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The Role of the Western Film Genre in Industry Competition, 1907-1911

ROBERT ANDERSON

An evaluation of the proliferation of American on-location narrative filmmaking from 1907 to 1911 reveals a complex interrelation of causal factors which transcend the simplistic traditional interpretation of independent film manufacturers seeking a remote refuge from the ubiquitous detectives and lawyers of the eastern based Motion Picture Patents Company.¹ Product differentiation and the desire to furnish the burgeoning national film exhibition market, particularly the nickelodeons, with a dependable and expanding supply of American-made motion pictures are the key variables in the development of on-location narrative film production during this period. The ability of the domestically produced on-location film in general, and the Western in particular, to become both differentiated from and preferred to the classical scenarios and traditional theatrical conventions of contemporary European photoplays prior to the advent of either the star system or the feature film dramatically altered the conception and use of the medium.

Film historians have overlooked the significance of the development of the Western between 1907-1911. Although extensive analysis has been done on the origin of specific genres in the 1930s, the American motion picture industry's development of the Western* indicates that the 1907-1911 time frame is the initial period in American film history when the goals of the industry and the function of a genre coincide. The transition between 1906 and 1908 from an emphasis on topical films dependent, for the most part, on

uncontrollable events to narrative films where the pro-filmic event is subservient to the needs of the filmmaker,² is also the beginning of Western genre production. The handful of Westerns staged in rural New Jersey by the Edison Company between 1898-1907 established the cinematic Western as a visible form of entertainment,³ but the recognition and manipulation of repetitive, predictable, nostalgic, symbolic and functional characteristics which define genre films had yet to become consciously encoded by the filmmakers.⁴

The popularization and mythification of the American West was a multi-media affair in the two decades preceding 1907. In the late nineteenth century, two men—Buffalo Bill Cody and Prentiss Ingraham—proved that the American public's nostalgia for and misconception of the West could, with the proper promotion, be translated into a lucrative money-making proposition. Beginning in 1885, Ingraham published over two hundred dime novels with Buffalo Bill as the main character,⁵ while Cody toured the world

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¹ Terry Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1926), pp. 533-534; Benjamin B. Hampton, *A History of the Movies* (New York: Covici, Friede and Company, 1931), pp. 76-80; Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1939), p. 85.

*The first specifically nationalistic response to the domination of the domestic marketplace by European manufacturing and the subsequent codification and standardization of the Western through distinctively American locales, themes and role models.

² Robert C. Allen, "Vaudeville and Film, 1895-1915: A Study in Media Interaction" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Iowa, 1977), pp. 212 and 217. In 1907, comedy and dramatic films comprised 67 percent of the total American production. In 1908, that figure rose to 98 percent.

³ Western titles for this time period are particularly scarce, but they all represent ersatz or Eastern Westerns. Ostensibly portraying life in the open expanses of the West, these pictures were filmed at various locations in New Jersey. Edison Westerns from this time are *Cripple Creek Barroom* (1898), *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), *Brush Between Cowboys and Indians*, *The Life of an American Cowboy*, *Western Stage Coach Hold-up* and *The Little Train Robbery*. In 1903, Biograph made a series of five pioneer stories, at least one of which was filmed entirely outside of the studio. In 1904, the Lubin Company duped Edison's *The Great Train Robbery* and released it as an original production; see: Kemp Niver, *Motion Pictures from the Library of Congress Paper Print Collection, 1894-1912* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 172.

⁴ See: Charles F. Altman, "Towards a Genre Theory of Film"; Thomas G. Shatz, "New Directions in Film Genre Study"; in *Film: Historical-Theoretical Speculations, the 1977 Film Studies Annual: Part Two* (Pleasantville, NY: Redgrave Publishing Company, 1977).

⁵ Henry Blackman Sell and Victor Weybright, *Buffalo Bill and the Wild West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), pp. 144-145.

with his "inimitable Wild West Show." In 1907, when Buffalo Bill returned to New York City to play a three-week engagement at Madison Square Garden following an extended five-year tour of Europe, every performance was standing room only, and the *New York Dramatic Mirror* proclaimed the extravaganza to be "the best entertainment of its kind ever seen in New York."⁶ The popularity of Cody's theatrical representations of "Early American History," "Primitive Savagery" and "Deeds of Equestrian Daring"⁷ diminished very little over three decades, as even his third farewell tour, in as many years, managed to make a profit.⁸ This feat becomes even more remarkable because the three annual farewell tours were anteceded by a three-thousand-foot documentary film produced by Cody entitled *Buffalo Bill Bids You Goodbye* and advertised heavily as "your last chance to see the Old Scout."⁹ At a time when few Americans had a firsthand knowledge of the West, Cody's performances in arenas around the world and in *Buffalo Bill Bids You Goodbye* defined the popular parameter of frontier lore and the motivation of the Western hero.

