

7. A 'Distant Reading' of the 'Chaser Theory': Local Views and the Digital Generation of New Cinema History

Paul Moore

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Abstract

What can the digital generation of film history add to past analog methods? This chapter revisits the 'chaser theory' through searches in digital databases of historic newspapers. Did filmed actualities and attractions really act as mere 'chasers' on vaudeville bills? Charles Musser's debate with Robert Allen in 1984 remains a touchstone of American film history. In principle, digital search results allow the structure of mass practices to be visualized, following Franco Moretti's call for 'distant readings' of textual relations, against 'close readings' of canonical texts. This chapter offers two visualizations of digital searches of historic newspapers across North America and focuses on the adoption of 'local views' by itinerant picture shows after the supposed end of the 'chaser' period.

Keywords: distant reading, Franco Moretti, chasers, vaudeville, local views

From the standpoint of local experience, early film culture was as ephemeral as yesterday's news. Recovering novel aspects of early cinema often relies upon those exceptional copies of newspapers that were kept by libraries and archives. Previous generations of film historians had to review these as bound print or microfilmed copies, but recently digitized newspaper databases allow the digital generation of cinema historians to imagine revising the analog generation's conclusions. For example, I have found reports of the production and exhibition of 'local views' to be remarkably well archived in local newspapers. Consider the smallest note in a column

of ‘Local Happenings’ in St. John’s, Newfoundland in 1905: “The American Vitagraph Company’s photographer expects to secure a picture of Water Street from the electric cars to-day; also a view of to-day’s Express.”¹ Such passing mentions of Vitagraph making local moving pictures appeared sporadically in 1904 and 1905 across Atlantic Canada, New England, and upstate New York. Often buried as town gossip amidst the local trivia of everyday life in small-town newspapers, I take these ephemeral remarks as the foundation for a new cinema history that begins with local film cultures, such as this case from the most easterly point in North America.² At the time, Vitagraph was one of the dominant film companies in America, but in Canada in 1904 it began a short-lived venture incorporating local views into their variety shows, briefly promoting ‘See Yourself as Others See You’ as the primary reason to attend a moving picture show. Soon abandoned as a profit-seeking strategy for the mainstream film industry, this aspect of self-recognition and place recognition remained an occasional part of local film culture, but primarily through independent and marginal producers.³

In this chapter, I test the power and utility of digital databases of historic newspapers for early cinema history. I aim to revise – or at least revisit – cornerstones of the history of early film in North America by focusing on circuits of cinema: continental networks of local exhibition and the circulation of itinerant showmen.⁴ I present a couple of ‘distant readings’ of early cinema on a continental scale,⁵ framed by the context of revisiting the 1984 ‘chaser theory’ debate between Charles Musser and Robert Allen. Graphing keyword searches between 1896 and 1909, I visualize how the chaser period does indeed seem to end in 1903 with a shift toward narrative cinema following the release of Edwin S. Porter’s *Life of an American Fireman*. Mapping the production and exhibition of local views between 1903 and 1906, I show the geographic extent of the brief craze for films of local fire brigade runs – but I cast this in relation to the popularity of *American Fireman* as an early narrative film. In this roundabout way, the deceptively simple question of why Vitagraph made local views of my home town of St. John’s required me to revisit one of the originating moments of early film history.

Reading the ‘Chaser Theory’ across a Digital Generation Gap

American Vitagraph’s venture happens *after* the infamous ‘chaser’ period, and well into the ascendance of the narrative story film. Most of Vitagraph’s

local views were exhibited once in one location; they exploit none of the economies of scale allowed by cinema's technological reproducibility.⁶ No matter how cheaply produced, they still make no rational sense for mainstream producers of mass culture. Although cinema's images circulated internationally from the start, Tom Gunning proposes "direct address," in particular, to be essential to early cinema, which "also marked the era of local cinema, the travelling exhibitor and the fairground cinema, especially during the period between cinema's highly publicized premieres and the dawn of new permanent theatres."⁷ True; but why the effort and expense when Vitagraph's program already included a wide variety of other attractions: illustrated songs, newsworthy actualities, trick films and early narrative fairy tales and comic turns. My answer derives from an aggregation of digital searches of historic newspaper databases, which instantly return trivial, localized mentions of cinema that only collectively gain significance. I propose that the power of such databases allows my digital generation of film historians to revisit the prior analog generation's efforts. I will focus especially on the 1984 exchange on the 'chaser theory' between Charles Musser and Robert Allen as a touchstone of analog film historiography, now decades past. To my distant judgment, Musser's agreement with Allen over the 'chaser theory' is of more interest than their differences. On its surface, the dispute concerned the empirical validity of the commonplace notion that the novelty of moving pictures quickly wore off, relegating them to 'chasers' on the vaudeville bill.⁸ This period of disinterest ended with the emergence of the fiction story film, which led the masses to love the 'movies'.⁹

Allen had offered a revision to that conventional take in a 1979 essay that labeled the notion 'the chaser theory', offering plenty of examples of film's continued popularity throughout the supposed 'chaser' period of 1898 to 1903. In particular, he offered the concept of early cinema as a "visual newspaper" and singled out the appeal of local views and French comic and trick films to indicate there was far from "nothing whatever of interest" happening before the story film.¹⁰ Those specific points mark admiring agreement from Musser. Indeed, the term 'visual newspaper' became central to Musser's detailed analysis of the years 1898 to 1901 in the dissertation that led to *Before the Nickelodeon*, an essential work of American film history told through the prism of Edwin S. Porter as a pioneering filmmaker.¹¹ Musser yielded little else, attacking Allen's revision of the 'chaser theory' with rhetorical and methodological zeal, testing the hypothesis with triangulated evidence, qualitative, quantitative and discursive, that confirmed how moving pictures suffered a period of

