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Mining the Movie Museum: The Mutoscope Collection at the National Museum of American History

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Mining the Movie Museum: The Mutoscope Collection at the National Museum of American History

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in American Studies from The College of William & Mary

by

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

- Acknowledgements 2
- Contents 3
- List of Illustrations 4
- Introduction 5
- Chapter 1: Museums and the Valuation of Popular Culture 17
- Chapter 2: Collecting Cinema: the History of American Movie Museums 34
- Chapter 3: Mutoscopes and the Photographic History Collection 59
- Conclusion: Mining the Museum 77
- Bibliography 84
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1  Charles Willson Peale’s *The Artist in his Museum*, 1822  19

Fig. 2: Exhibit script panel from NMAH Hall of Photography  35

Fig. 3: Illustration of a portable Mutoscope viewer  41

Fig. 4: Illustration of a woman using a Mutoscope viewer  42

Fig. 5: Mutoscope title cards in the NMAH Mutoscope Collection  44

Fig. 6: Motion picture exhibit at Arts & Industries ca. 1946  62

Fig. 7: John Sloan’s *Fun, One Cent*, 1905  65

Fig. 8: Russell Lee’s *Boys looking at penny movies at South Louisiana State Fair*, 1938  67

Fig. 9: Mutoscope viewer on display at Arts & Industries, March 1962  69

Fig. 10: The Amusement Arcade & Mutoscope display at NMAH, 1992  72
In the summer of 2007, I was an intern in the Photographic History Collection at the National Museum of American History (NMAH) in Washington, D.C. Though I began the internship anything but an expert in the history of photography, I had the good fortune of working under curator Shannon Perich. A young, dynamic curator in an old, static Smithsonian museum, Perich believed that one of the best ways to steward the nation’s collections was to attract enthusiastic interns, give them the freedom to design their own projects, and encourage them to research and write about the collections they encountered. Given this free reign to explore the collections of Photographic History, I discovered a significant group of objects related to the invention of the motion picture that demanded attention.

My experience with the history of film was limited to an introductory course on Cinema and Modernity that I had taken at William & Mary, and yet I recognized many of the names that I saw on the catalog cards and objects boxes in the storage room. I knew that William Kennedy Laurie Dickson, the Latham brothers, and Charles Francis Jenkins were among pioneers of cinema, but I hadn’t been told that the museum had a particularly strong motion picture collection. Browsing through the department’s catalog card files, I found references to hundreds of movie cameras, projectors, and film prints of which I hadn’t seen traces in the collection storage room. I would soon discover that this collection of cinema history objects was one of the most significant in the world, and one of the most tragically understudied. In the course of cataloging the scope and content of this extraordinary collection, I began to research a group of objects related to a specific early motion picture technology: the Mutoscope.
Perich gave me a brief primer on the subject, explaining that it was a medium of exhibition to individual spectators based on the principle of a photographic flip-book mounted on a metal hub, and viewed through a “peep show” type cabinet, but she could tell me little about the collection’s history or relative significance. One day, she took me to a nondescript steel cabinet in the hallway of the 5th floor offices of the museum, opened it, and revealed some twenty of these Mutoscope reels of varying age and condition, all without tags or records on provenance or acquisition. She and Michelle Delaney, her co-curator in Photographic History, had inherited the Mutoscope reels among the nearly quarter of a million objects contained within their division, and had never had the resources and time to devote to the orphaned collection.

As a student of material culture, this was a challenge into which I could sink my teeth. Over the course of the two summers I spent working on the motion picture collections at the museum, I probed the history of this seemingly forgotten but incredibly important trove of film history. The National Museum of American History’s Mutoscope Collection is an unparalleled and neglected cache of objects - movie reels, posters, cameras and viewers - illustrating the history of the first commercially viable medium of film exhibition. The collection bears the stamp of William Kennedy Laurie Dickson, the engineer whose work gave birth to the motion picture while in the employ of Thomas Edison in the early 1890s.1 Soon after, Dickson helped found the American Mutoscope Company to compete directly with Edison’s motion picture concern, and he directed, produced, and starred in a number of early films, some of which are represented

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1 Though crediting any single inventor with the development of such a technology must acknowledge the large contributions of forerunners and contemporaries, Paul Spehr, in The Man Who Made Movies: W. K. L. Dickson, David Robinson, in From Peep Show to Palace, and Charles Musser, in The Emergence of Cinema, are among the scholars who now largely credit him with the invention of the modern movie.
in the museum’s Mutoscope reel collection. Dickson’s involvement makes the collection especially remarkable.

Among the 59 Mutoscope reels that I eventually found in the collection, at least four are entire or partial “lost films” from the earliest days of movie production. The recovery of the reels is a major event considering the canonical reputation of the American Mutoscope & Biography Company deposits at the Library of Congress. It has been generally accepted among film archivists that the LOC collection is a complete archive of extant Mutoscope pictures; any AM&B film not in their vaults is probably lost forever.² It is true that there is likely little existing film outside of the Library of Congress’ collections, since early nitrate stock is as flammable as it is rare. The survival of the Mutoscope reels at National Museum of American History, however, is undoubtedly due to their paper composition. The movies are printed on cards that are mounted on metal hubs, a seemingly odd and ephemeral construction, but one that preserved them for decades longer than the film from which they were printed, even in the less than ideal conditions in which I found them at the museum. Having determined the significance of this collection, I was encouraged to do all that I could to research its history and discover the causes of its neglect and obscurity throughout the years.

As incredible as it was that these reels were almost unknown among film scholars, it was even more surprising to discover that past curators of the department had given them little serious attention since they were first acquired in the early- to mid- twentieth century. When the National Museum of History and Technology opened on the National Mall in 1964, it concentrated the Smithsonian departments devoted to collecting the history of American technology, including the photographic division, into one building,

² Paul Spehr, personal interview, July 7, 2008.
with one mission. The new museum was to be a national exhibition of American ingenuity, innovation, and industry. As far as the Mutoscope cameras and other apparatus pertained to the story of the invention and innovation of the motion picture, the photographic curators’ arms were wide open to the acquisition of such material. The Mutoscope reels, the movie media created and played by the machines, were more problematic. The nature of collecting popular media in museums is such that the actual content – be it a periodical, film, or sound recording – is often divorced from the objects which might help explain its production and reception. In the case of motion pictures, over the course of the twentieth century, this trend was codified into a “gentleman’s agreement” among major Federal history collections. The Smithsonian’s photographic collection unit would accession the machines used to capture, edit, and exhibit movies, and the Library of Congress and National Archives would archive the media – the posters, films, and other created content. The existence of the relatively comprehensive collection of Mutoscope objects in the National Museum of American History, therefore, affords a rare opportunity to study and critique the collecting philosophy which has guided curators’ attempts to document movie culture.