To the American motion picture manufacturers of 1907 (most notably Biograph, Edison, Essanay, Kalem, Lubin, the Miles Brothers, Selig, Vitagraph, and Williams, Brown and Earle), the domestic marketplace appeared to be an enigma. Patents litigation between Biograph, the Edison licensees, and other independents was rife. The cumulative effect was disorganization and a prevailing hesitancy to commit large sums of capital to the further expansion of the virtually fledgling industry. James Stuart Blackton, vice-president of the Vitagraph Company, specifically attributed the failure of his firm to expand from 1904-1907 to the continual legal wrangling with Biograph and to a pervading lack of confidence in the future of the business.¹⁰ Despite the restricted production and conservative nature of the American firms, the exhibition of motion pictures was booming nationwide. In 1907, *Variety* chronicled the phenomenal growth of the nickelodeons and estimated five thousand nickel theaters in the United States attracting a combined total of two million patrons daily, one-third of whom were children.¹¹

⁶ *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 4 May 1907, p. 16.

⁷ *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 27 April 1907, p. 11.

⁸ Sell and Weybright, p. 246.

⁹ *Moving Picture World*, 18 June 1910, p. 1042; *Moving Picture World*, 20 August 1910, p. 401; *Moving Picture World*, 10 September 1910, p. 601; *Moving Picture World*, 17 September 1910, p. 661.

¹⁰ Volume 4, Transcript of Record, pp. 1878-1880. *United States of America vs. Motion Picture Patents Company*, in the District Court of the United States for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania [1915] (hereinafter cited as *Record*).

¹¹ *Variety*, 14 December 1907, p. 33

The dynamic expansion of the nickelodeons coupled with the relative dearth of domestically manufactured films from 1905-1907¹² led to the mass importation of foreign motion pictures and the creation of illegal duplicating or duping plants in Chicago, Philadelphia and San Francisco.¹³ Although stringent steps were implemented to eliminate duping, the surreptitious practice proved a profitable activity and continued well through 1910.¹⁴ The advent of large scale duping can be interpreted as a response to both the American manufacturer's inability to supply a sufficient quality of films for domestic exhibition and to the prevalence of "cut-throat competition" between nickelodeons¹⁵ which resulted in the acceptance of any type of exhibitable film product regardless of quality.¹⁶ Whether due primarily to a lack of foresight, business acumen or the omnipresent threat of litigation, American film production was unable to keep pace with the demand from the nickelodeons,¹⁷ and foreign manufacturers usurped the majority of the domestic exhibition market.

The deleterious effects induced by the spectre of litigation are by definition more nebulous than the obvious chaos caused by the absence of coherent long range planning. By the fall of 1907, due to the "unsettled condition of stocks" and the curtailment of public expenditure in "the indulgence of luxury," theaters across the nation began reducing the number of nights they offered live entertainment.¹⁸ To offset the lack of

¹² *Moving Picture World*, 2 May 1908, p. 406. As late as May 1908, foreign imports accounted for over sixty percent of the American market and the French firm Pathé out-produced its nearest American competitor by a margin of slightly better than two to one. 104 American films were released compared to 170 foreign productions. Pathé produced 43 films during this period as compared to the American high of 21 by the Lubin Company.

¹³ *3 Record* 1485.

¹⁴ *Moving Picture World*, 14 September 1907, p. 435; *Motography*, October 1909, p. 103; *Variety*, 5 February 1910, p. 16; *Motography*, 1 March 1910, p. 131.

¹⁵ *Variety*, 14 December 1907, p. 33. Nickelodeons were defined as "tiny theatres" seating no more than 199 people. By keeping the seating capacity under 200, the nickelodeons qualified for inexpensive amusement licenses, whereas a 200-seat establishment would have to pay \$500 annually for a theatrical license in New York City.

¹⁶ *3 Record* 1499; Frank L. Dyer, vice president of the Edison Company, echoed the sentiments of numerous exhibitors when he testified that he doubted "if any motion picture theatre now (1913) would put up for a moment with the objectionable (in relation to condition, not content) films that were quite common" in 1907.

¹⁷ *Variety*, 18 April 1908, p. 13. *Variety* referred to the spring of 1908 as a time when there existed "an almost hysterical demand from exhibitors for new material."

¹⁸ *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 19 October 1907, p. 4.

revenue generated by these "dark nights," the Miles Brothers, the leading importers and distributors of film in the nation, inaugurated a concerted advertising campaign in the *New York Dramatic Mirror* prescribing the installation of motion picture projectors as the most sensible and inexpensive solution to the problem.¹⁹ In the short span of six weeks, the Miles Brothers claimed they received over two thousand inquiries from theater owners interested in curing the dreaded dark night malady.²⁰ The Miles Brothers' approach was simple, yet shrewd. The distributors appealed to the pocketbook of the theater owners by announcing that film exhibition would almost effortlessly increase their weekly net income from \$50 to \$250:

Your rent is paid whether you open or close your doors. Your help is paid and you can command their services at all times. You have no license to pay because you already operate under a general theatre license.