socio-cultural and political-economic disinterest, exacerbated by Edison's litigiousness, before a distinct resurgence of activity mid-1903 in production and exhibition alike. The turning point coincided with the release of Porter's *Life of An American Fireman*. Musser had cast the 'debate' as a matter of divergent ideological orientations to the dialectic of creative production and commercial exploitation as the foundation for popular culture and social history. He called Allen's approach "hampered by a disinterest in production" and reminiscent of "corporate liberalism." The journal publishing Musser's essay, *Studies in Visual Communication*, allowed Allen a concurrent rejoinder and Musser a concluding response in turn. Allen pointed to the places beyond his 1979 essay where he went into more depth, more nuance; he provided a valiant defense that their consistently overlapping evidence diverged only in emphasis. It is easy to sympathize with Allen's bewilderment; it is also easy to admire the depths of Musser's access to new archives, sources, and methods to seamlessly weave together exhibition and production, as became impressively clear with the publication of *Before the Nickelodeon*.

The end result of his and others' rigorous approach: "Film history courses put aside their copies of Lewis Jacobs and Terry Ramsaye and started reading new work by Charles Musser and Richard Abel based on primary sources."¹² Of course, Abel's own definitive take on the 'chaser theory' in his opening chapter of *The Red Rooster Scare* (1999) noted, along with Musser, how the emergence of the American fiction film in 1903 coincided with a monkey's knot of shifting circumstances: the emergence of film rental exchanges and standardized illustrated song production, the rapid expansion of small city 'family vaudeville' theaters and small town circuits for itinerant 'picture shows'. Musser¹³ more specifically cited the 1903 introduction of the three-blade shutter to reduce flicker as a neat marker of the shift, for those predisposed to technological determinism. It is that complexity of aesthetics, technology, cultural, and political-economic factors – the ability to at once look at the screen and all around – that marks the strength of Musser's work. This is contrasted against Allen and his colleague (later co-author) Douglas Gomery, who rarely direct their eyes toward the screen.¹⁴ In the 'Chaser Theory' folio, strictly speaking, the divide between Allen and Musser is not stark. Allen's emphasis on audiences and reception on the social and geographic margins was not articulated until later.¹⁵ And Musser's¹⁶ work analyzing the origins of Porter's pioneering production, also his editing and curation of the Edison papers,¹⁷ is barely evident in the 1983 'chaser theory' essay. Another difference went unstated at the time: Musser may also have been signaling

Allen's outsider status from the group of film historians who had been catalyzed by attending the 1978 Brighton conference, Cinema 1900-1906.¹⁸ Although they now appear members of the same analog generation, Allen's dissertation preceded Musser's by a decade – 1977 vs. 1986 – but it is a crucial divide for film history because they lie on either side of the Brighton conference. Musser attended Brighton as a student near the beginning of his dissertation research, and he benefitted (as did other participants) from Brighton's energetic catalyst for their collective and often collegial work.¹⁹ The points of agreement – visual newspaper, local views, trick films – actually align Allen's work with the emerging 'new film history' that has since come to be associated with participation at Brighton.²⁰ In the end, Allen seems chastened simply for being a predecessor – a risk of my own revisiting the 'chaser' debate here.

'Distant Reading' of the 'Chaser Theory'

In principle, digital search results allow the structure of mass practices to be visualized. Franco Moretti defined a 'distant reading' as an analysis across texts, as opposed to a 'close reading' of the text itself. The distant reading allows for a "focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes – or genres and systems."²¹ Restricting analysis to aesthetic innovations of canonical works only considered texts tautologically worthy of close reading, ignoring the vast majority of literature. First articulated before the humanities became digital, Moretti's initial call for a 'distant reading' was not in principle computational, although it was in essence quantitative. The concept was part of his effort to study literature's material practices as the circulation of reading practices, genres, styles.²² He turned to the visualizations of *Graphs, Maps and Trees*. 'Distant reading' could rely upon ephemeral and partial knowledge of the neglected mass of literature, including lost texts that *cannot* be read closely, despite leaving traces of their production and promotion.²³ The point was not to displace close reading and qualitative interpretation.²⁴ Moretti's central point was that the study of the entirety of literature was possible, and indeed was essential for a better understanding of literacy and literature as a political-economic, industrial pursuit. In this respect, he redefines literature as mass culture, and brings the methods of comparative literature closer to those of cinema and media studies. The unit of analysis for film history is, of course, the 'text' of films, but for early cinema the 'text' can easily be expanded

to become the 'show' – a confluence of films in a production context, showmen in an exhibition context, and audiences in a social context. This contextualized definition of a 'show' can be translated into maps or charts of the circulation of films, genres, or showmen-exhibitors. Digital newspaper databases do not simply allow close reading at a distance; a more structured view of cinema results from attempting to visualize patterns within amassed quantities of local facts, each trivial but all together substantial. Analytically, the aim is to be as lucid as Musser using Porter to recount the history of early cinema, except without the central figure to provide coherent narrative structure.