Although museum theorists have long debated whether objects in a history museum have the ability to “speak for themselves”, I believe that the fundamental role of history curators is to construct historical knowledge from objects, and in the process, give them meaning and value. Material objects have the capacity for economic, personal, and cultural value at all stages of their existence, from creation to functional use, disuse, and

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3 I first heard this phrase employed by Charles McGovern, professor of American Studies and History at the College of William & Mary, and the general idea was verified in interviews with Library of Congress Film Archivist Paul Spehr (7-7-2008) and NMAH Archivist David Haberstich (6-30-2008), both of whom were actively employed at their respective agencies in the 1960s through 1990s.
discarding or reuse. Curators of history, by nature of their training in material culture and demonstration of responsible scholarship, claim the power and civic responsibility to interrupt the natural cycle of an object’s use and disuse, to remove the object and place it in an atemporal space where they assign it specific historic and cultural value. History curators try to extract the significance of an object in a past social, economic, and cultural context to create historical narratives - in essence, writing history from objects.

Recently, cultural historians Paul Gorman and Lawrence Levine have examined how intellectuals in the first half of the twentieth century created and propagated a hierarchy of lowbrow and highbrow culture to understand and assert social control in the pluralistic modern age of mass media. Curators of art and culture were among the brain workers who helped enforce this hierarchy, and most would have been loath to elevate something as vulgar as an amusement park peep show viewer to an equivalent status with the highbrow works which comprised most museum collections at the time. Contemporary history curators derived their cultural power and livelihoods from their ability to create compelling narratives to explain the world around them, as long as the stories they told upheld the values important to the elite class that funded and sustained their institutions.

Late-nineteenth century museum benefactors had reshaped the American museum from an experimental egalitarian center of public education to a hierarchy-enforcing symbolic space for the enactment of ritualistic acculturation to a middle-class, “civilized” American norm. The decidedly “highbrow” course that such institutions charted was diametrically opposed to what elite benefactors perceived as the dangerous pluralistic world of increasingly popular mass entertainment, the content of which was much more
difficult to control. Heavily-attended diversions like movies, where the media’s message might just as well be propagandist, subversive, or purely titillating as high-minded and uplifting, were particularly suspect, and thus branded lowbrow. Curators would therefore only reluctantly collect objects relating to motion picture history through the first several decades of cinema’s existence.

As a museum collection representative of this early motion picture culture, and without clear provenance or established historical value, the Mutoscopes at the NMAH are problematic and intriguing. The collection is additionally significant because of the particularly lowbrow reputation of the Mutoscope format by the mid-twentieth century, when the majority of the museum’s reels were acquired. Departmental documentation shows that contemporary curators of Photographic History treated this collection as a representative slice of a second-class, crude form of film that at its best had only very recently become an object of historical interest. Mutoscope viewers were still found in amusement venues in the 1960s, but by then, subjects shown in the machines were very often “girlie” films, short comic gags, or the most sensational clips from newsreels by that time, having long been surpassed by the more popular exhibition method of projection for more mainstream narrative films. Indeed, many of the museum’s most noteworthy reels may have been almost accidentally acquired in an attempt to exhibit coin-operated Mutoscope machines as money-making exhibition props in the museum’s Hall of Photography. The reels, therefore, were not saved to advance curators’ intellectual agenda to study film history, but rather, to bolster photographic curators’ hopes to raise revenue from their display.⁴

⁴ David Haberstich, Personal interview, June 30, 2008.
The mistreatment of this group of objects now seems particularly unjust and short-sighted because of developments in the field of public history in the intervening years which enhanced the potential value of the collection. Since the 1960s, American historians have expanded the parameters of their inquiries in order to come to a more objective understanding of the past. They have focused particular attention on the study of the vernacular and mass culture. More recent generations of curators have rejected paternalistic and prejudiced ideas about the malleability of less educated audiences to mass media messages and intellectuals’ duty to act as arbiters of culture. Instead, modern curators have come to acknowledge that individuals exert some agency over the meanings they derive from mass and popular culture and have sought to understand popular culture’s connection to issues of race, gender, and class. During the 1960s, the left-leaning new social history made common people the subject of historical interpretation, and marginalized groups reasserted their place in narratives of American history. In light of these transformative changes in the nature of historical scholarship, museum collections such as the Mutoscopes at the National Museum of American History, which have long suffered obscurity and neglect due to their negative valuation under the old regime of highbrow curators, deserve a second look.

In the decades following the mid-twentieth century changes in popular historical methodology, public historians articulated a professional mission to bridge these historiographical gaps. Museum exhibits have come to accept and reflect the social historians’ critiques of narrowly-defined hierarchies and repressed minority representation. In 1992, artist Fred Wilson created a unique exhibit at the Baltimore

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Historical Society entitled *Mining the Museum* in which overlooked objects from the Society’s collections were used to tell the story of minority groups’ exclusion from traditional historical narratives. The exhibit reevaluated the history and context of objects not previously considered germane to the African-American or Native American experience in Baltimore. Eighteenth century slave shackles were placed on a table alongside an elite planter’s ornate silver tea set, emphasizing the cruel dichotomy of Maryland slaves’ lives. A room was filled with cigar store Indian figures facing away from visitors and toward a wall lined with twentieth century portraits of Native Americans. Each figure was labeled with an individual name, emphasizing the human subjects they represented rather than the generalized culture of advertising and racial portraiture for which they were created.\(^6\) Wilson’s controversial exhibit challenged museum curators to mine their own collections, to reevaluate and recontextualize similarly overlooked or misinterpreted objects in light of historiographical change. This is an essential project for modern curators, whose task of creating historical meaning with objects necessarily includes the reinterpretation of existing collections alongside acquisition of the new.