You probably own your own electric light plant and can therefore operate at less expense.

Can't you see the tremendous advantage you enjoy over the renter? You don't have to put up a dollar except for pictures and operating machines.²¹

While the Miles Brothers' objective of expanding the role of the motion picture as an attractive source of entertainment in legitimate theaters was accomplished, paradoxically, this undercut the position of American manufacturers as they were unable to adequately increase production, with the end result being that the Miles Brothers supplied the newly recruited theaters with a steady diet of European films.

The insufficient quantity of American motion pictures not only led to duping European films, but to a lessening in the quality of exhibition as a whole, due to the repeated screenings of damaged and worn-out films.²² This policy particularly impaired the reputation of the American manufacturers as each company's prices fluctuated depending on a number of variables (length, quality, narrative or topical, amount of money expended on advertising), whereas European films were purchased strictly by length, not by context.²³ For the distributor and exhibitor to

recoup the purchase price of a quality American narrative, therefore, extended runs of up to seven months were necessary. Although *Variety* characterized the rapid development of the film industry, in 1907, as a time when "everybody is making money—manufacturers, renters, jobbers and exhibitors,"²⁴ it was the European film producers who derived the lion's share of the benefits from the disorder and overnight expansion of the American nickelodeons.

Recognizing the absurdity of continued legal warfare, the *Moving Picture World* devoted an editorial to the systematization of the American film industry:

You and your competitor are in the same boat. Organization is the only possible prescription. Service is based on price, you can control neither without organization. The strongest craft will go to destruction without control. Why hazard our industry with the practices of the past? Let the strong man of the trade rise up and fight for organization. Bury all petty jealousies, and unite in this common necessity.²⁵

This editorial practically outlines the position of Thomas A. Edison who, by the closing months of 1907, was openly concerned with the escalating power which European firms (particularly Pathé which established a manufacturing plant in New Jersey in June 1907) wielded in the American marketplace.²⁶ Whether the other American companies shared Edison's fear of foreign domination or merely wished to terminate the patents litigation is debatable; however, with the combination of the Edison licensees (Essanay, Kalem, Lubin, Selig and Vitagraph) and the advent of the Film Service Association²⁷ early in 1908, American film manufacturers took the initial steps towards stabilizing the domestic market and increasing production.²⁸

While the F.S.A. was at best a truce in the internecine warfare that characterized early motion picture development, the organization did alleviate the fear of continuing legal warfare and freed capital for investment in the improvement and expansion of the film factories.²⁹ As Edison related to a *Variety* reporter:

²⁴ *Variety*, 14 December 1907, p. 33.

²⁵ *Moving Picture World*, 16 November 1907, p. 591.

²⁶ *3 Record* 1715.

²⁷ F.S.A. consisted of the Edison Company, the Edison licensees, the Biograph Company and George Kleine, a Chicago importer of foreign films.

²⁸ *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 22 February 1908, p. 8.

²⁹ *5 Record* 2986-2989. The cautious development of the Essanay Company is indicative of the "wait and see" policy of the majority of American manufacturers. Due

¹⁹ *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 21 September 1907, p. 13.

²⁰ *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 5 October 1907, p. 10; *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 12 October 1907, p. 13; *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 19 October 1907, p. 13; *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 16 November 1907, p. 12.

²¹ *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 28 September 1907.

²² *3 Record* 1499.

²³ *1 Record* 358.

"I am willing to admit that the French are somewhat in advance of us. But they will not long maintain their supremacy. Americans in any department of effort are never content to stay in second place. Our manufacturers have come to a realization now that the stability and advancement of our business is largely dependent on the excellence of their output. . . ."³⁰

Edison's statement reveals the American manufacturers' newfound determination to aggressively pursue a policy of domestic hegemony in which the production and promotion of the Western, a nationalistically differentiated form of narrative film, became a central component.

The explosive increase in production and popularity of perhaps the most definitively American type of narrative film, the Western, from 1907-1911 was accomplished through the successful manipulation of the American marketplace by domestic film companies who by self-consciously promoting a uniquely American product (in marked contrast to the stage dramas of European art photoplays), corralled the nickels and enthusiasm of motion picture patrons nationwide. By late 1909, in an article entitled, "An American School of Moving Picture Drama," *Moving Picture World* referred to the Western as the "foundation" of American dramatic narrative and recognized those pictures with Wild West or Indian themes as being "the most popular subjects."³¹ Increasingly, from 1907-1909, American manufacturers cinematized the legendary domain of Buffalo Bill with its six-shooters, stagecoaches, cowboys and Indians until the Western no longer functioned primarily as a competitive tool to differentiate American from European productions. By the time of the split between the Motion Picture Patents Company and the independents, the Western had evolved into a standardized format with codified locales, actions and attitudes. With little fanfare, the Western emerged as the first fully articulated film genre.

