**Video Script**

**Lecture 5 – Distribution and Transitional Film**

**Fa20/Sp21**

**Welcome**

Hello, and welcome to a new week!

Last week we thought about the period from the 1890s to about 1905ish from a couple of different angles,

But this week we’re finally moving ahead a little bit into a new period of filmmaking,

Called transitional film. Today we’ll be looking at the characteristics of transitional films—

And you’ll watch a few of my favorites for today’s course content—

But first we’ll start by thinking about how the film industry organized itself in those early days

in ways that still structure Hollywood today.

**Key Concepts**

Here are your key concepts for today;

Pause me if you need to copy them down.

**Production**

Broadly, the film industry has three branches—kind of like the government!

We’ve already talked about film production, but to give it an official definition,

Production is the branch of the film industry concerned with the *making* of motion pictures.

Here’s a little game to play along with at home.

Set a timer for 30 seconds, and list off as many film production jobs as you can possibly think of.

**[ANIMATION]** Done? Here’s some of the ones I thought of off the top of my head.

Film production includes everything from screenwriting to special effects makeup, casting to editing.

If any of these aspects of film production interest you, looking into the history of that role

would make a great research topic for any of our assignments.

**Exhibition**

We also talked about film exhibition on Friday, when we talked about nickelodeons.

But, again, to give it an official definition, film exhibition is the retail branch of the film industry

Which is concerned with displaying motion pictures for paying audiences.

**[ANIMATION]** Some things people who work in film exhibition might think about are

Theater operation, film programming, ticket sales, concessions, and exhibition windows.

If we think about our current moment, film exhibitors have struggled mightily during the pandemic,

With shut-downs, social distancing, concerns about disease transmission via recirculating air, and

A lack of new releases coming from the studios.

**Rooftop Cinema**

However, we’ve also seen exhibitors come up with some really creative solutions,

Some of which reach back into film history to revive older exhibition forms.

Thus, the resurgence of drive-in theater which originated in the 1950s,

And which we’ll talk more about later in the semester.

**Film Distribution**

I think the fuzziest of the three branches tends to be film distribution,

or the business of getting films from producers to exhibitors.

And by fuzzy, I just mean that it’s a little bit of a corporate black box.

I’d venture to say all of us have had contact with film exhibition at some point in our lives—

If we’ve been to a movie theater, we understand that branch.

And we know, or at least we *think* we know about film production,

Because so many Hollywood stories dramatize the filmmaking process,

And because they’ve made public-facing celebrities out of industry workers.

**Ve Neill**

Directors talk about their work publicly, sure, but I know special effects makeup artist Ve Neill

(seen here applying prosthetics to Danny Devito for *Batman Returns*)

Not because I’m particularly attuned to makeup, but because she was a judge

on the SyFy competition show *Face Off*.

**Distribution models**

Film distributors are rarely so public. But that doesn’t mean the branch isn’t integral!

Film distribution models have changed over time, particularly when

Hollywood became the gravitational center of the U.S. filmmaking industry.

And they continued to change as home video technology took hold and evolved.

We’ll talk about some of the earliest ones today,

Like selling film reels directly to exhibitors, or the advent of film exchanges.

Or, in other words,

**Film set**

We’ll spend the next few minutes thinking about how early and transitional films got from here…

**Nickelodeon**

…to here, or the audiences sitting in thousands of other nickelodeons like it across the country.

**Film reels**

The very earliest distribution method was studios selling films directly to exhibitors.

Film historian Max Alvarez describes it this way:

*In “the late 19th century, most film subjects were indeed sold outright, sight unseen, to theater owners, or ‘exhibitors.’ The sold films were not returnable or refundable. Around the turn of the century, a 15-meter reel of film could cost an exhibitor $25.00 to purchase. If the print was properly maintained, it could be projected at least 300 times. In the event the exhibitor wished to change the bill at his or her nickelodeon, a new film needed to be purchased, and this resulted in scores of exhibitors accumulating large collections of old film reels.”*

These films didn’t have much value to exhibitors after they’d shown them,

Alvarez describes one early New Orleans exhibitor who amassed more than 600 films in 1896 alone,

And traded them all to a group of Texans the next year in exchange for some diamonds!

This supposed valuelessness of old films remained a problem for decades, particularly in remote places

Like Canada’s Yukon Territory, which was the end of the line for films.

By the time they got there, films were old, out of date, and scratched up.

This image is taken from the so-called Dawson Film Find…

**Pool**

…which was discovered when they were doing renovations on the town’s hockey rink.

**[ANIMATION]** It turns out that the hockey rink had previously been the town pool.

And how do you fill in a big pool?

