

Advance Newspaper Publicity for the Vitascope and the Mass Address of Cinema's Reading Public

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By the end of the early cinema period, a mass culture of moviegoing made profitable an everyday routine of constant novelty. The currency keeping moviegoing institutionalized after 1913 was constantly renewed advertising and promotion of its serial, periodical character – its program of always new newsreels and short subjects, an all-new stage show at the local picture palace, and the latest feature film of a picture personality. Routine novelty defines the mass market of consumption: products and practices circulating predictably through routes of transportation and communication. As a product and practice, cinema became a cultural partner of railways and telegraph, part of the technological grid of a newly electric world. Knowledge about cinema circulated within that grid in advance of the technology and its exhibition spaces making the experience available. Considered as a collective, movie audiences *were* the mass market, but individuals were addressed most overtly – and thus probably understood themselves as part of a mass – primarily through first being part of the readership of newspapers. Cinema's mass audience was, in fact, first constituted as a reading public. The history of early cinema has been told, alternatively, as a matter of the invention and development of its electric and optical technology; as the rise of a competitive commercial market distributing films and projectors; and, finally, as the collective experience of audiences viewing moving images. But an equally important factor at play in the creation of cinema culture is the circulation of knowledge about cinema, chiefly in newspapers. Public knowledge binds the technological, economic, and experiential fields together. As I will demonstrate for North America, newspapers collectively addressed their reading public as a mass cinematic audience in formation, weeks and months in advance of even the first commercial exhibition of moving pictures.

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The debut of cinema is, of course, also the debut of newspapers circulating knowledge about cinema. Defining cinema through its cultural construction, W. Bernard Carlson reminds us that moving picture technologies are both “artifacts and frames of meanings,” manufactured and marketed in ways that telegraph their future public use.¹ Indeed, reporting about cinema to the reading public precedes its availability to the viewing public. Although the first public exhibition of Edison's Vitascope was April 23, 1896 at Koster & Bial's Music Hall in New York, the debut of knowledge about the Vitascope began weeks earlier with news reported throughout the United States following a special press screening at the Edison laboratories in New Jersey on April 3, 1896. This news story – not the later public exhibition – signaled the commercial availability of a new technology and a new way of seeing; the advance publicity was the arrival of cinema as public discourse. Publicity, advertising, reporting, and reflection about the everyday practice and social place of cinema have appeared in newspapers daily ever since. Tracing the circulation of cinema's appearance in newspapers has long been a foundational method for local cinema history, but it has often lacked a well-defined methodology grounded in an understanding of the newspaper itself as an agent in the cultural formation and continual transformation of cinema and its publics.² Cinema and newspapers animated modernity in tandem; or rather, insofar as cinema animated modernity for its viewers, newspapers had already presented that framework of understanding to their readers.

The public imagined through cinema begins with the address of newspaper readers as an existing public – neither quantifiable as the amassing of individual readers, nor conceptually reducible to a mass market. Attending to this process is vital in order to understand how empirically disparate and socially diverse audiences could come to treat moviegoing as something done collectively. My point is that the audience for cinema is not an empirical question, and understanding the emergence or invention of cinema cannot be restricted to the optical, electric apparatus and its commercial exploitation in the production of films. The study of optical technologies and projected entertainments before cinema has received understandable attention. Under the heading “pre-cinema,” we have volumes on chrono-photography, optical toys, stereopticons, panoramas, and the like, all in the interest of remembering that cinema was presented to a public well prepared and primed to receive it.³ However, the very term “pre-cinema” perpetuates assumptions that cinema was the natural outcome and perfection of prior inventions; this was precisely how Edison's publicity first described the Vitascope in April 1896. In fact, the idealization of screen projection was integral to publicity circulating after Edison's unveiling of the experimental Kinetograph in 1891, the commercial exploitation of the Kinetoscope in 1894, and again with its pairing with a phonograph as the Kinetophone in 1895.⁴ For at least five years before the Vitascope, Edison had repeatedly promoted and widely publicized his own pre-cinematic technologies as previews of an as-yet-unachieved ideal of screen projection.⁵

Publicity and his own celebrity was part of Edison's apparatus – it was the part of the apparatus that people encountered before the experience itself. Indeed, Edison's celebrity was key to the particularity of the Vitascope, since the design came from other inventors, Thomas Armat and F. C. Jenkins, and became associated with the Edison Manufacturing Company through the marketing company of Raff & Gammon. The technological aesthetic development in filmmaking and projection is painstakingly told by others, notably by Paul C. Spehr, with a focus on the pioneering figure of W. K. L. Dickson, Edison's assistant until 1897, charged with moving picture experimentation, design, and early film production.⁶ Charles Musser masterfully integrates early exhibition on the ground into his history of early cinema, which singles out the role of the early Vitascope exhibitor Edwin S. Porter, later a key filmmaker for the Edison Company.⁷ Yet, these essential accounts do not dwell on the mechanics of publicity despite acknowledging that the initial predominance of Edison's Vitascope in North America was due to the relative success and efficacy of its promotion as much as any technological, manufacturing, and economic advantages. My focus on the detailed circulation of publicity surrounding cinema's debut is meant to supplement, not contradict, existing film histories, and thus claim publicity as a neglected but crucial part of the process of bringing cinema to the public.