To be clear, I am not proposing an entirely decentered film history in which trivial, passing figures are valorized for their marginality. I am merely using a distant view of the 'chaser theory' to complement and visualize how key figures are networked in relation to marginal figures. The difficulty is distinguishing structured patterns from empirical case studies. As a starting point, let me present a view of the structured pattern of pictures-and-vaudeville that eliminates empirical case studies altogether. In its most basic form, the first of the two hypotheses in the 'chaser theory' takes a quantitative measure of the popular appeal of cinema relative to vaudeville. Both Musser and Allen agreed that regional variation was apparent and important to consider – New York alone was not sufficient; its differences from Chicago just a starting point. But how many case studies would suffice to make a generalization? On one extreme, all available cases can be transformed into a single statistic counting the frequency of film on vaudeville bills as reported and advertised in newspapers. Elsewhere, I have argued for the centrality of newspaper publicity in constituting early cinema's audiences as a mass public. Early cinema's viewing audiences were always already reading publics. In addition to local advertising and publicity, metropolitan news about film technology and popular vaudeville shows circulated through newswire and syndication in advance and well beyond local opportunities to see and experience moving pictures.²⁵ This special status of newspapers' centrality to popular and public culture at the turn of the twentieth century allows me to substitute the prevalence of cinema in newsprint for its status in vaudeville. Graphing the results (Figure 7.1) charts the prevalence of cinema within vaudeville between 1896 and 1909.²⁶ The effect of this particular type of 'distant reading' is geographic flattening, since newspaper items from any location are weighted equally, counted as equivalent. While the statistic erases the local context of each news item, it provides a rudimentary measure of film-within-vaudeville across North America, with the obvious disclaimer

that the prevalence of film and vaudeville does not necessarily correspond to its popularity.

Anyone who has used digital newspaper databases will know this estimate of film-and-vaudeville contains a degree of error.²⁷ The most obvious problem is the lack of precision in optical-character recognition, but indecipherable text is not new to digital searches. Illegible sections stem from the ephemerality of newspaper form and news as a genre. Digital copies are almost entirely made from microfilm, whose poor quality was compounded by newsprint's sometimes uneven tone, flaking, or yellowing. In any case, microfilm permitted libraries to expediently toss the bulk of bound print copies long ago.²⁸ Unique to digital searches, however, is the unpredictable coding of newspaper pages into component items, which can range from single ads up to an entire page, depending on the algorithm used when the page was added to the database. For the chart here, the size of the sample more than makes up for the error: a quarter million hits for cinema from May 1896 to April 1909, half a million for vaudeville, nearly 70,000 times when the two overlap in the same newspaper item – on average 100 times a week. The shape of the graph succinctly illustrates why there was a debate over the chaser theory in the first place. The main trend from 1896 to 1902 is the variance from month to month. Although there are moments in the 'novelty' years, 1896 and 1897, when more than ten per cent of vaudeville hits also mention cinema, there is a general unpredictability during the 'visual newspaper' period, 1898 to 1901. Neither a precipitous shift to disinterest, nor a sustained popularity is apparent. The best linear fit shows a slight decline for the early period, with fewer peaks of popularity through the end of 1902. A dramatic upward trend begins in 1903, but the turning point would have been hidden until mid-1903, when the rate of film-with-vaudeville is higher than at any point since cinema's arrival. By 1904, cinema's emerging mass adoption is undeniable, due to the corresponding increased number of family vaudeville theaters, amusement parks and itinerant picture shows. The same linear alignment of cinema and vaudeville continues throughout the nickelodeon boom years. In terms of simple correlation in newspaper discourse on a continental scale, this first elementary distant reading using digital database searches confirms the quantitative part of the 'chaser theory'. From 1898 to 1902, there is indeed a gradual decline of cinema within vaudeville, and a steady increase from 1903 throughout the emergence of the fiction film and the nickelodeon.

A more qualitative evaluation of the 'chaser theory' requires a slightly closer reading of the relative popularity of film genres. The quantitative