**[ANIMATION]** Well if you’ve got a ton of old films lying around that no one wants to watch,

You chuck those in.

Because the Yukon Territory is so cold, the films were actually preserved really well

And able to be restored when they found them decades and decades later.

The sense that old films weren’t worth keeping once everyone had seen them also contributes

To the number of early silent films we don’t have access to.

They were seen as ephemeral, so they just got destroyed.

**Film exchange (& text)**

Buying expensive film reels wasn’t a tenable situation for nickelodeons,

Because they were too expensive and studios were too cavalier about sending movies.

You might place an order for a film that would show up and be half as entertaining as you’d hoped,

Or might show up weeks late after your competition

on the other side of town had shown it a million time.

Ergo, a rental system model known as a film exchange emerged organically between exhibitors.

Film exchanges would do the annoying work of acquiring films,

and then rent those for a few weeks to theaters for a smaller fee.

Knowing how emphatically Edison wanted to control everything about the industry,

it might surprise you to learn that

**[ANIMATION]**

*“In the beginning, it was evident that these exchange men had a greater awareness of a film reel’s profitability than either of the two dominant film production studios, Edison and Biograph. The latter were more preoccupied with generating income from their respective Kinetoscope and Biograph projectors than from the films shown on those projectors.”*

Which just goes to show you, Edison was really concerned with his technology patents.

He saw the industry as constellation of profitable devices, not as a medium of storytelling.

**Laemmle’s film exchange**

**[Animation]** Alvarez also points out that the early film exchanges:

*“functioned as full-service stores for theater owner/managers. Motion picture and stereopticon slide projectors were sold, rented, and traded along with movie screens and other supplies. In 1905, the Chicago-based Eugene Cline & Company exchange did its competition one better by providing ‘sober and competent men’ to operate projectors for nickelodeons.”*

But as the exchanges became a crucial node in film distribution

**[ANIMATION]** they began to focus more on film. Exhibitors with theaters nearby could send

Their projectionists to exchange films in person, but the exchange would also ship reels to

More distant theaters. Their reputation relied on quick and reliable delivery of what the theater ordered.

**[ANIMATION]** Exhibitors could come to an exchange and preview film—

most of which didn’t have fancy screening rooms, so they might just project it on a wall or a curtain.

They’d rent the films they liked, return them after a few weeks, and a big crew of inspectors

Would make sure it was in okay shape. This was, incidentally, a job that hired women for a little while.

An exchange in 1913 in New York City had more than 150 women on staff who rewound films.

**[ANIMATION]** Film exchanges tended to be open late

And served as a bit of a social hub for projectionists. Alvarez mentions a 1910 article which quotes

A film exchange employee as saying projectionists were:

*“nutty, just plain nutty! This is the only fun they have. All the rest of the day they’re shut up in their hot coops, Sundays and all, and it gives them ‘attic trouble.’ At 11 o’clock at night they get away and all there is to do then is go to bed. In the morning they have to come with their reels and all the fun the poor devils get is what they have right in this office.”*

**[ANIMATION]** Some specialized in providing older (often worn-out) prints for a discount.

Thus beginning the still extant second-run movie theater.

**[ANIMATION]** Carl Laemmle’s Chicago film exchange, pictured here, charged slightly higher prices

For film rentals but prided itself on print quality and speedy service.

**[ANIMATION]** Laemmle also had a flair for advertising

Which will lead us to a critical turning point in the film industry next week.

Remember his name!

**Detroit film exchange**

Realistically, the MPPC—which remember, sought to control the US industry—

*Did* try to control film distribution too.

They created the General Film Company and bought out many small distributors

But they weren’t able to control everyone.

This is foreshadowing. Feel me foreshadow.

**312 Harwood**

Just because we’re **[claps]** deep in the heart of Texas,  
I wanted to see if I could find any film exchange buildings in our state.

I was able to find this one in Dallas,

Elements of which are preserved by the artists who bought it some time ago.

**Vault**

Like the fireproof film vault…

**Slots**

…with its metal organizing slots, which seem to be relabeled along the way.

As we’ve discussed, nitrate film was basically a weapon, and film exchanges were often the sight of fires,

Particularly because people were pretty lax about not smoking inside.

Plus, exchanges were not exactly fastidious about packing things carefully in their early years—

They’d wrap this intensely flammable stuff in paper and send it on its merry way.

It wasn’t until a train car literally exploded in 1914 because it was filled with smoking passengers

And two men carrying reels of film that municipalities began to enact laws about

How exchanges had to store, ship, and pack films and how film exchange buildings should be built.

Often, film exchanges were isolated on a particular block, to keep them away from other people

Who did not want to explode.