Readers, Publics, Audiences

The newspaper had just taken its modern form around 1890, facilitated by cheap, vast quantities of woodpulp paper, automated printing presses, typewriting and typesetting machines, and a new professional practice of factual, objective newsgathering disseminated widely through telegraph.⁸ Nonetheless, newspapers were not interchangeable. The modern newspaper was also a product of industrialization and urbanization, which exacerbated differences between metropolises, regional cities, and small towns, even as modes of communication and transportation bound them more tightly. A news market of coexisting small town weekly, regional city daily, and mass circulation metropolitan newspapers had emerged by the 1890s along with continental settlement, rail, and telegraph networks. The content of all three types of papers was sequenced and coordinated to give readers in even the most rural settled areas access to global and metropolitan happenings. With only rare exceptions, newspapers reflected the locality of each readership's place within interregional markets, altogether framed as a continental mass market. Publishers, editors, and journalists worked to craft a publication attuned to locality, but in relation to the world beyond its circulation. The coordinated marketplace for newspapers was mediated by commercial associations such as wire service membership as well as professional standards in language and judgments of newsworthiness. The particular combination of

reporting and advertising characterized any specific readership as a public in relation to other publics, able to recognize themselves and their everyday life, but precisely in connection to knowledge about others and elsewhere.⁹

In the largest cities, newspapers provided content to wire services, most importantly their own correspondents' reports from New York, and from London and Paris overseas. Smaller city daily papers all across the country subscribed to wire services primarily for such metropolitan content via New York, only occasionally providing their own content in return when it happened to be of national interest. Small town weekly papers might not have been able to afford membership in the wire associations, but a subscription to a condensed compilation of already-stereotyped boilerplate columns served their need for news from afar, forgoing timeliness. Editors also subscribed to exchange papers from nearby and afar alike, and could reproduce items using "pastepot-and-scissors," a common banner for a column of oddities culled from other sources. Only a minimal amount of news happened here and now, and all newspapers presented an edited cross-cut of events, features, and leisure reading from a variety of spaces, times, and publications. Essential to this continental network of news dispatching was the telegraph, the first electrical industry and the foundation of engineered commerce.¹⁰ By the time the trans-Atlantic cable was operating in 1866, Western Union was also the first monopolistic industry in the United States, leading to congressional scrutiny and its redefinition as a public utility, still profit-seeking but now required to provide fair access. News wire services were a key customer for Western Union; mutual advantages hardened monopoly control in both industries. By 1879, the New York-based Associated Press (AP) thus also gained a monopoly over the provision of news wire service across the continent, obtaining the first dedicated leased wire from Western Union. The result was a proliferation of news available simultaneously across the continent, but highly centralized in its selection in New York.¹¹

The New York dailies may have been fierce competitors rhetorically on their own pages and on newsstands in Manhattan, but through the AP they effectively controlled the national supply of news. "By having the nation's news 'edited' or, to use a term that legislators were more comfortable with, 'censored,' in one office ... the AP was the one institution in America that was immune from scrutiny by the press."¹² In 1880, the AP served 355 of 971 daily papers in the United States, with those not paying for membership obtaining news more slowly, although cheaply, through exchange-desk subscriptions or boilerplate service.¹³ The concentration in power actually led to a coup in 1892, when it became known to Midwestern newspaper publishers that the New Yorkers had been colluding to control competition. The moniker Associated Press was usurped and headquarters moved to Chicago, forcing the powerful New York daily papers to affiliate in competition as the United Press. At first, the New Yorkers kept their dominant position, but in October 1893 Joseph Pulitzer moved the *New York World* to the AP, providing it a secure footing with a supply of items from the largest circulation newspaper on the continent. United Press finally went bankrupt in 1897, although the resulting

monopoly of the AP was itself short-lived, dissolved by court order in 1900.¹⁴ Cinema was thus introduced to the public at a rare moment of unusual competition between wire services, and during an even more rare moment when New York's business-oriented establishment newspapers (the *Herald*, *Tribune*, *Times*, and *Sun*) were relatively weak in relation to the insurgent "yellow journalism" of Joseph Pulitzer's *World* and William Randolph Hearst's *Journal*.¹⁵ These factors will be important to keep in mind as I turn to a detailed analysis of the continental dispersal of news about cinema before its public debut in New York in April 1896.

Since at least Harold Innis, telegraphed news has been understood to be essential in laying the foundation for a modern orientation to space and time as a marketplace. Especially in North America, communications allowed rationalized but monopolistic enterprises to proliferate through what Alfred Chandler Jr. called the "visible hand" of a managerial revolution.¹⁶ In a classic description of the telegraph as an instrument of technology and ideology, James Carey stated plainly: "The effect of the telegraph is a simple one: it evens out markets in space.... It shifts speculation from space to time, from arbitrage to futures. After the telegraph, commodity trading moved from trading between places to trading between times."¹⁷ Carey also claimed a shift in public awareness at large, at least insofar as the relationship between the reading public and its newspaper had become a matter of cultural connection: "The origins of objectivity may be sought, therefore, in the necessity of stretching language in space over the long lines of Western Union.... The language of the telegraph displaced a fiduciary relationship between writer and reader with a coordinated one."¹⁸ My point is not to delve into the political economy of journalism so much as to reiterate that newspaper reading and the circulation of news is foundational to modern public practices in general, and mass marketed technologies in particular. In the years just before cinema, the experience of metropolitan modernity became available across North America to all readers of any newspaper.¹⁹ Indeed, the pervasive circulation of newspapers allowed an indiscriminate slippage between democratic public and mass market through their common constitution as newspaper readers. As I have written elsewhere, the newspaper offered a map or menu of possibilities of experience in modernity and everyday life, defining the contours of the modern public sphere as something meaningful despite its distinction from local and personal experience.²⁰

