**A Tale of Two Companies, Pt. 2**

**Video Script**

**Fa20/Sp21**

**Introduction**

Welcome back! I left you on a real cliffhanger on Monday, and I’m sure you’ve been

On the edge of your seat since then, but fear not!

We’ll be picking up right where we left off, with Thomas Edison and the Edison Trust.

**Key Concepts**

Here are your key concepts, same as last lecture

We’ll be hitting the yellow ones today

**Melies Review**

But first! A quick review.

**[ANIMATION]**

Think on this one for a moment:

How would you describe the business strategy of Star Films?

What did they make, how did they sell it, and what happened as a result of their business decisions?

Put another way, if you were another Melies sibling, how would *you* steer the business?

Would you do the same things? Or would you advise a new path?

**Thomas Edison**

Our second company in the tale of two companies is the Edison Trust (a term I will explain in a minute)

But it is—spoiler—affiliated with Thomas Edison.

And you might remember that he came up last week, when he met with Muybridge,

And then deputized his employee William Dickson to work on motion pictures.

His lab invented the kinetograph, kinetoscope, and vitascope—all important developments

(though not singular ones!)

In the development of early motion picture technology.

If you need a refresher you can always go back and re-watch my lecture…

**Drunk History**

…Or you could watch the first four minutes of the *Drunk History* episode on Thomas Edison.

Honestly, it’s great. It’s really helpful. It’s everything you need to know told to you by a man

Who’s even drunker than I am. (JOKING.)

It’s linked for you on Canvas.

**Timeline**

So, let’s dive in with Tommy.

**[ANIMATION]**

Edison is born in 1847 and he’s raised in Michigan.

He has very little formal schooling – he learns to read and write from his mom, a former teacher,

And because I think it’s important to surface the history of disability and disabled folks,

I think it’s worthwhile to note that Edison began losing his hearing as a young teen.

By the time he reached adulthood, he was almost completely deaf.

It’s said that he viewed this as an asset—that the relative silence he experienced was what allowed him

The uninterrupted periods of thought and experimentation that also made him a successful inventor.

**[ANIMATION]**

We’ve dragged Edison a smidge in this class because history so often attributes everything developed

By his laboratory to his singular genius, but he did invent quite a lot of things.

He coupled with some other young dudes, and from 1876-1888 they work at his lab in Menlo Park

Churning out inventions that make a huge impact on American culture:

The phonograph, the incandescent lightbulb, and so forth.

**[ANIMATION]**

As we discussed, from about 1888 to 1891, his employee William Dickson

Invents the kinetograph and the kinetoscope and—here’s where we see the difference when

We compare Edison to Melies—

He patents *the hell* out of these inventions.

Edison was a patenter extraordinare—he held *thousands* of them. And he enforced them.

**Illustration**

Here, you can see the illustration attached to Edison’s patent for the “kinetographic camera,”

How all of the basic cogs and mechanisms to advance film within an early camera

Are laid out here. This will be important.

Because, as you also know, other people were developing similar technology at the same time.

**Timeline**

[**ANIMATION]** So, now having invented the camera and the kinetoscope, that first viewing device

Edison opens the Black Maria in 1893 and begins shooting very short films.

**[ANIMATION]**

And from about 1894 to 1900, they make hundreds of kinetoscope films.

Here’s another departure from Melies. Edisons films mostly depict “actualities.”

What do I mean by that?

**Mermaid**

Well, while our French magician pal Melies is off in his glass castle outside Paris

turning ladies into mermaids

**Sun**

And figuring out how to feed trains to the sun

**Cats**

Edison basically just finds out which live acts are popular and has them do their thing

In front of the camera.

So, we get boxing cats…

**Sandow**

We get my boyfriend Eugen Sandow a-flexing his beefy heart out…

**Firebox**

And even when the directors working for him began to produce more intricate narratives,

They were still pretty grounded in reality.

This is a still from Edwin S. Porter’s 1903 film *Life of an American Fireman*

Which includes such shots as a closeup of a fire box…

**Firefighters**

And these images of firefighters doing their thing.

These are not the fantastical images of an illustionist’s brain—they’re more functional—

but they are equally pleasing to a growing moviegoing public that is *desperate* for new films.