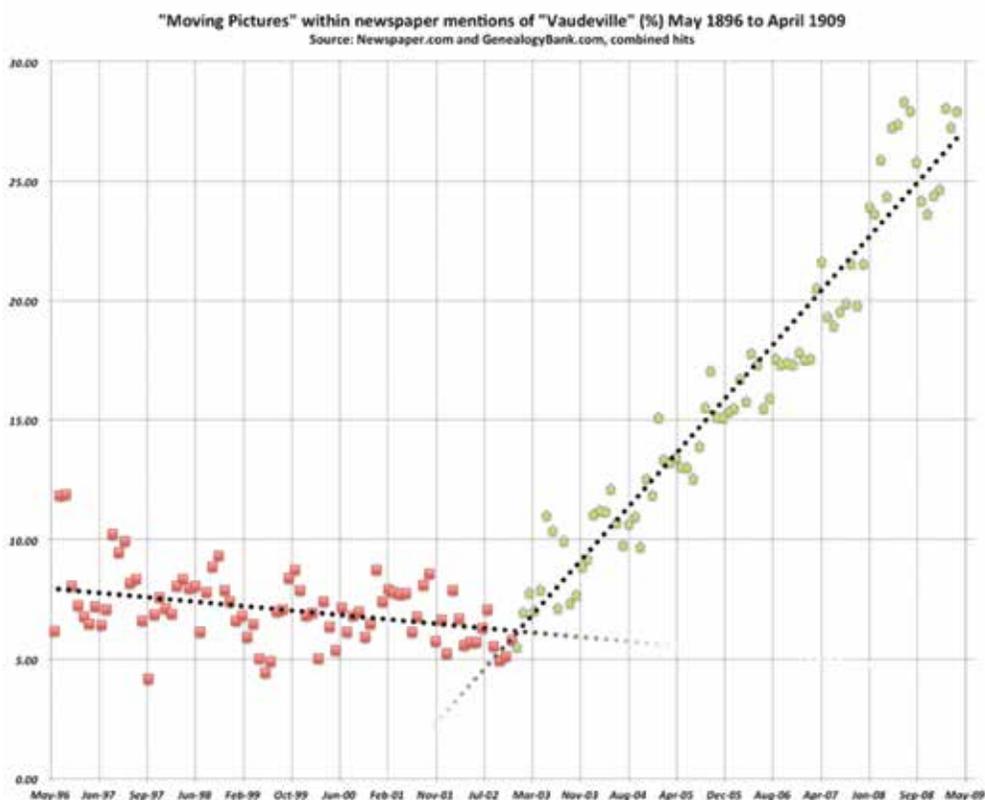


Fig. 7.1: Prevalence of cinema within vaudeville between 1896 and 1909

increase of film-within-vaudeville in 1903 should correspond to the emergence of the fiction story film and the decline of the 'visual newspaper'. The statistical graph above offers nothing toward this question, but the newspaper databases are nonetheless useful to provide a quick comparison with Lyman H. Howe, subject of another benchmark book by Musser with Carol Nelson.²⁹ Like Howe, the itinerant careers of Alonzo Hatch and John P. Dibble both span the 'chaser' period from 1898 into the nickelodeon years.³⁰ Hatch's Electro-Photo Musical Company toured a circuit from eastern Pennsylvania to northern Vermont from 1897 to 1909. Dibble's Moving Pictures traveled around New England and northern New York from 1898 to 1910. Both featured illustrated songs in combination with moving pictures right from the start of their business.³¹ Newsworthy events are initially the only specific films named in publicity – the Spanish-American war in 1898, the Galveston Cyclone in 1900, and the Buffalo Pan-American Exposition where President

McKinley was assassinated in 1901. Fiction films are first singled out by name late in 1902 and early in 1903, when both Dibble and Hatch mention *Jack and the Beanstalk* as a special feature. Conspicuously in support of the 'chaser theory', Hatch and Dibble begin to list multiple fiction film titles late in 1903 and early in 1904: Hatch featured *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Dibble cited *The Haunted Inn*, and both mention *A Daylight Burglary*, among others. At least one review of Hatch's show reported how *Life of An American Fireman* "awoke the audience to a pitch of excitement and enthusiasm seldom witnessed."³² Its familiar dramatic scenes were listed in sequence: "the arousing of the sleeping firemen, the leashing of the excited horses, the dash to and along the street, the arrival at the fire, the work of extinguishment, with the climax of the rescue of a mother and child from the burning building." In 1907, ads for Dibble's 11th annual engagement in Watertown fought for attention in the newspaper, surrounded by ads for four nickelodeons and a new vaudeville theater. Dibble dropped his price and reminded readers of the value of his show: "We do not give half-hour exhibitions of rented films, but nearly two hours of Our Own carefully selected moving pictures."³³ Indeed, there is less change *within* Dibble's ads over time than compared to the nickel shows. If the fiction story film is emergent in 1903, its predominance is not obvious until the daily ads for nickelodeons that start in 1906.

It is worth returning to *Life of an American Fireman* for an even closer reading of its arrival to complement Musser's detailed account of its production and cultural context.³⁴ Tracking the emergence of the fiction film can be built case-by-case through specific titles, such as Richard Abel's overview of the circulation of Méliès's *A Trip to the Moon* in the United States, which also charted the film's relation to precedents and variants beyond moving pictures.³⁵ The same snapshot can locate when, where, and in what context key film titles are singled out by name in amusement advertising. For example, *Life of an American Fireman* is mentioned by its title (or nearly its title) early in March 1903 in Manhattan and Brooklyn, and in Chicago by the Kinodrome at Kohl & Middleton's Haymarket vaudeville theater; a brief description of what the Kinodrome offered was already routine at the time, with *Rip Van Winkle* and *Jack & The Beanstalk* named a few weeks earlier. By the end of March, an itinerant Kinodrome brought the film to Dixon, Illinois, for a show that doubled as a benefit fundraiser for the local fire brigade.³⁶ Such small-town firemen's benefits were common at the time, as itinerant shows in small towns were routinely held under the auspices of local organizations, but this was perhaps the first time *Life of an American Fireman* was featured explicitly in relation to the work of local firemen. By the end of 1903 and throughout 1904, various itinerant exhibitors routinely

used the film precisely the same way. Indeed, the popularity of *Life of an American Fireman* seems to spark an interest in producing local versions in conjunction with dozens of fire brigades, coast to coast, from late in 1903 until 1906, precisely *between* the ‘chaser’ period and the nickelodeon.

‘Local Views’ and the ‘Chaser Theory’

Mainstream film companies’ occasional production of local views is well known in the earliest years; recall how popular interest in ‘seeing oneself as others see you’ during the chaser period was a key point of agreement between Allen and Musser. Immediately in 1896, the ability to easily produce local views distinguished the Lumière Cinématographe from the Edison Vitascope. Already by November 1896, vaudeville showmen such as Sylvester Poli in New Haven and John Foley in Harrisburg commissioned local views especially for their own theaters. In 1897, Edward Amet collaborated with newspapers to make Magniscope views in Chicago and Omaha, depicted in illustrate feature articles; he also helped train Richard Hardie in Winnipeg to produce local views of the Canadian prairies, first toured there before being used in the United Kingdom to spur immigration to Canada. Between 1897 and 1900, American Biograph routinely produced local views to spice up its program in metropolitan cities from Boston to San Francisco; Sigmund Lubin produced several local Cineograph views in his hometown Philadelphia; American Vitagraph occasionally included local views on its programs for itinerant shows and rural chautauquas, as well as at metropolitan vaudeville theaters.³⁷ Working out of Chicago, William Selig’s Polyscope and George K. Spoor’s Kinodrome had employees make local views, for example by Donald J. Bell for Kinodrome shows in summer parks in Michigan and Ohio in 1900, Selig himself for Polyscope shows in Edward Shields’ summer park in Des Moines in 1901, allowing Shields to proceed to make local views for his summer parks in Oregon. Polyscope’s Thomas S. Nash worked with Shields in 1903, but earlier trained H. H. Buckwalter in Colorado and Wyoming, where local views could be added to the Polyscope catalogue as typical ‘western’ scenes.³⁸ Almost from the beginning, filming of newsworthy special events was combined with a more generic approach. Local views were made alike from one town to the next: crowds of children leaving school, workers leaving the factory, and – always, every time – the town fire brigade racing down the main street in an exhibition of their firefighting equipment.