The traditional interpretation of the contributing factors behind Selig's sojourn West in 1907

to the demand from exhibitors for new film, George Spoor, an exchangeman and distributor, began producing two films a month in the streets of Chicago in the summer of 1907. Spoor operated without any studio and awaited the outcome of the Selig-Edison litigation before he invested any significant amounts of capital into his manufacturing operation. When Selig was ruled as illegally infringing on Edison's patents, Spoor became an Edison licensee and, freed from the burden of possible courtroom expenses, invested a total of \$25,000 into the construction of a studio and improved processing plant (*Motography*, March 1909, p. 82).

³⁰ *Variety*, 20 June 1908, p. 12.

³¹ *Moving Picture World*, 20 November 1909, p. 712.

emphasizes the need of the independent manufacturer to escape from the watchful eye of Edison's patents detectives.³² This explanation is non-sensical, as Selig enlarged the operation of his Chicago plant in 1907; this expansion hardly reinforces the image of Selig as a harassed producer, covertly filming narratives from a mobile far western studio. Furthermore, when it was beneficial for Edison to intimidate and coerce Selig into joining the Film Service Association as an Edison licensee, the "Wizard of Menlo Park" had little difficulty locating the Chicago plant and serving Selig with an injunction concerning his unauthorized usage of a motion picture camera patent.³³ Due to the paucity of primary source material,³⁴ the pivotal question of how Selig was able to increase his holdings and send narrative film crews on location to Colorado and California at a time of prevailing conservation and litigation within the industry remains a perplexing conundrum.

In January 1907, the Selig-Polyscope Company outfitted and dispatched a film troupe to go on location with the expressed purpose of producing narrative films. Whether or not the Selig unit located in Colorado or California is a matter of some historical controversy,³⁵ but regardless of which western state *The Girl from Montana* and the other on-location pictures were staged in, the journey West represents a decisive break with the prior pattern of the Eastern-based manufacturers' submissive acceptance of nature's cyclical

³² Hampton, p. 79.

³³ *4 Record* 1979-1980. The injunction was served the first week of November 1907. Selig became an Edison licensee between mid-November and late December 1907.

³⁴ Selig did not testify at the Motion Picture Patents Company trial; trade journals are not concerned with this question; and Selig's business records have either been lost or are no longer extant.

³⁵ Jacobs, p. 75; Niver, p. 188; *Moving Picture World*, 4 January 1908, p. 6; Lewis Jacobs quotes an article published in the *Views and Film Index* of 23 February 1907, which states that the Selig cameraman spent two weeks in the heart of the Rocky Mountains to produce *The Girl from Montana*, whereas Kemp Niver, who restored the film, credits *The Girl from Montana* as being "undoubtedly one of the first [motion pictures] ever made in California for use in theatres." The release date (14 March 1907) and content of *The Girl from Montana* suggests the probability that the film was shot at a warm weather site; however, H. H. Buckwalter in an interview with the *Moving Picture World* claimed he directed ten motion pictures for Selig at Golden, Colorado, for a total cost of one thousand dollars early in 1907. Despite Buckwalter's assertion, the question remains; why would Selig send a troupe to the Rocky Mountains in mid-winter? Also, perhaps Buckwalter felt the Selig Company's Colorado films produced in June 1907, constituted filmmaking activity in early 1907. His exact description in the article as to the date was "a year ago."

control over exterior narrative production. In addition to setting into motion the American manufacturer's belated emancipation from the seasonal confines of the Eastern studio, Selig's commitment to on-location shooting also fostered a predilection for local color and action which slowly became a standardized feature of Western productions.

Local color and sunshine abounds in the West and when the Selig-Polyscope Company traveled to Colorado for an extended stay in the summer of 1907, the film troupe produced a series of motion pictures capitalizing on the region's scenic diversity and picturesqueness. By mid-June, Selig was advertising its new Western subjects as a combination of "magnificent scenic effects" and "intensely dramatic" stories and reminding exhibitors that their previous "Western subjects have proved the film success of the season."³⁶ When *Western Justice*, the first of this Colorado series of melodramas, was released, Selig promoted it as "powerful . . . all life and exciting incident . . . [and] set as such a story deserves to be, in the wildest and most beautiful scenery of the Western country."³⁷ The *Moving Picture World's* reviewer awarded the picture an unprecedented 1 $\frac{2}{3}$ columns of space and commended the film's picturesque background and the "marvelously stirring and sensational chase."³⁸ In 1908, H. H. Buckwalter, the director of these "authentic" Westerns, stated that "the enormous number of copies (prints) sold, fully justified the expense" of the trip to Colorado and that the pictures were "going as well now as when they first came out."³⁹

Even though Selig's formula of filming indigenous action narratives on location demonstrated its profitability at the nickelodeon box office, no other manufacturers ventured outside of a two-hundred-mile radius from their home plant to produce full-reel subjects (500 to 1,000 ft.) in 1907. The hesitancy to invest in on-location narrative production is related both to the general recession in the American economy and to the lack of stability caused by the fear of patents litigation within the industry. The percentage of Western/frontier pictures did increase,⁴⁰ however, and the Kalem Company began promoting their Indian stories as examples

of historically and pictorially accurate representations of "the red man's way of life" staged under the auspices of the unnamed "leading Indian authority in the United States."⁴¹