Newspaper reading as the basis of "imagined communities" is a well-known observation of Benedict Anderson, but the relation between the circulation of vernacular "print-capitalism" and modernity can be generalized beyond Anderson's overt concern with nationalism.²¹ Michael Warner has thus defined "publics" as a crucial, uniquely modern social formation built around the circulation of texts. Warner defines a public as "a space of discourse" that "exists only ... *by virtue of being addressed*.... There could be an infinite number of publics within the social totality. This sense of the term is completely modern; it is the only kind of public for which there is no other term. Neither 'crowd' nor 'audience' nor 'people' nor 'group' will capture the same sense. The difference shows us that the idea of a

public, unlike a concrete audience or the public of any polity, is text-based.”²² The indeterminate formation of publics is the result of a “partial non-identity” with the subject being addressed, because public speech is always understood by its readers as both addressed to them directly but concurrently to strangers. Because it is possible for authorities to address a public as a unitary public, as *the* public, many aspects of Warner's conception of publics are related to more prominent theories of communicative association as the basis of democracy, most notably in Habermas.²³

Warner insists that publics “commence with the moment of attention, must continually predicate renewed attention, and cease to exist when attention is no longer predicated. They are virtual entities, not voluntary associations.”²⁴ To be animated and sustained over time, then, public address must take on elements of novelty and familiarity, repetition and resonance with existing practices. “It is not texts themselves that create publics, but the concatenation of texts through time. Only when a previously existing discourse can be supposed, and a responding discourse be postulated, can a text address a public.... Anything that addresses a public is meant to undergo circulation.”²⁵ The privilege given the nation and the democratic public is an ideological choice, then, supported especially through the prominence of orienting to public formation as if it were an empirical concern, mistaking public opinion for opinion polling in order to assert majority rule. The equivalent slippage in film history is the continual focus on the empirical question of audiences, in terms of proportions of populations or the demographic composition of audiences – as if knowing the facts would pinpoint the moment when a mass audience emerged within an institutionalized cinema culture. That problem is beside the point of the emergence of a cinematic public. Networks circulating telegraphs and newsprint had already facilitated masses of strangers to potentially understand their relationship to each other as linked by electricity and leisure. News about cinema did much more than communicate or make legitimate the social importance of film as a technology or practice. The very idea of a mass viewing public of disparate audiences was already inscribed in the logic of news reading; the success of Edison's Vitascope depended upon it.

Telegraphing Cinematic Experience: The Vitascope's Advance Publicity

The Vitascope made its debut to the public on Saturday, April 4, 1896. Let me restate this in a more accurate way: beginning April 4, 1896, newspapers across North America began reporting how, the previous evening, reporters from major New York newspapers had witnessed a special screening of Edison's latest invention, the Vitascope.²⁶ Although the later Vitascope debut on April 23, 1896 at Koster & Bial's Music Hall has come to signify the start of American film history,

at the time it was reported as a relatively local event and did not garner much attention outside New York. Instead, the three weeks prior were peppered with news about the Vitascope's advance press screening, published coast-to-coast in cities and small towns alike. Edison's marketing team, Raff & Gammon, relied upon a handful of New York newspapers to create nationwide publicity through their connections to news wire services. The story circulated for months, subsequently edited and reprinted for several boilerplate services. Only the three largest circulation New York morning newspapers appear to have been invited to the press screening at the Edison facilities in West Orange, New Jersey on Friday evening, April 3, 1896.²⁷ Reports about the Vitascope do not appear in New York's prominent business-oriented (but lower circulation) *Times*, *Sun*, or *Tribune*.²⁸ The only "establishment" paper to report the story was James Gordon Bennett Jr.'s *Herald*, which had long outgrown its origins as the populist "penny press" Bennett Sr. pioneered in 1835. Two other reports came from the more populist progenitors of the "new journalism": Pulitzer's *New York World* and Hearst's *New York Journal*.²⁹ All three printed stories on Saturday morning, April 4, 1896, although these metropolitan publications should not quite be considered authentic original reports of the event.

The Vitascope screening in New Jersey on April 3, 1896 was reported all across the United States as early as the next morning, simultaneous with its publication in New York. Even before newsboys descended upon Manhattan, the *World* had already provided its story as content to the Associated Press wire service. As wire copy, the *World* version was published in a variety of edited and paraphrased forms over the next week; it was then condensed for a boilerplate service article that circulated for months. The Vitascope story in the *Herald* was instead more likely to be reprinted through exchange desk copies of the published newspaper; used less frequently and later, the *Herald* version was more likely to be quoted in depth without editing, with the notable exception of a specially dispatched telegraph version in the *Los Angeles Times*.³⁰ The third Vitascope story, in the *Journal*, is substantively distinct, idiosyncratically dwelling on the sensationalistic screened images of dancing girls rather than the technology; it seems to be used only for its original Hearst publication. Altogether, the various permutations as wire copy, boilerplate, and clippings from exchange subscriptions allowed the story of the Vitascope to appear across the United States before its "debut" at Koster & Bial's Music Hall in New York. Each successive news form stripped the story of its historical specificity, removing the date, place, and context of the press screening, but allowing the Vitascope story to continue circulating for months to successively less frequent and smaller circulation papers.