Beyond the objects themselves, it is equally important to examine the documentation and particular history of an object once it has been removed from the greater cultural marketplace, marked for conservation, and assigned a specific value within the museum. In recent years, scholars have begun to recontextualize institutions like museums not just as places for researching culture, but as legitimate objects of study in themselves. These scholars recognize that museums serve as dynamic spaces for asserting and contesting ideas and that curators play a role in asserting a set of cultural

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values. Investigating the history of specific museums’ changing collection and exhibition policies through institutional resources illuminates the relationship of material culture and social norms, as well as the process by which institutions such as museums establish and maintain their claims to cultural legitimacy.

For example, Haidee Wasson’s 2005 book *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* details the evolution of the Film Library at MoMA, the first American motion picture archive, and how the museum’s curators sought to give legitimacy to film as a modern art in order to advance their institutional objectives. The Film Library’s success gave canonical status to its burgeoning collection, precipitated the rise of Film Studies as an academic discipline, and paved the way for other museums to collect film, albeit topically limited to the selection criteria set by MoMA. Caroline Jane Frick’s 2005 University of Texas PhD dissertation argues for film archives’ complicity in the creation of national heritage, and examines how the earliest archives utilized their legitimizing power to create American cinema heritage. Paul Gorman, in his *Left Intellectuals and Popular Culture in Twentieth-Century America* and Lawrence Levine, in *Highbrow/Lowbrow* both investigate American museums to make similar points about their increasing importance to late nineteenth and early twentieth century society. They assert that museum officials were among a larger group of white collar cultural workers who justified their existence in the changing world of modern America by identifying themselves as cultural arbiters, worthy objects of elite support because of their civic role in upholding social norms and hierarchies.

In light of this emerging scholarship, I analyze accession and research files as cultural documents that illuminate not only institutional procedures and politics but also
the meanings of particular objects in a greater cultural context. In investigating the Mutoscope Collection’s documentation, I immersed myself in a series of longstanding debates regarding the cultural value of mass entertainment, the criteria for preservation in the nation’s collections, and the proper candidates whose history deserves preservation and interpretation by government-supported museums. When these ideas change over time, the resultant reevaluations of collections within a museum can create conflict but also provide an opportunity to revise a historical interpretation to present a more complex, inclusive, and accurate narrative.

The Mutoscope Collection is now properly catalogued, documented, and rehoused to meet current archival standards, and it has been revalued as an integral component of the Photographic History Collection at the National Museum of American History. With this thesis, I hope to focus attention on this previously overlooked but remarkable collection of artifacts from the early days of the film industry, and to invite scholars to explore and mine its valuable content. Also, I wish to make an example of my experience of discovery and reinterpretation of the collection, to urge other museums to revisit and reevaluate their collections with objective and curious minds, to seek meaning in that which has been neglected and to assert the fundamental value of material culture within the larger realm of historical scholarship.

I will begin with a history of cultural hierarchy in American life, the creation of ontological distinctions between high and low culture, and the ways in which cultural institutions have perpetuated the division. American museums have always had a place in the pantheon of cultural arbitration. An investigation of the historical debates over what responsibilities they owe the society which gives them authority will inform my
case study of the National Museum of American History. I will examine museum curators’ power to remove objects from the cultural marketplace, imbue them with specific historical value, and to create meaningful interpretive narratives out of these objects.

The second chapter provides an overview of the early history of motion pictures, with special attention to the history of the Mutoscope technology and the American Mutoscope & Biograph Company, the first commercially successful movie production company in the United States. I will discuss how, given the attempts of cultural arbiters to assert control over popular entertainment, the Mutoscope gained a widely-held reputation as a second rate, insignificant exhibition form. Film has been a controversial medium since its genesis, and Americans’ constantly-changing perception of this medium included questions of whether movies could ever attain the status of “art,” or instead, remain an entertainment-focused medium of popular culture. These debates shaped the way that museums and archives collected and exhibited film, which in turn influenced the debates over film’s capacity for moral and aesthetic value. I will examine scholars’ recent attempts to understand how and why museums began to construct movies as legitimate art and began collecting the material culture of motion pictures as worthy artifacts of American history.

In the third chapter, I will discuss the specific history of collecting motion pictures at the Smithsonian, the evolution of the curatorial strategy within the Photographic History Collection over time, the uses of the collection, and its relative importance and scope within the larger context of cinema museums in the United States. Of particular interest will be the history of the Mutoscope collection at the Smithsonian –
its almost accidental acquisition, attempts to profit from the exhibition of the reels within the museum, and subsequent decades of dismissal and neglect of the collection until its rediscovery.

Finally, I will show how the fortunate reemergence of this group of materials offers to add much to our understanding of the pluralistic, contested nature of early cinema. My work with the collection and its documentation suggests that public memory of the Mutoscope format was a victim of American curators’ valuation of the technology as marginal and lowbrow, when objectively, its long life and adaptability suggest that the medium fulfilled an important niche in popular entertainment. The rediscovery and reinterpretation of the Mutoscope Collection at the National Museum of American History is an instructive instance of “mining the museum,” an essential methodology by which public historians complicate, broaden, and strengthen historical knowledge.
Chapter 1: Museums and the Valuation of Popular Culture

Since the earliest days of the American republic, museums have served as both producers and disseminators of knowledge, using objects to research and educate their audiences about the world around them. What has historically distinguished museums in the United States from their predecessors and peers is the way that they defined their audience, and shaped institutional philosophies to cater to it. Though elite individuals, including Thomas Jefferson, had long had private collections with which to entertain guests and conduct research, Charles Willson Peale’s Philadelphia museum, founded in 1786, was the first museum to express a uniquely American public mission. Peale’s museum and most others that would follow were institutions based upon the European museum model, that of privately-held “curiosity cabinets”, but they developed into ideologically republican institutions devoted to the enlightenment of an independent citizenry. It was the fundamentally public nature of the American museum which distinguished it from its ancestors. While these institutions have used their public educational mission to justify their existence, this justification also invites criticism. Thus, American museums have always been sites of conflict regarding what deserves to be preserved, who gets to decide what is collected, and how the objects are exhibited.