By 1908, nickelodeon audiences expected more for their five-cent investment than just pictures that moved; they demanded "plenty of action" and a consistent plot.⁴² The Selig Company, which constructed a temporary studio in Los Angeles at the end of 1907, continued to produce exciting Western narratives through the winter months and quickly established a reputation as the preeminent manufacturer of action oriented Western films. The grass roots appeal of Selig's style of filmmaking (Francis Boggs directed these pictures) was reiterated time and again by the trade magazine critics. The review of *The Squawman's Daughter* serves as a typical example:

The popularity of the Western romance will never exhaust itself. Not a story of Western fiction enacted in some backyard in the East, but a worthy dramatization of a thrilling romance. . . . In being so realistic of nature and life we appreciate that our Western photographer was very fortunate in securing this creation, and for those who exhibit same it cannot help but prove a fortune proportionately.⁴³

The Selig Company's ability to manufacture such a unique and desirable product at a time of "an almost hysterical demand from exhibitors for new material"⁴⁴ was a masterstroke for Selig and the entire American film industry. The rise of the distinctive action Western coinciding, as it did, with the decision by Edison to standardize the price of all licensed film at 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ cents a foot, regardless of shooting expense or content, helped place American-made films on a competitive basis with European imports for the first time in over four years.⁴⁵

In 1908, motion pictures became firmly entrenched in B. F. Proctor's legitimate theatres,⁴⁶ urban nickelodeons continued to prosper,⁴⁷ American narrative production significantly increased, and Essanay and Selig began extensive filming in Colorado.⁴⁸ Throughout the summer,

⁴¹ *Moving Picture World*, 12 October 1907, pp. 506 and 515.

⁴² *Moving Picture World*, 11 January 1908, p. 21.

⁴³ *Moving Picture World*, 7 March 1908, p. 195.

⁴⁴ *Variety*, 18 April 1908, p. 13.

⁴⁵ *Variety*, 9 May 1908, p. 11.

⁴⁶ *Moving Picture World*, 11 January 1908, p. 21; *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 30 May 1908, p. 7.

⁴⁷ *Variety*, 14 March 1908, p. 12; *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 28 March 1908, p. 4; *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 13 June 1908, p. 4.

⁴⁸ *Variety*, 18 April 1908, p. 13; *Moving Picture World*, 2 May 1908, p. 406; *Variety*, 19 September 1908, p. 11.

³⁶ *Moving Picture World*, 15 June 1907, p. 225; *Moving Picture World*, 22 June 1907, p. 251; *Moving Picture World*, 29 June 1907, p. 257.

³⁷ *Moving Picture World*, 29 June 1907, p. 257.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

³⁹ *Moving Picture World*, 4 January 1908, p. 6.

⁴⁰ *Moving Picture World*, 7 September 1907, p. 429; of the 87 American films listed, 9 are of the Western/frontier variety. Selig produced 4, Kalem 2, Vitagraph 2 and Biograph 1. None of the foreign imports were Westerns.

the Chicago-based firms' on-location units cranked out a series of Colorado Westerns, while Biograph, Edison, Lubin, Vitagraph and Kalem filmed a smaller number of Eastern Westerns.⁴⁹ Despite the strenuous efforts of the American manufacturers to meet the nickelodeons' demand for film, the domestic market still suffered from a deficiency of new subjects,⁵⁰ and "everybody [was] clamoring for" Western pictures.⁵¹ That the European manufacturers were cognizant of the Western's box-office appeal in the United States is confirmed by Great Northern's (Nordisk) entrance into the cowboy field with *Texas Tex*. Filmed in Copenhagen, Denmark, with a cast of "genuine" American Indians recruited from a touring wild west show, *Texas Tex* appears to be the only Western manufactured by European filmmakers in either 1907 or 1908.⁵² The absence of any further attempts by European producers to capitalize on the popularity of the Western underlines the distinctly American attributes and character of the genre and the European filmmaker's tacit recognition of these production prerequisites.⁵³

Even though the appeal of Westerns created a sizeable demand for films produced exclusively by American companies, Edison's dream of parity between American firms and European manufacturers in the domestic marketplace was ultimately accomplished not through product differentiation but through patents pooling and the subsequent establishment of the Motion Picture Patents Company. However, the success of the Western did establish the Selig and Essanay companies in the vanguard of American cinema as the realism, action and authenticity of their on-location pictures repeatedly attracted the ac-

colades of the national trade magazines.⁵⁴ Selig and Essanay also unexpectedly benefitted from the shortage of new films available for the nickelodeons⁵⁵ immediately following the formation of the M.P.P.C. on 9 September 1908. Exhibitors nationwide, and particularly in the urban east coast nickelodeons, rebooked their earlier Western productions since they had become their patrons' favorite form of motion picture entertainment.⁵⁶

