Looks like this. It looks at the reciprocal relationships between

the media industries and these other factors,

Examining the histories of studios, makers, and the mechanisms of media production and circulation.

**Media Industry Studies**

Media Industry studies is defined this way by Dr. Perren,

One of the leading thinkers on media industry studies and one of our very own RTF professors.

She says media industry studies is “a field of scholarly study with diverse traditions that analyzes

How media texts, audiences, histories and culture relate to

industrial structure, economics, politics and policy.

**[ANIMATION]**

It might be more helpful to think of some topics that fall into this bucket.

Looking at media history through the lens of media industry studies might examine:

Companies and other institutions; the power of media workers; diversity in the media industries;

Government regulation; markets and marketing; business models;

Media industry practices and standards; ethical issues regarding business practices; labor;

Histories of products, fields, or corporations; and intellectual property and other media law.

So, to put it simply, sometimes we think about studying film or TV as pondering questions like,

“Oooh, what kind of shot did David Lynch use in this scene?”

But that’s not the only way to talk about film! Using this perspective, the media industries perspective,

We take the focus off of what’s on the screen, and think about all the steps that got it there.

Often, I find that this perspective is most valuable to students who eventually want to work in media.

If that’s you, think about using our research assignments to take a media industry view!

**One, two, why**

Over the next two lectures, we’re going to be looking at

**[ANIMATION]** the Star Film Company, founded by Georges and Gaston Melies, and

**[ANIMATION]** the Edison Trust, founded a little later by Thomas Edison and his associates.

Why these two companies?

**[ANIMATION]** Because these two companies were hugely influential on the style of early films,

Because they were both big players in the early international film industry,

Because they had very different business methods and practices,

And because social and historical factors affected each company’s survival.

Star Films & The Edison Trust operate differently, and they produce very different art.

Also their paths cross! Over the next two lectures, we’ll see one company eventually consume the other.

This is not to say one is better than the other,

and it’s definitely not to say one made better art than the other

But rather to demonstrate how much business decisions impact which films reach audiences at all.

**Thought experiment**

Okay, a quick thought experiment!

I know you don’t know everything about American culture in the 1890s yet, but don’t worry about that.

Take what you do know from Friday’s lecture and from your general historical knowledge of the period:

There’s no internet, there’s no air travel, there’s no television or radio, there are no movie theaters,

No film conventions or traditions, no intellectual property law,

no regulations, no corporations, no patents.

**[ANIMATION]**

Now, imagine you’re a creative entrepreneurial hustler living in the 1890s.

You’ve just seen a demonstration of a projected moving image for the first time and you are entranced.

This is what you want to do and there are *no* industry rules…yet.

How do you build a company? What are its principles?

What do you make? How do you get people to watch or buy your product?

What kinds of films do you make? What’s your business strategy?

**Timeline**

Film director Georges Melies found himself in that very situation, and made a series of choices

That gave us some fanstastic early films, and also cost him his company.

**[ANIMATION]** Georges is born in 1861 in Paris.

**[ANIMATION]** From 1880-1888, he goes to work at his family’s shoe company.

And while that’s not his dream job, he picks up the useful skills of sewing and managing machinery.

Which goes to show you—every job can get you closer to your dream if you try!

**[ANIMATION]** In 1888, he makes a change. He is totally sick of making shoes,

So he purchases a theater, the Theatre Robert-Houdin, and he starts performing stage magic.

**Poster**

I was able to find this beautiful old poster from the theater, depicting a variety, of…

Magic tricks? I think? I neither read French nor like magic—

Don’t you try to pull the wool over my eyes, magician, I know you just hid that card, I’m not an *idiot*—

But it looks like we’ve at least got a kid popping out of a trunk,

And a magician making it rain candy and trinkets on these little kid’s heads over here in the corner.

**Three heads**

So, Georges Melies became a magician!

And here began his love of decapitation.

Here, you see a still from one of his early films that involves decapitated & multiplying heads.

But his history with chopping off heads starts in his magic days, when

He created what he called “theatrical compositions,” or tricks and illusions with kind of a story.

And one of his earlier ones was called “The Recalcitrant Decapitated Man.”

In this trick, a professor is decapitated because he just cannot shut up—but even his head is chatty,

And it’s stuffed in a box.

Some hijinks ensue with the head—his body gets it back, a skeleton steals it, etc.

And eventually it’s returned to the professor’s body and, in a happy ending,

The professor is hung.

What I am saying here is that I hope this is not how you think of me

BUT LET’S KEEP GOING JUST IN CASE.

**Timeline, again**

**[ANIMATION]**

So, Melies is happy magically chopping off heads, until 1895.

That’s when he goes to the first Lumiere film presentation, where he sees some of their simple films—

Factory workers leaving work, etc.

He is *transfixed*. He asks the Lumieres if he can buy one of their cameras, but they turn him down.

**[ANIMATION]** As we know, lots of people were developing film technology at the same time,

So he turns to the U.K. instead, and buys an animatograph from R.W. Paul.

He makes some modifications, learns to use it, and begins making his own short films.

**Animatograph**

Thanks to the British museum, here’s an up close and personal look at an animatograph—

It’s kind of a lovely piece of machinery, no?

**Timeline**

**[ANIMATION]** In 1896, Melies founds the Star Film company.

It’s just a French trademark for content, though. Melies don’t patent any technology or processes.