The *New York World* version of the Vitascope story was relayed across the country almost verbatim. After adding a dateline and header citing the source ("New York, April 4. – The World this morning says: ..."), the copy editor for the Associated Press made only minor changes: three typographic and spelling errors were fixed and two particularly florid phrases were cut. Although the Associated

Press was rarely credited, the source is cited at least once in New Orleans in the *Times-Picayune* (“The ‘Vitascope,’ Edison’s Latest Invention” April 4, 1896). The more quickly newspapers printed the wire copy, the more likely editors were to leave the dateline and citation intact. This detail at the start of the item was dropped as days passed and the story lost its currency, although some editors actually changed the date to keep it recent. The length of articles cribbed from wire copy varied greatly, however, as editors cut and shortened the story to fit whatever space remained on their page. Headlines, too, differed from place to place, and seem to be entirely composed by the local editor. On April 4, 1896, the same day as its publication in the *World*, for example, two papers, in Utah and Kansas, kept the dateline, but under different headlines: “Edison Has a New Machine” in the *Salt Lake Tribune*, and “Calls it the Vitascope” in the *Hutchinson News*. Both begin with the wire copy intact:

New York, April 4 – *The World* this morning says: Thomas A. Edison was in a very happy mood when seen by a reporter in his laboratory in West Orange last night. The great inventor had about completed another machine, which he called the ‘vitascope.’ It is an improvement on the kinetoscope, and Mr. Edison says he has no doubt that it will prove a success. The vitascope throws on a screen by means of bright lights and powerful lenses the moving life size figures of human beings and animals. Last night in the big foundry building adjacent to the laboratory the machine was rigged up and a very satisfactory exhibition was made.

Only the *Hutchinson News* continued with the remainder of the wire copy:

The first picture shown last night on the screen was a colored panorama of a serpentine dance by Anabelle, who posed before the kinetoscope last summer. The film roll on which the photographs were attached was arranged over a half dozen spools and pulleys and when the machine was set in motion, the dancer’s image appeared upon the screen half in life. The original photographs as taken by the kinetoscope and developed on the roll, are about the size of a special delivery postage stamp, and to produce a picture life size are magnified about 600 times. Mr. Edison expects shortly to be able to so improve the phonograph that he will be able to take records much longer than now and the vitascope and phonograph will then be so combined that it will be possible for audiences to watch a photographic reproduction of an opera and hear the music at the same time.

Other same-day versions diverge in detail from the core story as published above. In Texas, the *San Antonio Light* (April 4, 1896), near the end of a column of brevities headed “Wrenched from the Wire,” printed only one sentence. Wrenched gives a good sense of the process, as either the telegrapher transcribed the name of the invention incorrectly, or someone in the newsroom used indecipherable handwriting, or perhaps the compositor simply left a typo: “Edison has a new machine the Ulascope, an improvement on the Kinetoscope.” In Massachusetts,

the *Boston Transcript* ("Edison's Latest is the Vitascope," April 4, 1896) significantly edited the introduction to shorten the item, rather than cutting at the end. Other newsrooms took a few days to publish the Associated Press wire story. On Sunday, April 5, 1896, versions appeared in Texas in the *Galveston News* ("Edison's Vitascope") and in Nebraska in the *Omaha Bee* ("Edison Scores a New Triumph"), both with the original dateline still intact. On Monday, April 6, in Indiana the *Fort Wayne News* ("Edison's New Invention") changed the dateline to that very same day, while in Ohio the *Marietta Leader* ("The Vitascope") cut the citation of the *World* as the source and in Wyoming the *Laramie Boomerang* simply paraphrased a synopsis without a headline, running the item within a column of "Telegraphic Briefs." By the end of the week, news about the Vitascope had appeared in at least twenty US states in all regions of the country.

Under the headline "Tests His Vitascope," a literally stereotyped version of the story began circulating widely in dozens of newspapers as boilerplate the following week. Stripped of its *New York World* dateline, the syndicated story also entirely omitted all of the context of the original press screening: the New Jersey location, the April date, that journalists were eyewitnesses – all those facts were simply cut. With details of the Who? When? and Where? removed, this version zones in entirely on the What? and Why? explanation of how the Vitascope worked. Sentences that describe the technology and experience are left intact, but the only context for this news as an event is that Edison tested it "the other night." The currency of the event is taken out in order to maintain the value of the news item. This careful stripping away of detail was precisely the point of dateless, placeless boilerplate news; this was the service small town weekly papers needed, since it allowed a span of months to publish a story from a file clipping. The identically typeset story appeared as early as April 14, 1896 in Illinois in the *Decatur Republican*, but not until June 14 in Iowa in the *Dubuque Herald*. Later still, and this time not even meriting its own headline, a two-sentence description was part of a boilerplate point-form column collecting recent curiosities from the realm of "Science and Industry"; this appeared, for example, in Nevada in the *Reno Gazette* on July 10 and in Ohio in the *New Philadelphia Democrat* on August 6, 1896. Each reiteration and repurposing stripped away specificity but also allowed wider coverage as the story moved from regional city daily papers to small town weekly papers. In every case, however, news about the Vitascope was published locally well in advance of the local availability of the experience itself.