Beyond this quick list of early ventures into local views during the ‘visual newspaper’ period, I find an upsurge of this primal form of the ‘cinema

of attractions' *after* the chaser period, and on a continent-wide scale by a handful of itinerant exhibitors (Figure 7.2). The first company to have their advance agent produce local views – primarily fire brigade runs, usually shown with *Life of an American Fireman* – was an outfit run called the International Bioscope, beginning in August 1903. The company was an American offshoot of the London Bioscope, which came to Canada in 1901 with A. J. West's 'Our Navy' and went on to produce the well-known 'Living Canada' series for Urban's Warwick Trading Company. In the United States, instead of nationalist scenic films the company turned to local views on a coast-to-coast path from Pennsylvania to California, back and forth through the Southwest and Midwest several times for three years. The scheme was followed late in 1903 by the Chicago Novel Show Company in towns throughout the Midwest and Pennsylvania; this company honed the pitch of providing a Firemen's Benefit concert, showing the local fire run amidst dozens of firefighting films, and always including *Life of an American Fireman* as the fictional prototype. The gimmick was exploited even further by Edward Shields from 1903 to 1907, alternating his summers in Oregon with winter itinerant routes across the Midwest; 'Shields' Fire Fighters' gave benefit fundraisers with programs of local and metropolitan fire runs. Finally, a long-standing touring company, the Fiske-Stock Company briefly added 'The World in Motion' to its show late in 1905, with Meyer Cohen acting as advance agent taking local views later shown as part of the picture program.



Fig. 7.2: Early ventures into local views during the 'visual newspaper' period

In Evansville, Indiana, Cohen's letter of thanks to the Fire Chief was quoted in the paper: "The turn-out and run given by the department today was the finest we have ever taken. When I say this, it covers a large field. We have taken moving pictures of fire departments in over 300 cities and towns in the United States and Canada, but the one taken today will undoubtedly take its place at the head of the list and can be exhibited with credit to the city of Evansville throughout the land."³⁹ With the 'World in Motion' scheme visiting only its tenth locale, Cohen's figure of 300 must be referring to his work the previous year with American Vitagraph in the Canadian Maritimes, and the company's further work upstate in New York and across New England.⁴⁰

As I noted at the start, the systematic exploitation of local views from 1903 to 1906 is most curious when it comes to American Vitagraph – indeed its expanded venture into itinerant exhibition is curious, too. Why did the predominant producer-exhibitor turn to itinerant shows in marginal locations featuring local views just as the industry was turning to fiction films? Allow me, in conclusion, to look closely at the work of the American Vitagraph in Atlantic Canada in 1904 and 1905. This 'close reading' started with entirely surprising results of digital searches, extrapolated with microfilm searches for locations without digitized newspapers. Before the American Vitagraph Company transformed into a major early film studio in 1905, the company provided the films, projectors, and projectionists to metropolitan vaudeville houses, and ran an extensive itinerant film service across the Northeast and Midwestern United States and Eastern Canada. Vitagraph exploited all aspects of the still-novel industry, working simultaneously as an exhibition, distribution, and production company.⁴¹ Albert E. Smith and J. Stuart Blackton had their first foray with moving pictures as film exhibitors in New York in 1897, then a brief stint making advertising films in 1898 before riding the bandwagon exhibiting Spanish-American War films, both purchasing from and supplying films to Edison Manufacturing. The American Vitagraph program was soon contracted to provide films to Proctor's New York vaudeville theaters, and by the end of 1898, "Vitagraph was virtually the only East Coast exhibitor of 35mm films that retained a supply of exclusive subjects" of their own making.⁴² On this unique strength, the company expanded its service to vaudeville theaters throughout New England and in cities as distant as Montreal and Detroit. The company also established itinerant exhibition routes on the lyceum lecture circuit in the Northeast USA and the Chautauqua circuit in the Midwest, soon stops in Southern Ontario, too. Between 1902 and 1905, the actuality films they produced were shown primarily on their own itinerant exhibition circuits, joining newsworthy views, trick films, and comedic scenes on

variety bills with illustrated songs. By 1904, however, the company claimed to have perfected a mobile film lab.⁴³ Vitagraph began including local views on its tours of smaller cities and towns around New York and New England (Figure 7.3). One of their shows extensively toured the Canadian Maritimes in the springs and summers of 1904 and 1905 – making moving pictures and exhibiting them on return visits weeks, sometimes months, later. These are some of the earliest known films made in each of Canada's eastern provinces.

In Atlantic Canada, the Vitagraph Company at first promised continent-wide publicity when they solicited community leaders – not least newspaper editors – to help film local scenes and people. The first local films were made in Halifax in May 1904. Once exhibited in early in August 1904, “they were remarkably distinct, and features of Halifax citizens were easily made out [...] Albert E. Smith, treasurer of the American Vitagraph company, who is in the city, says the pictures of the Halifax fire department were put on in Tony Pastor's theater, New York, last week, and made a big hit.”⁴⁴ Rather than merely local films, Cohen initially emphasized how the films would be shown to Vitagraph audiences in the US “by each of the twenty-six companies which are now on the road under the control of this company.”⁴⁵ Despite these claims, there is no evidence they played in the US except for Smith's reported claim, quoted above. Returning to the Maritimes in April 1905, the Vitagraph did a first circuit of the region in spring, making local views and showing films of Saint John and Halifax made the year before. Each place saw its own

The image contains four distinct advertisements for the American Vitagraph company, arranged in a row from left to right. Each advertisement is a rectangular poster with a decorative border and contains text in various fonts and sizes.