**Timeline**

**[ANIMATION]** So, by 1902, Edison owns a ton of filmmaking patents.

And his business strategy is basically an attempt to assemble a wide enough series of patents

that it would be effectively impossible to produce motion pictures in the U.S.

without purchasing a license from his company.

And, crucially, he begins threatening competitors with lawsuits as they begin to pop up.

And when I say threatened, I mean *threatened.*

He was suing people left and right for making films without his okay.

This is perhaps one of the greatest differences between Star Films & Edison.

Where star films saw the camera as a tool one needs in order to make art,

Edison saw the camera as patented product one needs to control the use of in order to make an industry.

And not only does he protect his patents with lawyers—

He protects them with straight up brute force.

**Cecil B. DeMille**

Here’s a photograph of the director Cecil B. DeMille with a comically large gun.

Though this photo was taken a decade or two after his run-ins with Edison,

Journalists have reported that he began carrying & collecting weapons

because Edison would send his henchmen

to bust DeMille’s equipment and threaten him for daring to make films without kicking a license fee

Back to Edison.

The book *Lost Hollywood* also reports that DeMille kept a tame wolf on the premises of his house

For the same reason, and because I don’t have a picture of DeMille’s actual wolf,

**[ANIMATION]** here is a picture of a very good wolf shirt.

Wolves aside, the henchmen part is a common story. Edison would dispatch teams of cronies

To enforce his patents *by* force. He wanted control of the industry and

Revenue from anyone and everyone else who wanted in.

**Timeline**

**[ANIMATION]** So Edison is making all of these short films in the Black Maria,

But he notices that there’s a demand for European films like Melies’s

Because they do more than just animate images. They tell a *story*.

He begins to produce more complex films, and one of the most famous from this period

Is Edwin S. Porter’s *The Great Train Robbery* from 1903.

**Porter**

You’ll be watching this film for this module.

Porter is doing something different than Melies is—he’s not telling a fairy tale

He’s not building elaborate sets or using special effects—

But he *is* using the film medium and different kinds of shots to tell a story in a way the Melies doesn’t.

As you watch, note how he uses editing to build suspense and depict stories in more than one location,

And also remember that this is a supposed “Western” that is so clearly shot in the woods of New Jersey.

Like yes, all of those desert pine trees and fall foliage, you can’t have an outlaw tale without them.

This film is also famous for its cryptic and surprising last shot, depicted here.

**Timeline**

So, knowing both that he has to tell more complex stories and that he has to make more films, period,

Edison builds kind of a movie factory in the Bronx in 1907.

Movies become a product that can be manufactured with efficiencies by producing them in bulk.

**Edison Studios**

Here’s an image of Edison Studios.

Because film is silent, you can produce a whole bunch of pictures side by side—

there doesn’t need to be any quiet on the set.

They’re also beginning to break down film production into different roles and professions,

like a director vs. a camera operator.

And while there are certainly strides being made in Edison Studios with regard to what films can do,

The goal here is churning out a whole lot of product to meet demand,

*Not* exploring the possibilities of the medium.

**Timeline**

All the while, Edison is suing and smashing his competitors into oblivion.

By 1907, almost all of them gave up and entered into a partnership him rather than keep fighting.

The only holdout was a company called Biograph, who were only able to keep operating

Because their cameras held film in place with pressure rollers instead of little cogs,

like in Edison’s patent drawing, and they bought one additional key technology patent.

**[ANIMATION]** By 1908, even they negotiated a deal to join forces with Edison.

**Edison Trust**

What resulted was called **[ANIMATION]** The Motion Picture Patents Company, a.k.a the Edison Trust.

**[ANIMATION]** The MPPC was made up of all the major film studios at the time,

the leading film distributor,

*And* the leading supplier of film stock, Eastman Kodak.

What does that mean? The MPPC (the Edison Trust) controlled every aspect of U.S. filmmaking.

**Edison Standards**

So? What does that mean in practical terms?

It means that to coordinate film production and distribution between all the member organizations,

They created standards.