As could be expected, the popularity of the on-location Westerns spawned a host of Eastern-made imitations, but unlike the approval afforded the realistic productions, the ersatz Westerns met with consistent condemnation.⁵⁷ The majority of these low-budget pictures came from the newly established Independent manufacturers and while these Eastern Westerns initially were screened by exhibitors anxious for first run films, their appeal quickly waned. *The New York Dramatic Mirror* addressed an editorial to the exhibitors' resistance to shoddy Independent productions which succinctly summarized the problem:

It is with sincere regret that the *Mirror* is forced to again record a week of releases of Independent pictures that merit hardly any praise. No wonder there is a cry going up from Independent exhibitors for improvement in quality.⁵⁸

By mid-1909, critics and spectators alike repeatedly derided the Eastern Westerns as amateurish and reiterated time and again that "cowboys, Indians and Mexicans must be seen in proper scenic backgrounds to convey any impression of reality."⁵⁹ Viewed as a novel addition only two years earlier, authentic locale and

⁴⁹ For release dates and capsule scenarios of a cross section of Westerns produced in 1908, see: *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 4 July 1908, p. 7; 11 July 1908, p. 7; 8 August 1908, p. 7; 15 August 1908, p. 7; 29 August 1908, p. 7; 9 September 1908, p. 9; 26 September 1908, p. 9; 28 November 1908, p. 8; *Moving Picture World*, 25 January 1908, p. 61; 27 June 1908, pp. 541 and 546; 8 August, 1908, p. 110; 19 December 1908, p. 512; *Variety*, 29 August 1908.

⁵⁰ *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 1 August 1908, p. 7.

⁵¹ *Moving Picture World*, 19 December 1908, p. 512.

⁵² *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 1 August 1908, p. 7; *Moving Picture World*, 27 June 1908, p. 512.

⁵³ Whether *Texas Tex* would have been produced without the presence of the American wild west troupe is problematic. One Western was manufactured by Europeans in 1909. Entitled *A Western Hero* and filmed by Pathé in Paris, the picture was caustically dismissed as a strange assemblage of customs, costumes and surroundings and derided for not being either authentic or American "by the longest stretch of the imagination." See: *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 10 July 1909, p. 15; *Moving Picture World*, 3 July 1909, p. 12; *Moving Picture World*, 31 July 1909, p. 151.

⁵⁴ *Moving Picture World*, 23 January 1909, p. 104; *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 9 January 1909, p. 9; 24 April 1909, p. 15; 15 May 1909, p. 15.

⁵⁵ *Moving Picture World*, 20 February 1909, p. 202.

⁵⁶ "Military and Indian scenes in the far West always prove strong drawing cards." *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 22 May 1909, p. 17; 1 *Record* 380; 3 *Record* 1833-34; *Moving Picture World*, 22 May 1909, p. 672. The review of Essanay's *The Indian Trailer* is indicative of this trend: "No number elicited so loud and unwonted applause as *The Indian Trailer*. Metropolitan audiences show great appreciation of pictures of this character. . . . Skillful horsemanship. . . . The scenery and action are of the best."

⁵⁷ For some examples of the type of reviews Eastern Westerns received, see: *Moving Picture World*, 10 July 1909, p. 48; 24 July 1909, pp. 119 and 166; *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 27 March 1909, p. 13; 10 April 1909; 8 May 1909, p. 16; 22 May 1909, p. 17.

⁵⁸ *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 23 October 1909, p. 16.

⁵⁹ *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 5 June 1909, p. 15.

scenery rapidly evolved into an essential ingredient for Western production and although the Eastern Western continued throughout the existence of the M.P.P.C. (largely due to Lubin's Pennsylvania Westerns), the brief outburst of Eastern Western production must be attributed to the extreme shortage of unlicensed film, not to audience interest.

Bison (New York Motion Picture Company), an independent firm which entered film production by surreptitiously staging Eastern Westerns in New Jersey (Fred J. Balshofer, the director and part owner of the company, "had an idea that western pictures were what the exchanges wanted"⁶⁰), became the initial unlicensed motion picture unit to locate in California. Disembarking in Los Angeles in late November 1909, with a ten-member team of experienced actors, actresses and technicians, within four months the plucky Bisonites were producing more Westerns than any other film company in the nation.⁶¹ The achievement of this troupe signalled the end of the mass production of Eastern Westerns and proved both the feasibility and advantages for the studioless eastern independents in locating near Los Angeles and capitalizing on the ideal motion picture climate and scenic variety of Southern California. Even though Selig, an M.P.P.C. member, completed a permanent studio in Edendale in 1909, Southern California soon became a haven for the independent filmmakers.⁶²

1910 is a pivotal year in the development of the American film industry: the birth of the star system,⁶³ American manufacturers gain control of the domestic marketplace,⁶⁴ the dynamic expansion of independent companies, the establishment of Los Angeles as a mecca for filmmakers,

⁶⁰ Fred J. Balshofer and Arthur C. Miller, *One Reel a Week* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 17 and 28.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 54; *Moving Picture World*, 12 March 1910, p. 386; 26 March 1910, p. 451.