**[ANIMATION]** And from 1896 to 1897, Melies builds this beautiful studio to film in.

**Studio**

It’s made out of glass.

Why? Because you need tons and tons of light for these early cameras and film stock,

And building out of glass is a great way to harness the power of the sun.

Okay, now let’s watch one of Melies’s very earliest movies.

**A Terrible Night**

This is called *A Terrible Night*, and it’s from somewhere around 1896-1897.

**[PLAY FILM]**

As you can see, the fear of bedbugs in a hotel has been with us for a troublingly long time.

This film tells a little story, kind of like the Lumiere’s “The Sprinkler Sprinkled”

(which was from around the same time)

But it’s told through one shot, with little or no editing.

**Timeline**

**[ANIMATION]** Georges makes hundreds of films once he’s built his studio

And the period from about 1899 to about 1904 is considered the prime of his career.

In that time, he begins to experiment with the medium of film and the things it and it alone can do.

Instead of just filming the equivalent of a stage show, or filming actualities like the Lumieres,

He uses the camera itself to tell stories in a new way.

Let’s take a look at one of those films.

**Four Troublesome Heads**

Here’s that decapitation film I was talking about, from roughly 1898.

**[PLAY FILM]** So as you can see here, he’s created special effects.

He’s toying around with what the camera and film can do to make these heads appear and disappear.

His performance is still like a magician on a stage, but now it’s the camera that provides the magic.

**Le Voyage**

Melies’s films get longer, more complicated, and more fantastical,

With intricate sets and props and more of these editing tricks.

In 1902, he makes probably his most enduring film, “A Trip to the Moon,”

Which you’ll be watching in full for this lecture—it’s linked in the module.

And while the version you’ll be watching is black and white…

**Butterfly**

…it’s important to know that many of these were in color!

Star Films workers hand tinted each frame of film and the result was fantastic.

So, even though we think of old film as totally black and white, the very oldest films were often *not.*

**Timeline**

**[ANIMATION]** Some stuff hits the fan around 1902.

Georges discovers that our old friend Thomas Edison is making money off of his films in the U.S. by

Manufacturing copies, adding English titles needed, and distributing them around the country.

In response, he sends his brother Gaston to establish Star Films in New York,

To try to protect his intellectual property—because that’s all Star Films is!

**[ANIMATION]** And as Georges stays in France making more and more elaborate versions of

The same kinds of films he’d been making

Gaston begins to make his own films in New York. Star Films moves to San Antonio in 1903,

And they make westerns here in Texas until around 1908.

**Star Films Ranch**

Here’s an image of the Star Films Ranch as it stood in San Antonio around 1910 or 1911.

The crew of actors is all from New York, and they shot something like 70 short Westerns in about a year.

**Star Films Ranch – Filming**

Here, you can see them filming outside. Just like Georges needed his glass studio,

At the considerably more workaday star ranch, they just filmed outside.

Even when the scene was supposed to be inside! They’d just crop it and hope the wind didn’t blow

Anyone’s hair around suspiciously.

**Francis Ford & Edith Storey**

And here’s promotional postcard from one of those westerns

Which seems to have starred Francis Ford and Edith Storey.

**New Timeline**

**[ANIMATION]** In the 1910s, the American branch of Star Films can’t resist Edison.

He controls film in the U.S., and his film trust (which we’ll talk more about in the next lecture)

acquires the company. The company owes Edison a certain quota of films each week or month

And as Georges is toiling away at long, now kind of old-fashioned epics, Gaston fills that quota.

**[ANIMATION]** Georges has fallen into debt in France because he can’t adapt to new tastes

So he ends up entering into a deal with another French company called Pathe to save his company.

**[ANIMATION]** In 1912, Gaston—the U.S. brother—gets this idea that film could also bring very

Far away parts of the world to American audiences.

He takes this trip through the South Pacific making 64 short documentary films and ships them back,

But many of the negatives arrive in the U.S. destroyed.

Remember: silver nitrate film is dangerous, and fragile.

**[ANIMATION]** By 1915, it’s curtains for the U.S. branch of Star Films.

Gaston moves back to Europe and dies—he never spoke to Georges again.

His son sells off the business to Edison and ceases production.

**[ANIMATION]** In France, World War I puts a stop to Georges’s filmmaking, as tenuous as it was.

His studio becomes a hospital, and the French Army melts his film down for supplies.

The celluloid is used to make boot heels.

**[ANIMATION]** After the war, Pathe takes control of what’s left of Georges’ studio,

Because he’s hugely in debt to them.

He burns his remaining negatives and gives up.

**Studio**

His studio is all abandoned.

**Toy Store**

He marries his mistress—who starred in many of his films—

And together they run a toy and candy shop in a train station in Paris.

(Which, if you have seen the film *Hugo*, is where that story starts.)

He falls into obscurity for some years as the film industry evolves away from his style

But his work is eventually rediscovered, some prints are found,

And he’s celebrated as an innovator.

Many of his films remain lost to history,

though occasionally a long-forgotten print pops up in some forgotten archive.

So, if we think about the business strategy of Star Films as a company,

We see a business built totally in service of content, and more specifically, of an artist’s vision.

They’re not concerned with technology, they’re not even really concerned with audience tastes,

Which leaves them at a considerable disadvantage when tastes do change.

And while Gaston tried to save the business from Edison in the US…

**Edison**

…Edison’s very different business strategy ate them for breakfast.

And that’s where we’ll pick up with Part Two in the next lecture.