Museums’ claim to civic necessity, the vital role that they play in “expressing, understanding, developing, and preserving the objects, values, and knowledge that civil society values and on which it depends,” has given them existential justification and forms the foundation of arguments for public support.7 This power to influence society’s

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understanding of culture, history, technology, science, and art has imbued these institutions with great cultural authority, while at the same time, making them beholden to certain prevailing interests who have sought to assert control over their content and mission. History museums in the United States, in particular, because of their mission to tell the story of a diverse and changing nation, have been battlegrounds for conflicting ideas about the shape of this narrative. An examination of American history museums, and especially their relationship to popular culture over the past two centuries, will provide a foundation for the inquiry into the particular relationship of the National Museum of American History to its Mutoscope Collection.

The portrait artist Charles Willson Peale’s Philadelphia museum is often cited as the first ideologically American museum. Peale’s collections reflected Enlightenment interest in natural history. The ordering of the museum’s exhibit hall, reflecting Peale’s conception of the world, emphasized natural hierarchy and order, revealed through reason and methodological inquiry. Whereas such collections in England would have been closed to all but the upper class patrons who supported or owned them, the Peale Museum differed from its European counterparts in its commitment to educating a broadly-defined republican citizenry. Peale made a case for the American museum’s superiority based on its accessibility and pedagogical responsibility to the wide range of white men - farmers and mechanics as well as planters and merchants - who were to be the enlightened voters and citizens of the new republic.8 The Philadelphia museum, “open to the public without restriction except for the payment of an admission fee of twenty-five cents,” would impart moral virtue to the American public through the

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revelation of the world’s natural order. While the entry fee would have surely been prohibitive for lower-class visitors, the American museum in Peale’s conception occupied a position unique from any other educational institution, including colleges and universities. These museums allowed republican free men to recapitulate the process of scientific inquiry and learn the lessons of history and the order of the natural world without academia’s selective requirements of religious affiliation, fluency in Latin, or an advanced level of education. Rather than emphasizing rote memorization, American museums would strive for “pleasurable instruction” through thrilling or visually appealing displays of objects that would engage visitors’ innate curiosity. Peale saw museums as secular temples of learning for the people.

Figure 1: In this 1822 self portrait, titled The Artist in His Museum, Charles Willson Peale depicts himself physically revealing the exhibits at his museum. Peale believed that accessibility would define the American museum. Image courtesy the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

10 Orosz 29.
This high-minded, egalitarian ideal was nevertheless contested, both by showmen, who played down scholarly intentions and asserted that museums should be popular attractions, and by elite intellectuals, whose concern for the direction of American culture prompted attempts to remake museums into less democratic highbrow institutions. As if symbolic of the disintegration of his ideal, Peale was unable to convince either the national or state government to take custodianship of his collections, and his museum closed a few years after its founder’s death. The showman P.T. Barnum purchased Peale’s collections in 1848, and merged them with his New York American Museum, the spectacle-oriented attraction which emphasized accessibility and entertainment over enlightenment and education. Barnum was a product of the market revolution, the United States’ transition to a fully-fledged capitalist economic system, and he skillfully adapted the egalitarian museum as a tool to commoditize spectacle and profit from collections.11

The sideshow-like museum was certainly not Barnum’s creation, as exhibitions of grotesque, superlative, and noteworthy objects had roots at least as old as the medieval fair, but Barnum pioneered the popular entertainment function of the American museum. Historian James Cook has termed Barnum’s work “artful deception,” noting that he had less interest in educating his audiences than thrilling them, either with spectacular objects or theatrical presentations.12 Recently, however, many scholars of the history of museums have revised previous generations’ uniformly negative interpretation of Barnum’s influence on the American museum. Whether by coincidence or by popular demand, the showman’s American Museum grew over time to include relatively significant collections of natural history and cultural artifacts, and he made them

11 Hart and Ward 412.
available to the widest possible audience who could afford to pay his admission fee.¹³

The dichotomous nature of Barnum’s museum is in fact representative of the very tension that underlay museums in nineteenth century America.

As museums opened in greater numbers over the course of the century, there was a clear divide between those founded as popular attractions and those intended as highbrow, academic halls of civilization and science. Professionalization marked this second group, which increasingly included specialized museums of art, natural history, and technology, established with funds and collections donated by philanthropists who shaped their intellectual foundation. These new museums hired curators with experience in academia and reputations for serious scholarship, which they often continued to pursue at their new institutional homes. In natural history museums, scientists pioneered new disciplines like paleontology and evolutionary theory and studied vast collections inaccessible to the average visitor to publish new knowledge of geology, biology, and chemistry.¹⁴

Museums of history, technology, and culture also began to take shape as distinct entities staffed by professional curators with a distinct social functions. As the last famous Americans of the Revolutionary generation died in the 1840s and sectional tension refocused attention on the nation’s founding mythology, citizens organized to promote and preserve heritage sites like Mount Vernon and Independence Hall.¹⁵ A number of great expositions organized to showcase the spoils of imperial conquest and the fruits of industrial manufacturing institutionalized displays of technology and

¹³ Orosz 172.
¹⁵ Orosz 182-3.
ethnography, and the collections of these fairs frequently formed the basis for new museums across the United States.\textsuperscript{16} Meanwhile, the American Historical Association was founded in 1880 to enforce standards of methodology and practice within the field, and soon after, members began writing professional critiques of history museums, thereby forcing these standards on museums across the country.\textsuperscript{17}

Entertainment museums took a different route, presenting thrilling, shocking, and spectacular exhibits without paying much attention to the provenance of their collections or didactic uses for their objects. The city dwellers and immigrants who began to enjoy leisure time by mid-century were drawn to such museums because the visual spectacles they presented did not require the ability to read English to enjoy.\textsuperscript{18} Entertainment museums drew ideas about form and function from the concerts, theater performances, and circuses with which they competed for working peoples’ attention. They were not bound by any benefactors’ exhortations to educate or enlighten, but instead owed their existence to the profit they made by engaging visitors’ senses and curiosity. In the 1820s, several New York museums featured “one-man bands, learned dogs, ventriloquists, and freaks of nature” in their ‘lecture halls,’ for instance.\textsuperscript{19}

In response to the visible popularity of museums that foreswore a responsibility to educate and new, potentially threatening forms of leisure like vaudeville and motion pictures, social elites sought to enact a tripartite solution. In order to safeguard traditional American moral values, they would create their own private reserves of tradition from which they would direct public institutions to reflect their conceptions of proper art and

\textsuperscript{16} Orosz 186.  
\textsuperscript{17} Conn 28.  
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid 6.  
\textsuperscript{19} Orosz 132.
culture, and convert those with values aberrant to their system of beliefs. In alliance with these elites were the new middle and moneyed industrialists, who found such allegiance a route to cultural legitimacy. For museums to fit the regime of high culture pedagogy, they had to reinforce the hierarchical worldview that these correlated interests sought to propagate. American society after the Civil War was marked by industrialization and a growing bourgeois culture that combined to create an explosion of consumer goods and visual culture in ordinary Americans’ lives. Museums became instruments by which social elites taught people to navigate this world of material excess and sensory overload, and curators carved out a professional niche as arbiters of cultural attention. With donations of personal collections, cash, and leadership, local leaders reshaped existing museums and founded new ones to create and enforce favorable narratives of social order in an otherwise chaotic, rapidly changing republic. Museums were among the many public cultural institutions which changed to reflect elites’ attempts to establish an authoritative cultural hierarchy in American life over the course of the nineteenth century.