⁶² *Moving Picture World*, 19 February 1910, p. 256.

⁶³ Balshofer and Miller, pp. 56 and 57; *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 13 November 1909, p. 16; 23 April 1910, p. 21.

⁶⁴ *Moving Picture World*, 12 March 1910, p. 398.

M.P.P.C. Films	
Domestic	105
Foreign	41
Total	146
Number of Westerns,	16
Independent Films	
Domestic	42
Foreign	38
Total	80
Number of Westerns,	10

and the proliferation of Westerns⁶⁵ all serve to underline the historic importance of the year. The arrival of D. W. Griffith and the Biograph Company in California, early in 1910, is generally regarded as the portent for the future direction of American cinema, but the audience interest created by the initial Essanay "Broncho Billy" picture may be of equal importance. Filmed on location in Colorado in July 1910, *Broncho Billy's*

Moving Picture World, 11 June 1910.

M.P.P.C. Films	
Domestic	97
Foreign	19
Total	116
Number of Westerns,	22
Independent Films	
Domestic	88
Foreign	60
Total	148
Number of Westerns,	20

Moving Picture World, 13 August 1910.

M.P.P.C. Films	
Domestic	124
Foreign	61
Total	185
Number of Westerns,	25
Independent Films	
Domestic	113
Foreign	80
Total	193
Number of Westerns,	24

Moving Picture World, 22 October 1910, p. 935.

M.P.P.C. Films	
Domestic	85
Foreign	48
Total	133
Number of Westerns,	13
Independent Films	
Domestic	103
Foreign	44
Total	147
Number of Westerns,	33.

Moving Picture World, 31 December 1910.

M.P.P.C. Films	
Domestic	135
Foreign	85
Total	220
Number of Westerns,	21
Independent Films	
Domestic	109
Foreign	51
Total	159
Number of Westerns,	29

⁶⁵ One out of every five pictures produced by American manufacturers in 1910 was a Western.

Redemption featured G. M. Anderson as the good-bad man, a role he played with such consummate skill that he almost single-handedly added a new dimension to the genre, the repetition of conventionalized attitudes, actions and relationships.⁶⁶ By the summer of 1910, the Western was firmly entrenched as a powerful box office force which prompted Charles Baumann, the president of Bison, to announce:

There will always be a perceptible demand for these cowboy, ranch life, Indian subjects which after all, are racy of the soil: that is to say, typically American. . . .⁶⁷

The western had come of age as a genre.

Despite the statistical decline in the proportion of screen time allocated to the Western in 1911 (from 20% to 12%), the increased production of on-location films coupled with the rise of such cowboy "stars" as G. M. Anderson, Tom Mix and J. Warren Kerrigan gradually functioned to all but remove the lesser quality Eastern Westerns from the marketplace.⁶⁸ The creation of popular screen personae for Western performers unquestionably benefited the genre as fan loyalty to particular cowboy types breathed new life into the standardized chase scenarios. The astute sensitivity of the film manufacturers to the complaints and dissatisfaction of the exhibitors and audiences, therefore, deflected the criticism that the position of the Western was analogous to "a gold mine that had been worked to the limit" and was devoid of further profits.⁶⁹ By placing "stars" in authentic backgrounds (Anderson filmed in Redlands, California; the Kerrigan scenarios were staged around San Diego and, later, Santa Barbara; and Mix worked in Colorado Springs), the manufacturers successfully perpetuated interest in the genre.

The final ingredient that played a factor in the continued appeal of the Western was the emphasis on higher production values, or the promotion of visual spectacle. This strategy was employed by Biograph and Bison, on-location films, which had yet to develop a discernible type of cowboy "star." Examples of this may be found in two D. W. Griffith California Biograph productions, *The Heart of a Savage* and *In the Days of '49*, whose advertising campaigns featured the unique atmosphere of the former

film ("the most beautiful California mountain scenery ever photographed . . . taken on Mount Lookout, a peak of the Santa Monica mountains")⁷⁰ and the sheer size of the latter (two hundred cowboys, eleven prairie schooners, a hundred horses and a wagon team under attack).⁷¹ Bison's solution was to lease the entire 101 Ranch Wild West Show.⁷² With its contingent of 350 "seasoned show people equipped with splendid horses and necessary paraphernalia," the company anticipated producing "the most sensational" Western subjects in the history of motion pictures;⁷³ Bison's advertisements echoed this optimism by recognizing "that the day of the ordinary cowboy and Indian picture" had passed from public favor and that now only "sensational, spectacular and massive" productions could jar picture patrons from their indifference to the Western.⁷⁴ Although the effect of advertising gimmicks varied from one picture to another, the standardization of lavish promotion of visual spectacle confirmed the economic advisability of higher budgets and greater production values for the Western in the future.