Changing the timeline of the event to keep the story current also happened with the more limited reprinting of the second account of the Vitascope press screening from the *New York Herald* ("Mr. Edison's Latest," April 4, 1896). The *Herald* article was reprinted on the same day in Connecticut in the *Meriden Republican* ("Mr. Edison's Latest," April 4, 1896), and sent by special dispatch telegraph directly to the *Los Angeles Times* ("Edison's New Invention," April 4, 1896). Elsewhere, the story was reproduced more slowly and with less modification than the Associated Press wire story detailed above, indicating that it was cut-and-pasted from exchange

subscription copies. For example, the *Omaha Bee*, which had quickly published the AP news wire story on April 5, did not reprint the *Herald* account until April 19. With the subheading "Edison's Latest," the item was placed within a feature story, "The Field of Electricity," which also included items about telephone services, X-rays, and hand-held lamps. The Nebraska editor made a point of rewriting the story to say the screening had happened "one evening last week." In the next days, the story appeared elsewhere with its own headline and the text left almost verbatim except for the timeline. In Ohio in the *Steubenville Herald* on April 21, the event was noted as happening "the other night," whereas the *Honolulu Bulletin* on April 20 changed the phrase to read "about two weeks ago." A few days earlier, all indication of the original date was removed when reprinted in the British colony of Newfoundland ("Mr. Edison's Latest," *St. John's Telegram*, April 16, 1896).

Sharing the structure and many phrases with the story from the *New York World* and news wire, the *Herald* added further details to publish a lengthier story. A second film of an English Derby is noted, in addition to Anabelle's serpentine dance. Names of Edison managers and Raff & Gammon are given to make clearer the publicity stunt context, whereas the *World* version lent itself to misinterpretation that Edison was experimenting in a laboratory. The *Herald* also paid closer attention to Edison's own opinions of the new apparatus, proclaiming it to be the "perfection" of previous experiments and machines. Vibration is noted as the main failure of previous projectors. Curiously, the *Herald* reported that "Even the inventor himself was surprised at the results, although ... he discovered flaws in the film which he declared must be disposed of before the vitascope would come up to his ideal." Inadvertently, the *Herald* confirmed something we know from Raff & Gammon's private correspondence: planned, earlier demonstrations to Edison himself had fallen through, and the Wizard only witnessed the Vitascope in person during the press screening.³¹

The amassed articles reporting about the Vitascope and its moving pictures support my claim that cinema's audience was the entire public of the United States even before the technology and its films were distributed for exhibition. This mass public could only be addressed as a newspaper reading public, through established networks for disseminating newsworthy events. As a marketing strategy, the Vitascope's promoters needed to ensure publicity was carried to everywhere exhibition rights for the apparatus were being sold across the United States and Canada. Tapping into the news network was, of course, the most efficient means of covering this vast territory, but ensuring the Vitascope was promoted as something newsworthy also tapped into the more intangible sense of the reading public as an already-existing mass audience. The subsequent experience of cinema would begin at the metropolis and take months to circulate to the periphery of the mass market. That the wide readership about Edison's latest invention derived from news of its being unveiled to the press, rather than its being shown to a New York audience, made the imagined community for cinema more inclusive of all readers everywhere. To some extent, the Vitascope's promoters understood as much.

As is well known to film historians, the Vitascope was not invented by Edison; the apparatus was a renamed Phantoscope, originally developed by C. Francis Jenkins and Thomas Armat of Washington, DC. Breaking from his partner late in 1895, Armat agreed to have the device commercialized by Raff & Gammon, the marketers of Edison's kinoscope. After composing a contract with Armat in December 1896, Raff & Gammon proceeded quickly to negotiate rights to exhibit the "screen machine," beginning early in February 1896 before the word "vitascope" was chosen. They first invited existing Kinoscope entrepreneurs to purchase state-based rights to exhibit the Vitascope. Seven states were already sold by the time a promotional circular was printed to promote the machine to potential investors. Although Raff & Gammon's correspondence indicates that reporters were trying to confirm rumors of Edison's new invention, keeping a lid on press coverage was key to the promotional scheme; Raff & Gammon wanted the first press reports to stem from their own successfully orchestrated event. Throughout March 1896, prospective rights-holders were assured that a press screening was soon planned that would generate public interest and thus increase the price they could demand from latecomers seeking to sub-lease territory and apparatuses. Someone interested in rights for Wisconsin was encouraged, late in March, to make a quick decision: "Territory is being purchased rapidly, and when we permit the new machine to get into newspapers, we think all good territory will quickly be taken."³²

Within Charles Musser's review of the Vitascope's debut, there are indications that Raff & Gammon understood the existing network through which newspapers dispersed publicity across the continent. For example, Musser notes that Raff & Gammon "choreographed an abbreviated but effective promotional campaign.... From the outset, they had decided to have the premiere in New York City, the nation's entertainment and media capital."³³ This formulation only hints at the material (and electric-immaterial) circulation of metropolitanism connoted by the phrase "media capital." Musser offers further confirmation that Raff & Gammon themselves knew exactly how publicity worked, citing a letter written to Armat explaining plans for exploitation: "We can do much better and make more money for both parties by exhibiting the machine at the start exclusively in New York City. The reports through the news-papers go throughout the country, and we shall do a lot of advertising in the shape of news-paper articles which will excite the curiosity of parties interested in such things."³⁴ Here is the crux of the matter: an advance screening for the New York press would suffice as a national advertising campaign.