**[ANIMATION]** They decided that films would be one reel long, or between 12-14 minutes on average.

**[ANIMATION]** They also standardized the reel. Reels were made up of 1000 feet of film.

**[ANIMATION]** They set the standard that films would be rented, *not sold,* to exhibitors.

We’ll talk more about the exhibition side of things tomorrow.

**[ANIMATION]** Finally, they set the rule that member studios had to provide the trust one film a week.

That’s 52 new films per year!

**TIMELINE**

Those of you who’ve studied a bit of American history or business history might have noticed

That the Edison Trust’s complete control of the film market is…problematic, to say the least.

This is a textbook monopoly.

**[ANIMATION]** And the government agreed! They’re broken up in 1915.

Still, though, the MPPC’s early practices form the basis of the film industry as we know it.

And despite totally opposite strategies, neither Star Films nor the MPPC

Survives in any meaningful way into the 1920s.

**KODAK LAB**

Because we mentioned that Eastman Kodak—their facilities pictured here—were part of the film trust,

I wanted to take a second to talk about film stock aspect of the Trust

Very early filmmakers like Melies had to basically invent and manufacture their own film

Until companies like Eastman Kodak began producing it as a product.

And it’s *expensive.* Even aside from Edison’s control of most of the film stock in the U.S.,

It would be difficult for an independent filmmaker to acquire it.

You might not have thought about what film actually *is,* but the quick explanation is that

It’s a light-sensitive emulsion adhered to some kind of base.

During the early cinema era, the emulsion is made from nitrate, and the base is cellulose.

**FILM**

And, as I’ve mentioned before, this film is really dangerous.

It’s really flammable and self-oxodizing,

Which means that if it catches on fire you can’t even put it out by submerging it in water.

This very flammable material was threaded through a projector with a super hot light in it

Which makes for a dicey situation, if you ask me.

And while nitrate fires did happen, it’s not nearly as many as you would think.

The paper in this picture depicts a particularly bad one in 1897, when 123 people died at a charity event

When the projection booth caught on fire.

What I find fascinating is that the industry is *weirdly blasé* about this,

Arguing against fireproof booths because they’re too dark for projectionists,

*SOME OF WHOM SMOKE WHEN THEY ARE HANDLING THIS STUFF.*

Man named Harold B. Franklin wrote a manual called Motion Picture Theater Management in 1928,

And in it he basically takes the stance that nitrate film doesn’t cause fires, cigarettes cause nitrate fires.

**Tarantino**

I know there are some Tarantino fans in the class and you might remember that the danger

Of nitrate film was dramatized to spectacular effect in

*Inglorious Basterds*.

**Archive**

What I think is interesting, or poetic maybe, is that George Eastman and his company

was highly instrumental in the development of this film, and it made him a fortune.

Now, there are only three locations in the country licensed to store or show this dangerous stuff,

And one of them is the George Eastman museum,

Which sinks millions of dollars a year into its preservation and maintenance.

To everything, turn, turn, turn…

**Early Cinema**

Okay, let’s just reflect for a second before we move on in our next lecture to nickelodeons

And early movie exhibition.

While lots of us tend to think of “early” film as anything old, “early cinema” is actually

A pretty short period that runs from the 1890s until about 1905 or 1908ish

(depending on which source you read).

And early cinema has some characteristics.

It’s experimental, because no one knows what’s going on!

It’s drawn from theater—think of Melies, performing on a shallow stage with flat props and effects.

It’s also draws on photography—meaning that people “photographed” early film

like they would take a picture, with a pretty stationary camera.

Early film tended to be nonnarrative, or it had a pretty simple narrative.

It was sometimes very fanstastical, like *A Trip to the Moon,*

And it was sometimes very realist, like *Boxing Cats,*

But what unites these two visual strategies is the idea of the cinema of attractions,

Which you have a whole reading about, and you should check out!

At their core, these early films were about delighting the eye with this wonderful new technology.

**Transitional Cinema**

This is going to change when we get to next week and start thinking about a new era,

Which we call transitional cinema.

Don’t worry about this too much now.

I just want to bring it up to orient us within a specific era, even though its name sounds vague.

Thanks for listening, and

Tomorrow, you’ll be coming with me to movies!