And still, film history is filled with exchange fires.

**Early vs. Transitional cinema**

That people were willing to continue frantically handling a medium that blew up like it had a *grudge*

Speaks to the depth of public excitement about film as a medium.

Particularly, as we move from the early era to the transitional era,

Because film as a medium became increasingly unique, and

filmmakers were beginning to tell stories unique to it.

When we say “transitional” era, I’m less concerned about the exact years – scholars disagree—

But just that you know we’re talking about the transition from a scattershot experimentation

to the classical Hollywood system, with its industrial structure and storytelling conventions.

So let’s look at some differences.

**[ANIMATION]** If early cinema is characterized by experimentation…

**[ANIMATION]**Transitional cinema is increasingly characterized by standardization

—like the one-reel film.

**[ANIMATION]** Early cinema sees many companies popping up all over the place…

**[ANIMATION]** …while in the US, the industry eventually comes under control of the Edison Trust.

By 1908, you can’t really make, distribute, or show a film that Edison doesn’t make a cut of.

**[ANIMATION]** Early cinema is the so-called cinema of attractions,

meaning that its primary purpose is visual delight, the sheer pleasure of movement

**[ANIMATION]** while transitional cinema moves us to the cinema of narrative integration, or

Marshalling all the elements of filmmaking toward telling a story.

Roberta Pearson talks more about this in your reading for today.

**[ANIMATION]** If you might see early films in kinetoscope parlors, as part of live vaudeville shows, or

At special presentations in theaters, church basements, or other community gathering places…

**[ANIMATION]** the transitional era sees the widespread proliferation of nickelodeons,

The first business *expressly* for showing movies.

**[ANIMATION]** Early cinema can be long or short, from Fred Ott’s sneeze to Melies’s longer films

**[ANIMATION]** But during the transitional era, film comes to be measured by the reel

—a thousand feet of film, which is between 12-14 minutes.

**[ANIMATION]** In early cinema, the camera is stationary and shots tend to be static;

You don’t see a lot of variation in shot types or camera movement

Even though early filmmakers did experiment with visual effects.

**[ANIMATION]**  Due to advances in technology, in transitional cinema we begin to see different

shot types and camera movement.

**[ANIMATION]** And finally, during the early cinema era, the U.S. film industry

Is mostly concentrated on the East Coast, around New York and Ft. Lee, NJ, an early film hub.

**[ANIMATION]** But as you’ll see in next week’s lectures, filmmakers depart for the West coast

During the transitional era, settling in the town we still use as shorthand for the film industry as a whole.

**Laughing Gas**

For this module, I’ve asked you to watch four transitional films, and honestly…

…it was hard to just pick four! I’ll be honest and say that early films,

aside from my beloved Eugen Sandow, don’t spark much joy for me.

I can appreciate what an accomplishment they were, and marvel at the preservation work that went into

Our being able to stream them, but I’m not super entertained by a lot of them.

Transitional film, though, I *love*. They’re telling real stories, but they’re still full of experimentation.

I just wanted to briefly touch on the four I’ve asked you to watch.

First, another Edwin S. Porter film I just recently stumbled on called *Laughing Gas*,

starring this performer, a woman named Bertha Regustus.

I’ve not been able to find *anything* about who she was, but in an era when films often featured blackface

Rather than Black performers (as we’ll talk about in the next lecture)

Regustus turns in a star comic performance in *Laughing Gas* that doesn’t rely on racist tropes.

It does drag on a little, but she’s so charming, and it communicates something sweet

about the very common experience of “catching” laughter from someone.

**The Lonedale Operator**

Then you’ll watch *The Lonedale Operator* from 1911, directed by D.W. Griffith.

That’s a name you might know, and we’ll talk about him in detail in our next lecture.

We won’t be watching any of his other films.

With *Lonedale*, pay attention to how he uses the close-up.

**Suspense**

Then you’ll move on to *Suspense*, a film by Lois Weber from 1913—

She also stars in it, that’s her in the top right.

It’s a thriller, and I think you’ll be struck by how modern and exciting some of her choices are.

**Daisy Doodad**

And finally, you’ll watch a British transitional film I just discovered this summer called

Daisy Doodad’s Dial (it’ll help to know that *dial* was slang for face).

This one actually made me laugh out loud.

It’s directed by Florence Turner, who is also the star,

And the premise is that she enters an ugly face-making contest.

I think this film is an absolutely masterful in using silent acting to its

absolute height of absurdity, and with Turner’s willingness to look totally bananas the whole time.

I think you’re in for a treat, and I’ll link you to a few more of my favorites if you’d like to keep watching.