My point is not that Raff & Gammon thought advertising and news were interchangeable or that they paid for the publicity. They seem to fully understand how news was disseminated across the continent by first drawing the attention of New York journalists; this is where Edison comes in, as Terry Ramsaye duly notes in his foundational account from *A Million and One Nights*, since the "wizardly" Edison's involvement ensured extensive media coverage.³⁵ On the evening of the

press screening, Edison played the ascribed role of inventor. Ramsay reprints the news story from the *New York Herald* and the account with “a shade more color” in Hearst’s *New York Journal*.³⁶ Musser also quotes the *Journal* and notes that the *New York World* and other dailies published stories the following day, and he further mentions that “their reports soon appeared in newspapers nationwide.”³⁷ This acknowledgment of coast-to-coast publicity allows for my focus on the circulation of news with a view to understanding the rapid pace of the spread of cinema in 1896.³⁸ The diffusion of the apparatus from metropolis to continental mass market was the marketing plan from the start, made possible with the nearly instantaneous diffusion of knowledge to the newspaper readers who would become the audience for cinema.

Cinema's Publicity Beyond the Vitascope

The association of cinema in North America with Edison, even more than with the Vitascope itself, was built precisely upon its continuity with his Kinetograph and Kinetoscope beforehand, now cast as imperfect experiments against the ideal manifested in 1896 in projected moving pictures. Briefly that year, the word “vitascope” could be used as metaphor for idealized representation in and of itself. For example, the *Washington Post* published a series of vividly descriptive urban vignettes under the banner “Vitascope Pictures” (from October 25, 1896, weekly through December). And again, a humorous column entitled “Like Life in a Novel” by Edgar Saltus described the gilded lifestyle of wealthy vacationers at Newport in Rhode Island as “a vitascope of what social existence might be, an approach to the ideal.” (Published, for example, in the *Lima (OH) Times-Democrat*, September 4, 1896.) Such connotations for the specific word ‘vitascope’ could not last long, as 1896 also witnessed the proliferation of variously named screen machines. Another item, under the heading “Gossip of Gotham,” poked fun at the metropolis for its obsession with novelty: “The living photograph machine craze is upon Gotham in its most virulent shape. Beginning with the vitascope, the disease ran the various stages of cinematograph, kineopticon, biograph, and centoscope, terminating finally in cinographoscope. The animatograph and theaterscope, both of which are raging in London, have not yet found their way over on steamships” (*Houston Post*, November 14, 1896). As this humorous newspaper tidbit indicates, Edison and his promoters knew they would not have a monopoly on the technology of moving pictures for long.

Raff & Gammon faced an array of challenges in marketing, but the most urgent was the imminent invasion of competition from Europe. The problem was not solved simply by being first in the North American market; success relied on the public branding of “Edison” and “Vitascope” with the very idea of cinema. Press coverage of earlier domestic machines had been circulating in newspapers

of all types in the pattern described above for almost a year already, and stories about the craze for cinema in Europe began to appear in the United States in February 1896, facilitated by the instantaneous communication allowed by the trans-Atlantic newswire. Edison's domestic advantages could be scuttled by New York journalists' own metropolitan pull toward Paris and London. During the very same week of the Vitascope's advance screening, a boilerplate article appeared about the Lumière Cinématographe's debut in London. Headlined "Beats the Kinetoscope," the piece was originally written by the New York correspondent of the *Pittsburg Dispatch*, who wrote about attending a Kinetoscope parlor with someone recently returned from overseas. The article laments the inability of America – even New York – to keep up with the novelties of Europe: "These [Kinetoscopes] are all very well in their way, but they're not in it with the cinematographe.... In this French development of Edison's toy, London has the biggest attraction of the sort that it has had for years. Of course the cinematographe will astonish New York before long." The chain of locations is remarkable here: Paris–London–New York–Pittsburgh, and then reprinted in boilerplate throughout the country, for example, in Maine in the *Lewiston Sun* on April 6, 1896. At the end of the week, it appeared within a features page of the *San Francisco Sunday Call* on April 12, under the banner "Novelties in the Realms of Science, Literature, and Art" – all before anyone in North America except a few journalists had seen the Vitascope.

Another article about the Cinématographe appeared even before the Vitascope advance screening. Originally a dispatch from the Paris correspondent of the *Philadelphia Telegraph*, the entire column is a lament about the mundane character of American life compared to Europe, "where the studious youth revel in mirth and headlong enthusiasm." Reprinted in the *Syracuse Standard* on March 29, 1896, it read: "There is a new show called the Cinematographe, whereunto one is admitted for the modest sum of 20 cents. There in a neat little theater one sits and contemplates a series of scenes, the latest triumph of photography." Earlier still was an article extolling the wonders of the Theatrograph in London, running across the United States all throughout March 1896. This story began as a late-February dispatch from the London correspondent of the *New York Journal* and was then picked up by the *Chicago Tribune* on March 1, 1896: "The French cinematograph is a device for throwing pictures made in Edison's kinetograph on a screen so that they may be viewed by great audiences at a time. This now is followed by an invention by Robert Paul of London called the Theatrograph." Within days came a boilerplate version headlined "The Theatrograph," printed in four Ohio papers in the next two weeks, then adapted by the *Los Angeles Times* (March 16) within a feature on "The Field of Electricity." Publicity about cinema from Europe was thus gaining momentum just as the domestic hype from November 1895 surrounding Jenkins' and Armat's Phantoscope had run its course. A similar trajectory of metropolitan publicity greeted the Latham's Pantoptikon or Eidoloscope between April and July 1895.³⁹