In his book *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, historian Lawrence Levine traces the history of this cultural hierarchy, finding rich documentary evidence of an improbably unified American public culture splitting along the eponymous line over the course of the 19th century. He traces, for example, Shakespeare’s plays’ transformation from the most popular and well-known works across all levels of nineteenth century American society to quintessential indicators of highbrow sophistication and refinement by the early

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21 Levine 176.
22 Conn 12.
twentieth century. The change in society’s perception and reception of Shakespearian drama was an outgrowth of the deliberate process of theatrical class segregation occurring at that time. In the early republic, theaters were places where Americans of different social and economic standing could mingle and enjoy a shared experience, but in the increasingly heterogeneous cities of the late 19th century, elite patrons of the arts sought to differentiate themselves from the masses via the qualifying use of the term “culture.” Some theaters began to place restrictions on and police non-decorous behavior in the audience, leaving others to cater more specifically to the supposedly inferior working class patrons, and a segregation of entertainments followed the segregation of audience. “Serious” culture developed to include the cerebral performance of Shakespeare’s plays while the oppositional “popular” culture developed entertainment forms like vaudeville, burlesque, and movies that provided a culture for the outcast farcical, emotional, and participatory components of the old, unified style of theater. Under the new cultural regime, Shakespeare’s plays were unalterable, sacred texts which low class audiences were supposed not to have the requisite intelligence or reverence to appreciate properly.23

The same gentrification of entertainment occurred in the world of opera, where performances in the work’s original Italian came to “signify the Old World pretensions and effete snobberies” of those patrons who chose to forgo the popular English version.24 Opera, too, had been a shared American leisure culture in the first half of the 19th century. Performances were widespread and well attended in American cities and operatic sheet music sold in similar quantities and alongside popular tunes by Stephen Foster and other

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23 Levine 56-81.  
24 Ibid 94.
American songwriters. The broad, egalitarian popularity of such a seemingly aristocratic art elicited enthusiastic comparisons to European society from cultural commentators. According to Nathaniel Parker Willis, the editor and founder of the *New York Home Journal*, America’s popular embrace of opera was “proof of the slightness of separation between the upper and middle classes of our country – of the ease with which the privileges of a higher class pass to the use of the class nominally below – and marks how essentially, as well as in form and name, this is a land of equality.” In England, on the other hand, stricter social codes of spatial segregation between lower and upper class pleasure seekers would never allow such intermingling.

As Levine makes clear, however, the same Victorian tendency to separate theater audiences into low and high culture factions produced a popular/classical divide in musical theater by the end of the 19th century. Whereas in 1853, *Putnam’s Magazine* had suggested the populist showman P.T. Barnum take control of the New York Opera to give the people what they wanted, by 1900, opera had been branded the highest form of art on the scale of highbrow culture. In turn, opera houses became markers of a city’s cultural and economic ascendance, “more a symbol of culture than a real cultural force.” They were places for the wealthy to mingle and engage in costly signaling set apart from the rowdy crowds which now flocked to burlesque, vaudeville, and movie theaters.25

This process of cultural segregation changed theaters and opera houses from public leisure spaces where class lines were blurred in pursuit of a shared entertainment experience to implicitly selective locations for the enactment of conspicuous ritualistic consumption. The “eclectic blend of culture that had characterized the United States” survived, but spatially segregated into high and low audiences aligned with the

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25 Levine 96-7.
hierarchical or evolitional classification of works within the art form. In the case of opera, English operettas were less cultured than English versions of Italian and German operas, which paled in comparison to untranslated Italian and German operas, with the work of auteurs like Schumann and Wagner constituting the highest order of the art. In this process of dividing formerly unified types of entertainment, popular music now fell into two categories – marches and symphonies – and popular theater divided into highbrow performances of Shakespeare and lowbrow burlesque shows. What was lost was popular artists’ flexible performance style, a form of cultural empathy, the rich tradition of audience participation in a feedback loop with the performer, and a culture of amateur participation, including the ritual of parlor music, as the lines between professional and amateur artists became codified.

Museums, too, began to reflect American elites’ attempts to enforce the regime of cultural hierarchy. Across the spectrum, curators professionalized and rested their expertise on rationalized taxonomies for objects and procedures for collecting and exhibiting objects developed to reflect changing intellectual currents. Curators justified their existence and appealed for support from upper class supporters by making a case for their fundamental necessity in contemporary society. They claimed a vital civic responsibility, the ability to remove objects of aesthetic or historical interest from the marketplace, where their value was determined by the ebbing tide of supply and demand and transform them into objective representations of a certain worldview. To this end, curators’ task was to imbue the objects with specific meaning, make them part of a didactic narrative, and present them to a public with all the authority of a sacrilized

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26 Levine 102.
27 Ibid 139.
symbolic space, the museum. Removed from their “original, functional context,” it was the taxonomic subject, and importance within a disciplinary canon, which gave objects lasting cultural value, rather than the fleeting and mutable market value they held outside of the museum.  