From 1907-1911, the conception and function of the Western underwent three distinct shifts. Undertaken initially by Selig as a way to emphasize local color and to differentiate his 1,000 foot productions from European films, by 1909 the staging of imitative Eastern Westerns became the most frequently selected means of unlicensed manufacturing to the entire film industry until by mid 1910-1911 the Western had evolved into a fully articulated genre that emphasized locale, characterization and visual spectacle to the benefit of motion picture patrons, the M.P.P.C. and the Independents alike. In this five-year span, the Western grew into a consistent money-making, distinctly American form of motion picture entertainment—a position that the genre maintained for the following six decades.

⁶⁶ Schatz, p. 49.

⁶⁷ *Moving Picture World*, 13 August 1910, p. 93.

⁶⁸ *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 12 April 1911, p. 30; 24 May 1911, p. 33; *Motography*, July 1911, p. 94; *Moving Picture World*, 29 July 1911, p. 190; *Motography*, September 1911, pp. 120-21 and 146, and November 1911, p. 243; *Moving Picture World*, 30 December 1911, p. 1106.

⁶⁹ *Nickelodeon*, 18 February 1911, p. 181.

⁷⁰ *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 1 March 1911, p. 31.

⁷¹ *Moving Picture World*, 3 June 1911, p. 1244.

⁷² *Variety*, 15 April 1911, p. 15. A complete description of the 101 Ranch Wild West holdings is in this issue.

⁷³ *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 1 November 1911, p. 27; 6 December 1911, p. 29.

⁷⁴ *Moving Picture World*, 9 December 1911, p. 782.

APPENDIX
G. M. ANDERSON'S
THE HEART OF A COWBOY:
THE ORIGINAL SCENARIO

The picture was produced in Colorado and released the same week in December 1909, as D. W. Griffith's *A Corner in Wheat*. Notice the emphasis on riding and the use of local color.

Scene 1. Girl comes out of house, holding some Kodak pictures of herself. Cowboy comes up, sees picture and begs it from her. She refuses at first, but finally gives him one writing "To Steve" on it. He asks her to walk with him, but she refuses and he departs.

Scene 2. As Steve goes out the gates, he meets his partner also named Steve, coming in. They shake hands and part.

Scene 3. Girl gives cry of joy as she sees newcomer. Throws herself into his arms. Playfully demands his pencil, and writes "To My Sweetheart, Steve" on the picture that she gives him.

Scene 4. As this Steve sits in front of his dug out, looking at the picture, and shows his own to prove that the girl is his sweetheart, Bad Steve sneeringly shows him his picture with "To My Sweetheart" written on it. To settle the matter, however, they ride to the girl's house.

Scene 5. Call girl out. When an answer is demanded, she puts her arms around Bad Steve's neck, but holds the hand of friendship to Honest Steve. After a minute, he joins their hands and rides away.

Scene 6. Mexican rides up to Bad Steve's dug out and tells him of a chance to steal some cattle. Steve refuses at first, but finally consents, and they ride away.

Scene 7. Cutting a bunch of cattle out of the herd, and driving them away. Steve drops his picture.

Scene 8. Showing the thieves hurrying the stolen steers along, Steve goes to the girl's house, and sends Mexican to sell cattle.

Scene 9. Rancher discovers his loss. Organization of the Vigilantes.

Scene 10. Ride of the Vigilantes.

Scene 11. Bad Steve visits the girl's house. As they sit on step, the Vigilantes ride up. They accuse Steve of stealing cattle, and when he denies, pull picture on him. The girl makes them stand back, and as she defends him, Honest Steve slips in beside his friend. Takes his picture out of his hat, and forces it into Bad Steve's hand. Bad Steve produces it as proof of his innocence, and Honest Steve steps forward and takes guilt upon himself. Vigilantes throw rope around his neck and lead him away. Girl throws arms about Bad Steve's neck.

Scene 12. Bad Steve comes to house and tells girl she must elope with him. She consents and hurries in to gather things. Mexican comes up and starts to divide money. Bad Steve stops him with curse, and leads him around to side of house.

Scene 13. Girl comes out and looks around. Hears voices and creeps around.

Scene 14. Steve and Mexican quarrel over division of money. As they wrangle girl appears, learns the truth, and steps forward. Mexican starts to stab her, but she jerks revolver out of Steve's holster, and covers them both. Makes Steve hand her the money, write a confession, and then forces them to mount the same horse and jump the country.

Scene 15. Girl mounts horse and starts on her ride to save Honest Steve from lynching.

Scene 16. Girl riding.

Scene 17. Vigilantes riding with Honest Steve in their midst.

Scene 18. As they are about to hang Steve, girl rides up. Hands over money, shows confession and lifts the rope off his neck.

Scene 19. Girl gives Honest Steve another picture with "To my future husband" written on it.

Moving Picture World
14 December 1909, p. 801.