News about screen projection provides context for understanding how the newspaper reading public recognized moving pictures as of interest long before the opportunity to experience it in person came along locally months later. In Michael Warner's sense, the mass public for cinema existed at least a year in advance of its gathering as geographically and temporally dispersed audiences. Strongly including the newspaper promotion of cinema within film history means repositioning cinema as a practice also embedded within the work of publishers and editors, who envisioned their own roles as serving readerships, treated at times interchangeably as markets, at other times as publics. The material of modernity thus becomes evident in the network of newspapers circulating culturally meaningful experience. In embedding cinema within newsprint, the circulation of filmstrips could fulfill a promise made to the public with the earlier circulation of knowledge about cinema. The reading public, the mass market, and cinema's mass audience are inextricable because the newspaper encouraged its readers to conceive of themselves as modern by simultaneously being citizens, consumers, and spectators.

Notes

- 1 W. Bernard Carlson, "Artifacts and Frames of Meaning: Thomas A. Edison, His Managers, and the Cultural Construction of Motion Pictures," in *Shaping Technology/ Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change*, eds. Wiebe E. Bijker and John Law (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 175–98. Carlson's essay writes film history as a matter of "science and technology studies," in which objects are culturally constructed to have social agency. In the same book, Bruno Latour provides an elegant introduction to the theoretical premises of such an approach, which has become known as Actor-Network Theory. See Bruno Latour, "Where are the Missing Masses? The Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts," in Bijker and Law, *Shaping Technology*, 225–58; and also Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- 2 Robert C. Allen and Richard Maltby have argued strongly for a "new cinema history" based upon local practices. Neither is abandoning the prospect of a theorized or generalized statement about cinema, but both insist it be built upon the study of a diversity of grounded practices. See Robert C. Allen, "Relocating American Film History: The 'Problem' of the Empirical," *Cultural Studies* 20, no. 1 (February 2006): 48–88; and Richard Maltby, "How Can Cinema History Matter More?," *Screening the Past* 22 (December 2007), www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/current/issue-22.
- 3 See Deac Rossell, *Living Pictures: The Origins of the Movies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998); Hermann Hecht, *Pre-Cinema History: An Encyclopaedia and Annotated Bibliography of the Moving Image before 1896*, ed. Ann Hecht (London: Bowker-Saur Publishers, 1993); and Stephen Herbert, *A History of Pre-Cinema*, vol. 1 (New York: Routledge, 2000).
- 4 Publicity about Edison's Kinetograph camera appears as early as "Edison and the Big Fair," *Chicago Tribune*, May 13, 1891. The marketing of the solitary-viewer Kinetoscope

- begins with publicity about the strongman Sandow being photographed at the Edison facilities in Menlo Park, New Jersey, published as early as "Edison's Latest Invention," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 9, 1894. Synchronized with a phonograph recording, the Kinetophone was unveiled as early as "A Wonderful Combination," *Los Angeles Times*, March 17, 1895. All three "inventions" spawned a continental proliferation of news wire, boilerplate, and cut-and-paste articles in the months that followed. Almost all related stories between 1891 and 1895 mention the idealized future of screen projection.
- 5 Carlson points out, however, that Edison was intent upon a solitary viewer, following the precedent and marketing strategy set by the phonograph (Carlson, "Artifacts and Frames of Meaning," 182–4). Even as late as April 1895, publicity surrounding the Kinetophone depicted a future screen projection for only two viewers in a private, domestic setting, for example in a widely syndicated feature story used for "Edison's Latest Marvel," *Los Angeles Times*, April 14, 1895. See also Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), on the renewed marketing strategy of the phonograph begun in 1889.
 - 6 Paul C. Spehr, *The Man Who Made Movies: W. K. L. Dickson* (Eastleigh: John Libbey, 2008).
 - 7 Charles Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).
 - 8 "Domestic production of newsprint increased to 196,000 tons in 1890 and to 569,000 tons in 1899 and per capita consumption to 8 lb. in 1890 and 15 lb. in 1899. Prices of paper declined from \$344 a ton in 1866 to \$246 in 1870, \$138 in 1880, \$68 in 1890, and \$36 in 1900.... The fast press was developed to the point that 96,000 copies of 8 pages could be produced in an hour in 1893. The linotype with at least five times the type-setting speed of the compositor was introduced in 1886 and was followed by a marked increase in the use of typewriters. It made possible the modern newspaper." Harold Innis, "Technology and Public Opinion in the United States," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* 17, no. 1 (February 1951): 12–13.
 - 9 For synopses of American newspapers' historical relation to their communities, see Kevin G. Barnhurst and John C. Nerone, *The Form of News: A History* (New York: Guilford Press, 2001); Richard L. Kaplan, *Politics and the American Press: The Rise of Objectivity, 1865–1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and David Paul Nord, *Communities of Journalism: A History of American Newspapers and their Readers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).
 - 10 James W. Carey, "Technology and Ideology: The Case of the Telegraph," in *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*, revised edition (New York: Routledge, 2009), 155–76.
 - 11 On the history of the telegraph and news wire services in the United States, see Menahem Blondheim, *News Over the Wires: The Telegraph and the Flow of Public Information in America, 1844–1897* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); and Richard B. Du Boff, "The Telegraph in Nineteenth-Century America: Technology and Monopoly," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26, no. 4 (October 1984): 571–86.
 - 12 Blondheim, *News Over the Wires*, 162.
 - 13 Richard Allen Schwarzlose, *The American Wire Services* (New York: Arno Press, 1979), 53.