Over the course of the nineteenth century, Charles Willson Peale’s model of a catholic and broad-based curatorial cabinet was superseded by the specialized museum, staffed by the new generation of professional curators. The new highbrow museum usually presented a coherent, progressive narrative of the chronological evolution of its subject matter to an equally select audience of “respectable” Americans. “Serious” museums, those dedicated to visitors’ moral uplift and top-down education, differentiated themselves from bawdy entertainment museums by the use of monumental architecture and more staid displays, but even as elite patrons attempted to make American museums more highbrow, none of these institutions became completely inaccessible. The fundamental question was, as always, that of balance – to what extent museums existed to collect and preserve the superlative products of human civilization, and to what extent they owed the public an interpretive, educational experience. The debate required museums to decide to whom they were ultimately beholden, the public who comprised their audience or the philanthropic elites who sustained them. Historian Joel Oroz argues that many American museums had negotiated a pragmatic middle ground on these issues by 1870. He wrote that this unique “American compromise” obliged institutions to provide popular education while at the same time promoting advanced scholarship inaccessible to the casual visitor by the end of the nineteenth century. 

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28 Conn 28.
century. Still, while the intellectual problem may have been resolved in theory, in practice, museum benefactors and critics did exert influence over the nation’s museums in an attempt to control them and reinforce their highbrow identity.

The Boston Museum of Fine Arts is a relevant example. The museum was established in 1870 for the purpose of “collecting material for the education of a nation in art” rather than to serve as a collecting agency for the acquisition of art, a nod to the populist ambitions of Peale’s Museum a century earlier. At its genesis, the Massachusetts legislature mandated that the museum emphasize popular education over the building of a significant collection in order to receive state funding. Therefore, the museum’s first collection was a group of plaster casts and photographs of European art, rather than the originals themselves. These served as “classroom models,” and the museum’s exhibit hall was the classroom in which visitors were allowed to closely interact with the great works in order to understand their aesthetic value. Over time, however, as the museum’s patron Brahmins donated European and highbrow originals to replace the plaster casts, curators and board members alike altered the museum’s philosophical foundation to match the changes in collection composition. The museum’s Assistant Director, Matthew Stewart Prichard, wrote about this new museological philosophy – the “first and great commandment [of a museum] is to establish and maintain in the community a high standard of aesthetic taste,” he wrote, while conspicuously silent on the issues of accessibility and popular appeal that had once defined the museum.²⁰

²⁹ Orosz 3.
³⁰ Levine 151-2.
The shifting nature of museum priorities also played out on the national stage. In the mid-19th century debates raged in Congress over how James Smithson’s bequest to the United States would best be spent on the “increase and diffusion of knowledge” specified in his will. While proposals were floated for the establishment of a national university, observatory, library, or school for training science teachers, any of which would have fulfilled the terms outlined in Smithson’s will, in the end, advocates for a national museum carried the day. Nevertheless, the Smithsonian Institution’s first secretary, Joseph Henry (1846-1878) asserted that there could be no diffusion of knowledge without its increase, and devoted the Smithsonian under his watch to the production of knowledge. To this end, steering the institution away from its charge to educate the public, Henry transferred the Smithsonian’s book holdings to the Library of Congress, deflected gifts of art to the Corcoran Gallery, and fought the establishment of a national museum. It was his intention that the Smithsonian would primarily serve as a research institution.

Despite these objections, Henry eventually capitulated to congressional instructions to establish a national museum, especially when it became apparent that the establishment of such an institution would entail increased government funding. The Smithsonian National Museum, an eclectic castle-like building on the National Mall housing the motley aggregate of the United States government’s collections, opened in 1855. Still, the museum operated without an explicit didactic mission until 1879, when curator George Brown Goode brought the United States’ Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition display to the capital. This collection of historic and technological objects

31 Kulik 7.
32 Levine 156.
33 Orosz 206-212.
filled a new Arts and Industries annex next to the old Castle in 1881, and Goode used the new collection to articulate a justification for the museum. Goode was among the new class of professional curators, and as a member of the American Historical Association, he was the first to study the history of American museums.\textsuperscript{34} At the Smithsonian, Goode wanted to make the national collections into a “museum of record” which would reflect his belief that “history was progressive, its advance was incremental, if inexorable, and it moved in stages from the primitive to the civilized.” His National Museum would tell the story of the rise of American society and culture through material objects which represented cultural and industrial progress, thereby stating that American national heritage was a history of material innovation.\textsuperscript{35}

The Smithsonian Institution’s museums, while they are not entirely publicly funded, have been imbued by history and by fiat with the power to act as the ultimate arbiters of culture and science in the United States. This ability to bestow objects with particular historical significance is especially acute at the National Museum of American History, which inherited Goode’s collections and his charge to become “the major repository of the material, documentary, and graphic record of the nation’s history, culture, and technology.”\textsuperscript{36} The American History museum opened in its new building on the National Mall in 1964 as the National Museum of History and Technology, a nod to both Goode’s intentions for the museum and the national narrative to which it claimed exclusive authorship. The museum’s location, physically between the symbolic and real centers of American political power and cultural heritage and adjacent to iconoclastic

\textsuperscript{34} Orosz 241.
\textsuperscript{35} Kulik 8.
sites of social protest, enforces the power of the collections within the building. The museum professionals employed at the National Museum of American History are well aware of its cultural authority, and the power that they have to influence the national canon of American heritage and culture. Thomas J. Schlereth recounted that “when asked what great historical treasures the museum possessed, one curator at the National Museum responded that anything was a national treasure simply by being in the collection.” The museum is an inheritor of the authoritative voice that nineteenth century curators claimed for their institutions.

The late nineteenth century sacrilization of culture was a response to a series of fundamental changes in American life, among them, urbanization, increased immigration, industrialization, and an explosion of visual culture. Cultural arbiters emphasized the distinction between high and low culture that was in part based on the difference between products that were mass-produced or reproducible and those which were individually crafted. However, the idea of cultural institutions existing only to serve and protect the most sacred art or historical objects never came to full fruition, because museums and other institutions could never fully shed their pedagogical responsibilities, the sometimes lone voices that spoke out in favor of retaining some popular function and accessibility to the majority of the public. It is imperative, therefore, to think of the establishment of cultural hierarchy in American institutions as a discursive process in which the historian can hold individuals accountable for their opinions and actions in a marketplace of ideas over the meaning of culture.

37 Schlereth 390.
38 Levine 164.
Lawrence Levine cited Max Weber’s *Economy and Society*, in which the theorist observed that social “status order” depends on the hindrance of the marketplace via monopolization of certain commodities, to explain the way that curators maintained their reputation as arbiters. In the context of late nineteenth century American culture, this process involved socioeconomic elites empowering museum curators to monopolize objects (by acquisition) and ideas (by publication and exhibition) germane to a particular subject. As long as objects with historical value remain free in the marketplace, their value is negotiated by a shared and open culture, but once they are removed from the social and economic marketplace, they become the intellectual property of those who preserve them.