- Leftmost advertisement:** Promotes the Union Opera House's Grand Opening Night on Thursday Evening, Sept. 22. It features 'THE VITAGRAPH CO., OF AMERICA.' and 'Our Own Moving Picture Concert.' The text describes the company's mobile film lab and lists several films to be shown, including 'Your Own Home Company Banning to a Fire' and 'The Great India Purber'.
- Second advertisement:** Promotes the New London Opera House on Friday, Saturday and Sunday Evenings, Dec. 16, 17, 18, and Saturday Matinee. It features 'American Vitagraph Popular Concerts' and 'Local Moving Pictures.' It lists various films such as 'See Younices at Ghore See You' and 'Watch the pupils of St. Mary's Parochial School being dismissed at 3.50.'
- Third advertisement:** Promotes the American Vitagraph Popular Concerts at the Opera House on April 13, 14, 15. It features 'Beautiful Views of St. John City.' and lists several films, including 'The Army of Reaction in Successful Moving Pictures' and 'The Last of the Mohicans.'
- Rightmost advertisement:** Promotes 'WILL TAKE PICTURES.' and features 'Moving Pictures of Fredericton to be Shown Throughout the Country.' It mentions Mr. Schilling, the representative of the American Vitagraph Company, and lists several films to be shown, including 'The Army of Reaction in Successful Moving Pictures' and 'The Last of the Mohicans.'

Fig. 7.3: Advertising for the American Vitagraph featuring local views: (left to right): *Ticonderoga Sentinel*, 15 September 1904; *New London Day*, 13 December 1904; *Fredericton Gleaner*, 12 April 1905, promoting the 1904 Saint John films while local views were produced.

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local views on the second engagement in the summer, and these later moving pictures of other towns were shown exclusively in the communities where they were produced. No matter where the cameraman stopped, no matter how picturesque the harbor or unique the landscape, the local views were uniformly of school children, church congregations, crowds at parks – but especially of fire brigade runs. Although the *Saint John Sun* had strenuously touted the possibilities for tourism and investment as it cajoled its readers to get ready to be filmed, its review of the resulting films was dismissive: “These, with the exception of the falls and harbor, are of almost wholly local interest, and do not bring before outsiders any of the attractions of the city.”⁴⁶

Having tested the local view gimmick in Canada, Vitagraph began using the gimmick of locally promoted local views in the United States in September 1904 – in those cases, without the false hope of the pictures being shown elsewhere. At least three of its itinerant units produced local views that season, with cameramen preceding exhibitions by about two weeks.⁴⁷ This was dramatically quicker than happened in Canada, no doubt due to the proximity of its facilities in New York City. One Vitagraph company made films of local fire brigades in the Midwest. A second outfit covered upstate and northern New York. And a third outfit toured Massachusetts and Connecticut. For several months ‘Our Own Moving Picture Concert’ and ‘See Yourself as Others See You’ would be the featured aspect of the Vitagraph program across New England and New York. “Don’t fail to see your own hose company running to a fire. See your friends all alive in the moving pictures. See your sweetheart and yourself.”⁴⁸ The local views were linked to the global reach of the company’s cameras: “The Vitagraph photographic operators encircle the globe taking scenes of interest [...] After many years of costly experiments, the Vitagraph Company have at last perfected a portable animated photographic plant, and it is their intention to take local Vitagraph pictures in every town and city.”⁴⁹ Given how it took at least a week after filming to screen local views, the claim of a mobile film lab should be taken skeptically, but the use of local views in mainstream film program is nonetheless remarkable. For about a year the dominant film company in the United States made local views central to its mainstream program – the moment was fleeting, of course. Just weeks after ending its 1905 Maritime tour, American Vitagraph turned its attention to distribution rather than local exhibition, effectively shutting down its itinerant circuits in order to take advantage of the emerging market for renting films to permanent exhibition sites.⁵⁰ Instead of local views shown locally, the Vitagraph and all mainstream film producers subsequently turned exclusively to general interest views and fictional narrative films that could be rented widely and distributed globally.

Conclusion

Although this chapter is written in dialogue with Charles Musser, the main contribution I can add to Musser's work on early cinema in America is to point out it could be revised to include Canada and the Caribbean, to become a history of a transnational popular culture, rather than a national culture. Richard Abel's analog method reached the same conclusion in recounting how cinema became self-consciously American. Other than that, my research largely affirms how comprehensive Musser was in the first place. So, then, why am I driven to generate a new history of early cinema in North America? Why does the research enervate and motivate me when on one level it is a Sisyphean task? In a sense, I am embracing the rupture envisioned by Thomas Elsaesser for film history as media archaeology.⁵¹ The digital transfiguration of microfilmed newspapers dates to the 1990s, and such high-profile titles such as *The New York Times* and *The Chicago Tribune* have been functional for over a decade to those with institutional or commercial access. Copyright, licensing and other negotiations are fraught and remain uncertain,⁵² but the Library of Congress has spearheaded a standardized, national project for the United States for newspapers up to 31 December 1922, which have no copyright restrictions. Other affordable databases are mass-marketed for family genealogy, bringing an ever-increasing depth of material and greater functionality. While Richard Abel and Jan Olsson have briefly considered the implications for film history,⁵³ more attention has been given the digital transfer of entertainment trade publications through the Media History Digital Library.⁵⁴

The material form of media formats has become foregrounded as the foundation for content, experience and knowledge.⁵⁵ The apparent immateriality of digital documents has thrown attention on historical print ephemera,⁵⁶ as shifting contours of accessibility and durability seem to come with digitization.⁵⁷ Newspaper historians (as opposed to journalism historians) now seek to typify form and genre.⁵⁸ The benefits of digitization are stark – efficiency, speed, accessibility – but the implications for historiographic method, reliability and interpretation are only beginning to be asked.⁵⁹ My digital generation of cinema historians may employ novel tools, may do more, quicker, more thoroughly, but I do not believe we will add new history, not in the sense of undiscovered narratives and neglected stories about the emergence of the technology, the industry, the art form. Even on the margins of local exhibition, I continually find Musser's analog method already noticed and footnoted my online discoveries. In hindsight,

this is not surprising; digital databases don't create documents, they merely transform them and render them accessible at all hours from most any location. The contributions of my digital generation of film historians, and our digitally-generated film history, will be a shift in scale from the case study and the canonical figure to comparative visualizations of the mass character of circuits of cinema, at a distance and, potentially, on a global scale.