- 14 Innis, "Technology and Public Opinion," 15.
- 15 See W. Joseph Campbell, *The Year that Defined American Journalism: 1897 and the Clash of Paradigms* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
- 16 Alfred D. Chandler Jr., *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap–Harvard University Press, 1977).
- 17 Carey, "Technology and Ideology," 167.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 162.
- 19 Gunther Barth argues that metropolitan newspapers are the foundation of the rise of modern city culture in nineteenth-century America. Although he means to restrict the case to city newspapers read by city people, I am extending this to newspaper reading generally through a focus on the wide circulation of telegraphed features and information. See Gunther Barth, *City People: The Rise of Modern City Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 58–109.
- 20 Paul S. Moore, *Now Playing: Early Moviegoing and the Regulation of Fun* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 158–63.
- 21 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (New York: Verso, 2006).
- 22 Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone, 2005), 67.
- 23 See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).
- 24 Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 88.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 90–1.
- 26 Digital newspaper archives provide only a partial and non-representative sample of at-least-weekly publications, of which nearly 20,000 were circulating in the United States and Canada in 1896. Altogether, newspapers were published in nearly 9,000 different towns and cities in North America; in the United States, only 800 cities then had populations of 5,000 people or more (all figures from N. W. Ayer and Son, *American Newspaper Annual* [Philadelphia: N. W. Ayer & Son, 1897]). Perhaps 5 percent of these newspapers have been digitized and are searchable online through various databases. A handful of still-dominant mastheads are available through ProQuest subscriptions (the *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Toronto Globe*, for example). The Library of Congress has compiled a selection as its *Chronicling America* database. For a modest fee, researchers can access *NewspaperArchive.com* or *GenealogyBank.com*, both of which provide a surprisingly thorough archive of papers from across the United States. A few less populous states and regions have already digitized all available newspapers: Utah, Wyoming, and northern New York, to name a few.
- 27 Charles Musser, "Introducing Cinema to the American Public: The Vitascope in the United States, 1896–97," in *Moviegoing in America: A Sourcebook in the History of Film Exhibition*, ed. Gregory Waller (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 14.
- 28 The *New York Times*, for example, does not mention the Vitascope until Bial himself holds a press conference more than a week later to announce it was booked to soon appear at his music hall ("Edison's Latest Triumph," *New York Times*, April 14, 1896).
- 29 Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978).
- 30 The Vitascope story that ran in the *Los Angeles Times* ("Edison's New Invention," April 4, 1896) is unusual for being a same-day reprinting of the version from the *Herald*.

- Cited as "Special Dispatch, By Telegraph to the *Times*," this is a rare example of a newspaper using its own telegraphs rather than wire services. The *Herald* version was also reprinted the same day in the *Meriden (CT) Republican* ("Mr. Edison's Latest," April 4, 1896), likely from a printed copy given the proximity to Manhattan.
- 31 Although Raff & Gammon anticipated Edison would attend a demonstration on March 27, 1896, they reported to Thomas Armat on April 1 that illness had prevented it. Harvard Baker Library, Raff & Gammon fonds, MSS 692, vol. 6: 467.
- 32 My synopsis of Raff & Gammon's business strategy relies upon correspondence about the sale of the Vitascope's exhibition rights and plans for publicity, as well as correspondence with Thomas Armat and Albert Bial, archived at the Harvard School of Business Baker Library, Raff & Gammon fonds, MSS 692. The 500 pages of volume 3 cover more than a full year up to the day before the press screening on April 3, 1896. The 500 pages of volume 2 cover the single month afterwards until May 5, 1896.
- 33 Musser, "Introducing Cinema," 14.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Terry Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights: A History of the Motion Picture through 1925* (1926; repr., New York: Touchstone-Simon & Schuster, 1986), 226.
- 36 Ibid., 228.
- 37 Musser, "Introducing Cinema," 14.
- 38 Compiling a range of sources (starting with Musser, "Introducing Cinema,"), I have confirmed that moving pictures were exhibited by the end of 1896 in at least 38 American states and five Canadian provinces. By the end of 1897, all present-day states and provinces had hosted cinema with the possible exception of Alaska (although moving pictures were taken of the Klondike because of the gold rush underway).
- 39 News about the Phantoscope originated with a *Baltimore Sun* feature on November 13, 1895 and was reprinted, for example, in the *Burlington (IA) HawkEye* (November 14, 1895) and several other places in the next two weeks. The piece was used for a boilerplate item, "Gives Life to Phantoms," as early as December 26, 1895 in the *San Francisco Call* and other papers throughout January 1896. News about the Pantoptikon began April 22, 1895 in the *New York Sun*, and reprinted as early as the same day, for example, in the *Hamilton (OH) Republican*. Citing the renamed Eidoloscope, the *New York World* printed an illustrated Sunday article about it on May 26, 1895, which became a boilerplate item under the headline "Photographing a Wink, and Reproducing It on a Big Canvas Screen."