Levine notes that even when these cultural products were not made inaccessible to the greater public – when they were available for perusal in a public museum, for instance – their objective value was still compromised in that their specific value was determined by the “tight control over the terms of access” afforded. Those wishing to experience the objects would have to agree to the terms by which the curators allowed their exhibition, in the specific confines of the museum presentation. Accessibility is “a key to cultural categorization,” especially as it changes over time. Levine cites the example of D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*, which was originally received as a popular cultural production but over time, became regarded as a highbrow, auteur motion picture. In this case, the cinematic language of the motion picture became less accessible to its audience over time, and another audience – film critics and historians – rose to take its place, rendering a different value judgment decades after the movie’s release.

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39 Levine 230-1.
40 Ibid 234.
By the twentieth century, most “serious” museums of history, culture, and art had embraced their role as enforcers of cultural hierarchy. Those American social and economic leaders who supported museums allowed and encouraged curators to use their power to remove objects from the cultural marketplace, imbue them with specific historical value, and to create meaningful interpretive narratives out of these objects. In the process, a hierarchy of high and low culture became socially normative, and museums became places where ordinary Americans participated in the acculturating ritual of “civilized” learning. While there was still space to debate the extent to which museum exhibits may entertain while they enlighten audiences, such efforts are now necessarily subordinate to the museum’s educational objectives. The Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History is uniquely positioned and charged to collect and teach the nation’s history, but it is foundationally the same as any other heir to the legacy of the debates over the American museum. The museum fulfills its mission within the framework of a lasting cultural hierarchy which has shaped its collections and exhibitions since its founding. When the new medium of motion pictures presented a challenge to the strict terms of that high and low brow divide, the National Museum of American History responded characteristically.
**Chapter 2: Collecting Cinema: the History of American Movie Museums**

American history museums have usually responded to cultural change by embracing their power as cultural arbiters and attempting to lead efforts to sort through the material, legal, and technological implications of the new cultural reality. A classic example is that of early cinema, when an emerging cultural industry was marked by competing egos, patent litigation, and the stunningly rapid ascent of film as America’s most popular art. As they related to a vernacular, popular entertainment form, movie objects – films, posters, machines, and other ephemera – did not fit within existing museum taxonomies at the time of their invention and rise to great cultural import in the early twentieth century. Many of the same cultural critics who supported censoring the supposedly subversive messages that movies broadcast were also exerting pressure on museums, whose professionals did not make collecting the controversial medium a priority. As cinema became an international, morally reputable, and culturally powerful economic force, however, curators warmed to the idea of motion pictures as worthy of museum preservation and created acceptable channels through which movie objects could enter museum collections, either as art or historical objects. The Mutoscope Collection came to the Smithsonian’s photographic curators over the course of the twentieth century, during which these shifting curatorial objectives influenced the physical care and exhibition as well as the intellectual treatment of its objects.

The invention of film is contested ground for historical scholars and museum professionals, who have grappled with the question of responsibility since the 1890s, when the cinema technology emerged. By that time fully endowed with their
legitimizing power, museums were battlegrounds for this historical debate. American film historians have long credited Thomas Edison with perfecting the motion picture and giving birth to the film industry, a story that is still often taught in the nation’s schools today. The traditional narrative states that the Wizard of Menlo Park conceived of the idea of the movies as a means of making motion recordable just as he had for sound with the phonograph. In line with the dominant narrative of Edison’s rise from poor Ohio farm boy to industrious inventor extraordinaire, many scholars interested in the early days of film were all too willing to take Edison’s claims of total authorship at face value in the first decades of the twentieth century (fig. 2). Despite attempts of historians in other countries to advance a host of local inventors said to have preceded Edison’s Kinetoscope design (Britain’s William Friese Greene and France’s Lumière Brothers chief among them) crediting Edison had become so pervasive by the 1950s that film scholar Gordon Hendricks titled his revisionist history of early cinema *The Edison Motion Picture Myth*.41

Figure 2: This exhibit script panel from the 1972 Hall of Photography at the National Museum of American History demonstrates the long scholarly life of the “Edison Motion Picture Myth,” even after Gordon Hendricks conducted much of the research for his book at the museum. Image courtesy the National Museum of American History Photographic History Collection.

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Hendricks was one of a number of scholars in the mid twentieth century who sought to augment and supplant the prevailing anecdotal histories of film, which suffered from the same problems that plague so many histories of technology. Most of these accounts were written in the 1920s and 1930s by men who had been employed by or acquainted with some of the pioneers of cinema, and for obvious reasons remained stakeholders or otherwise, biased historians of the period. Personal relationships and the knowledge of Edison’s legendary proclivity to sue anyone he thought had crossed him necessarily tainted the accounts of such chroniclers as Terry Ramsaye, who was a movie producer and friend of Edison. His *A Million and One Nights* was considered the definitive history of early film for years after its publication in 1926, but showered adulation on Edison at the expense of others who contributed to that history.

The reappraisals of Edison’s involvement, beginning with Hendricks’ work, have provided a more accurate and objective narrative of the development of the motion picture and revived the reputation of the man who did more than any other to bring the movies to life, W. K. L. Dickson. In the words of film historian David Robinson, Dickson was “the man most directly, practically, and certainly involved in the development of the Kinetoscope,” the first successful motion picture technology.\(^{42}\) Dickson’s work is worthy of mention within the broader narrative of film history, but especially here since it is well-represented in the collections at the National Museum of American History.

William Kennedy Laurie Dickson was a Scots-American engineer whose contributions to the history of motion pictures were incalculable and extended from his

pioneering work at Edison’s labs in the 1880s to the founding of the first successful film production company in America and personally filming many of the nation’s first pictures. Despite having developed the motion picture from a hazy, conceptual idea to a fully-fledged, marketable entertainment medium, Dickson’s fame was subordinate to his employment in Edison’s shadow and an aversion to self-promotion that was exactly the opposite of his boss’ propensity for aggrandizement. While working for Edison, and then on his own at American Mutoscope and Biograph, Dickson was the first American movie producer, director, cinematographer, and editor, taught a group of assistants the skills he was developing, and made standard his sprocketed 35mm film, thereby establishing an industry. Recent scholars have worked to revisit Dickson’s contributions, and recent works, particularly Paul Spehr’s *The Man Who Made Movies: W.K.L. Dickson*, have restored Dickson’s vital place in the history of American cinema.