Notes

1. *St. John's Telegram*, 24 June 1905. Newfoundland was the last present-day Canadian province or US state to witness moving pictures, not until December 1897 (Moore, 'Early Picture Shows'). Elsewhere, I explain the 'noteworthy' appearance of early cinema in small town newspapers fully as part of a methodology typifying other newspaper-community-cinema relations in terms of the 'newsworthy' logic of the metropolitan daily press, and the 'adworthy' logic of small city newspapers (Moore, 'The Social Biograph').
2. 'New Cinema History' is a research paradigm advocated by Richard Maltby ('New Cinema Histories'; 'How Can Cinema History Matter More?') for a nascent international HoMER project (History of Movie Exhibition and Reception). The point is to develop accounts of cinema as sites of social and cultural significance, putting audience relations to cinema as the central concern rather than scholars' interpretations of film content.
3. Johnson, 'The Places You'll Know'; Toulmin and Loiperdinger, 'Is it You?'
4. 'Circuits of Cinema: Itinerant Showmanship in North America, 1895-1907' is my major project, funded by the Insight Grants program of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2015-2020, with co-investigator, Sébastien Caquard, and collaborators, Jeffrey Klenotic, Kathryn Fuller-Seeley, and Deb Verhoeven.
5. Moretti, *Distant Reading*.
6. Benjamin, *The Work of Art*.
7. Gunning, 'Pictures of Crowd Splendour', 52.
8. I will not reiterate the genealogy of the 'chaser' label for film as the 'dumb' or silent final act on a continuous vaudeville bill. Suffice to note how most early histories of American cinema state the point casually: Grau (*The Theatre of Science*), Ramsaye (*A Million and One Nights*), and Jacobs (*The Rise of the American Film*), for example, and in journalism for the general public (e.g. 'Craze for Moving Pictures', *New York Sun*, 14 March 1909).
9. As I have noted elsewhere, "the American slang 'movies' was common enough by 1909 to start appearing in journalism, at first always surrounded by quotation marks to signify it as youthful jargon – the 'movies' was where

- kids went *and* what they saw" (Moore, 'The Grand Opening of the Movie Theatre', 114).
10. Seldes, *An Hour with the Movies and the Talkies*, 20.
 11. Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* and *Before the Nickelodeon: The Early Cinema of Edwin S. Porter*.
 12. Walsh, 'Review of *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema*'.
 13. Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema*. Also see Musser in this volume, 39-40.
 14. Elsaesser, 'The New Film History as Media Archaeology'. Allen begins his rejoinder by pointing to Musser's ('American Vitagraph') parallel debate with Gomery's ('The Coming of the Talkies') economic presumptions about the role of technological innovation in film's cultural success.
 15. For example, Allen, 'Relocating American Film History'; 'From Exhibition to Reception'.
 16. Musser, 'The Early Cinema of Edwin S. Porter'.
 17. Musser, *Thomas A. Edison Papers*.
 18. Holman, *Cinema 1900-1906*; Gaudreault, *Cinema 1900-1906*; Gartenberg, 'The Brighton Project'.
 19. Musser, 'Historiographic Method'.
 20. Gaudreault and Gunning, 'Early Cinema as a Challenge to Film History'; Elsaesser, 'The New Film History as Media Archaeology'; Gauthier, 'Periodization as a Political Process'.
 21. Moretti, 'Conjectures on World Literature', 57.
 22. Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel*.
 23. Brake, 'The Longevity of "Ephemera"'.
 24. Nicholson, 'Counting Culture'.
 25. Moore, 'Advance Newspaper Publicity'.
 26. The graph measures the percentage of search engine hits from two subscription newspaper databases, www.newspapers.com and www.genealogybank.com, which both allow complex Boolean searches. For each calendar month, I took the count for (vaudeville or variety) and (theatre or theater), and calculated the percentage of times those 'hits' coincided with any of thirteen words or phrases for cinema. My choice of projector names had to change annually because of a maximum limit of characters one of the databases would accept. The phrases or projector names chosen were as follows: 'moving pictures', 'motion pictures', 'animated pictures', biograph, cinematograph, bioscope, kinoscope, vitagraph (1896-1909), vitagraph, kinodrome (1899-1909), polyscope (1900-09), kinetograph (1902-09), projectoscope (1896-1901), wargraph (1896-99), veriscope, and cinematographe (1896-1898). Other newspaper databases did not allow this degree of precision in searches, including the stellar collection openly accessible through the Library of Congress, www.chroniclingamerica.loc.gov.
 27. Abel, 'The Pleasures and Perils of Big Data'; Liddle, 'Reflections on 20,000 Victorian Newspapers'.
 28. Baker, *Double Fold*.
 29. Musser and Nelson, *High-Class Moving Pictures*.

30. Other research on itinerants tends to consider exhibitors working as specialty acts for other touring theatrical companies until 1903 or later, rather than running independent 'picture shows' during the 'chaser' era. Fuller begins *At the Picture Show* with Cook & Harris – not independent exhibitors until 1904. Lowry ('Edwin J. Hadley') profiled Edwin J. Hadley, who worked under Lyman Howe until 1903 except for a brief period in 1899. Archie J. Shepard all but saturated the entire Eastern and Southern US with several touring picture shows and Sunday concerts at city vaudeville theaters (see Abel, *The Red Rooster Scare*), but before 1903, he provided pictures between the acts of the Maud Hillman Stock Company. Pryluck ('The Itinerant Movie Show') provides a good overview of the research problems posed by itinerant exhibition.
31. Altman, *Silent Film Sound*.
32. *Williamsport Gazette & Bulletin*, 22 June 1904.
33. *Watertown Times*, 21 September 1907.
34. Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon: The Early Cinema of Edwin S. Porter*.
35. Abel, 'A Trip to the Moon as an American Phenomenon'.
36. *Dixon Telegraph*, 28 March 1903.
37. On the 'local view', see Jung ('Local Views'), Toulmin ('Local Films for Local People'), and Gunning ('Before Documentary'). Musser ('*The Emergence of Cinema*') notes many instances of the production of early local views. Perhaps the first explicit promotion of 'local views' was for the Vitascope at Koster & Bial's: *New York World*, 26 July 1896. 'Local views in preparation' for the Cinématographe: *Philadelphia Times*, 26 July 1896; filming, 6 September 1896; being developed in Lyons and due to be exhibited, 25 October 1896. Correspondence from Andrew Holland to Raff & Gammon. Baker Library, MSS 692, Volume 6, Folder 7, 10 August 1896, notes local scenes filmed and shown by the Cinématographe in Montreal. Local views on the projectoscope for Foley's Bijou: *Harrisburg Telegraph*, 9 December 1896; of special note is the local filming of a staged comic scene of police fight and arrest of a drunk, carried away in a paddy wagon, 24 December 1896. Biograph local views for Poli's Wonderland: *New Haven Register*, 17 November 1896. Edward Amet in illustrated feature articles: *Chicago Tribune*, 4 April 1897; *Omaha World-Herald*, 12 December 1897. Amet with Hardie in Manitoba: *Winnipeg Free Press*, 3 September 1897; *Brandon Western Sun*, 22 September 1897. Local views for the Biograph: *Boston Herald*, 11 July 1897 through 1898, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 5 November 1899, and *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 30 April 1899. Lubin's Cineograph: *Philadelphia Times*, 14 September 1897, and regularly through 1898. Vitagraph: *Richmond Times*, 7 November 1899; *Waterloo Courier*, 12 July 1900; *Boston Herald*, 9 December 1900; and *Brooklyn Eagle*, 1 September 1901.
38. Musser ('*The Emergence of Cinema*') provides excellent overviews of Selig's Polyscope and Spoor's Kinodrome companies. For Bell's filming for Spoor, see *Grand Rapids Press*, 8 May 1900 and *Mansfield News*, 7 July 1900. For Selig filming, see *Des Moines Capital*, 30 May 1901; *Portland Oregonian*, 13 October 1901; *Denver Rocky Mountain News*, 20 May 1902, and *Portland Oregon Journal*, 19 May 1903.

39. *Evansville Courier*, 16 September 1905.
40. Musser ('*The Emergence of Cinema*', 405) briefly noted Vitagraph's local view making in 1904. I have confirmed more than 50 locations where the Vitagraph made local views in 1904 and 1905, so the figure of 300 is perhaps not much of an exaggeration. In December 1904, Cohen had severed his connections with Vitagraph in a veil of larceny, briefly accused by Vitagraph's Albert Smith of absconding with the advance contracts and receipts from the tour of Canada (*New York Herald*, 16 December 1904; *New York Times*, 20 December 1904).
41. Gartenberg, 'Vitagraph before Griffith'.
42. Musser, 'American Vitagraph', 27.
43. 'A New Idea in Moving Pictures', *Plattsburgh Press*, 21 September 1904.
44. *Halifax Herald*, 12 August 1904.
45. *Saint John Sun*, 9 July 1904.
46. *Saint John Sun*, 17 April 1905.
47. Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema*, 405.
48. *Ticonderoga Sentinel*, 15 September 1904.
49. *Plattsburgh Press*, 21 September 1904.
50. Musser, 'American Vitagraph', 40.
51. Elsaesser, 'The New Film History as Media Archaeology'.
52. Gabriele, 'Transfiguring the Newspaper'; Horrocks, 'Nineteenth-Century Journalism Online'.
53. Abel, 'The Pleasures and Perils of Big Data'; Olsson, 'Screen Bodies and Busybodies'.
54. Hoyt, 'Lenses for Lantern'.
55. Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge*.
56. Cocks & Rubery, 'Margins of Print'; Mussell, 'The Passing of Print'.
57. Nicholson, 'The Digital Turn'; Brake, 'Digital Form'.
58. Mussell, 'Elemental Forms'; Barnhurst & Nerone, *The Form of News*.
59. Milligan, 'Illusionary Order'; Upchurch, 'Full-Text Databases and Historical Research'.

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About the author

Paul Moore is Associate Professor at Ryerson University. His media histories argue that audio-visual audiences are always also reading publics, and his work traces the intermedial connections between newspapers and cinema & radio. Essays on early cinema showmanship and exhibition have appeared as articles in *Early Popular Visual Culture* and *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, as chapters in the books *Explorations in New Cinema History* and *A Companion to Early Cinema*, as well as *Now Playing*, a book about early movie theatres in Toronto. A forthcoming book, *The Sunday Paper, 1888-1922*, co-authored with Sandra Gabriele, recounts the intermedial leisure of illustrated American newspapers.