Born in France to well educated parents of Scots descent on August 3, 1860, Dickson spent his youth studying art, engineering, and the violin in a series of cities throughout Europe. In February 1879, the young Dickson wrote a letter to one of the world’s most famous men, Thomas Alva Edison, extolling his personal characteristics – fluency in several languages, drawing skill, and successes in amateur engineering – and requesting employment at his laboratory in the United States. Despite receiving a rejection letter from Edison in March, Dickson and his family set sail to America, arriving on June 28, 1879, and after two years in the Richmond, Virginia area, Dickson appeared at Edison’s New York machine works, asked again for a job, and this time, convinced the boss. Dickson quickly proved his skill working on electricity and

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43 Spehr 384.
44 Ibid 10-12.
magnetic ore-separation projects, and when Edison opened his new state of the art laboratory in Orange New Jersey in 1887, he brought Dickson with him to work on a special project, the motion picture.\textsuperscript{45}

Edison’s instructions to Dickson were based on the inkling of an idea that he, along with many other inventors and photographers around the world, thought to pursue at the close of the nineteenth century. The photograph had transformed culture by making it possible for people to record the world around them, and concurrently, individuals were pushing the boundaries of the art to record motion and create narrative sequences of images for entertainment value. Edison’s correspondence with high-speed “chronophotographers” Eadweard Muybridge and Étienne-Jules Marey in the late 1880s convinced him of the possibility of “doing for the eye what the phonograph does for the ear” by capturing motion through a photographic process, then reanimating that motion to produce a moving image.

Dickson was an amateur photographer and, as was natural in the days before the point-and-shoot camera and the photo lab, he possessed an above average understanding of the science and chemistry of photography. After several furtive attempts to follow Edison’s uninformed directives to transfer pinhead-sized reproductions of Muybridge’s motion work to celluloid cylinders, Dickson caught word of a novel innovation, celluloid photographic film. He built a high-speed, continuous camera for recording photographs on the film, which he cut into 35mm strips and punctured at regular intervals to smoothly guide it through the camera’s sprocket wheels.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{45} Spehr 14-15, 64-5.
Dickson’s motion picture innovations were legion. He developed the now-industry standard 35mm gauge for film and vertical-landscape orientation, built the first practical movie camera and machines for perforating and editing film, and constructed the first movie studio, the Black Maria. When the first Kinetoscope movie was exhibited for the attendees of the Women’s Clubs of America luncheon at Edison’s laboratory on May 20, 1891, the attending ladies looked through a magnifying lens mounted on top of a crate to view Dickson tipping his straw hat in welcome, making him the first film actor. Whereas Edison was committed to the idea of a peep show-style viewer, probably because of his previous marketing of nickel-slot phonograph amusement machines, Dickson saw the potential for projection, and had been working on designs for a projector from the earliest days of his experimentation.47

As was established practice in such a research lab, Edison rushed to patent each of Dickson’s innovations, even issuing interferences that established precedent for improvements that hadn’t been perfected yet. While the boss negotiated contracts for leasing Kinetoscope viewers and industrial-scale production of the machines, in 1894, Dickson was reassigned to produce Kinetoscope films. His early picture subjects included now-famous scenes of a fellow worker sneezing, a couple kissing, a strongman flexing, and a costumed dancer performing a “serpentine dance.” Dickson tailored his short films to the limitations of the Kinetoscope format, in which a single viewer would peer in to a box to view a short, poorly-lit, and shaky image. The subjects maximized sensational entertainment value within a short period of time, and Dickson’s framing of

47 Spehr 83, 239, 156, 234-236, 200, 266-267, 203, 385-387.
the action brought the viewer in to intimate contact with the performers, an important innovation over stage performance that sustained interest in these early films.48

Dickson, meanwhile, became frustrated with the limitations Edison placed on him, such as denying him the opportunity to work on a motion picture projector. Dickson was more valuable to Edison as a content producer than as a technician or engineer, and his job description now precluded experimentation at the lab. When two acquaintances, Grey and Otway Latham, consulted Dickson for advice building their Eidoloscope, an important early movie projector, he willingly obliged. Then, on April 2, 1895, Edison’s assistant William Gilmore informed his employer of Dickson’s possibly dishonorable dealings with the Lathams. When Edison declined to dismiss the charge, Dickson, already feeling slighted by the credit Edison received for his inventions, resigned. While Dickson would later call the invention of the motion picture a collaborative effort, Edison would ever after call him a double-crosser, and refused to communicate with him (although he did pay him a pension towards the end of his life).49

Meanwhile, Dickson had been working on another side project, the Mutoscope. In 1894, friend and fellow inventor Henry Marvin approached Dickson with the idea for a portable version of the Kinetoscope that could be used without electricity. Dickson knew that Edison, secure in the proven profitability of the Kinetoscope, wouldn’t entertain the idea, but suggested that Marvin try to build a movie flip book and provided some technical advice on what shape this might take. As Dickson became more involved with the group of men working on the Mutoscope, his relationship with Edison deteriorated. The Mutoscope syndicate carefully avoided the Dickson technologies which Edison had

48 Ibid 234, 331.
49 Spehr 371-372.
patented, but created a movie format and viewing cabinet similar to the then-popular Kinetoscope. In November 1894, co-inventor Marvin Casler applied for a patent for the Mutoscope, a coin-operated peep show movie viewer that would play the flip book reels the men had invented (fig. 3). Dickson’s involvement was probably fairly extensive, but records do not survive – he was one of the world’s leading motion picture experts, while the others’ backgrounds were more heavily weighted towards mechanical engineering than photography. The camera which the syndicate built in early 1895 used 2 ¾ inch wide film in an attempt to circumvent Edison’s patents, and the men found that this actually produced a clearer image. In mid-June 1895, Dickson filmed the first Mutoscope movie, a boxing match between Marvin and Casler, and in December, the American Mutoscope Company was incorporated in New Jersey.\footnote{Spehr 352-356, 401-411.}

![Figure 3: An illustration of a portable Mutoscope viewer with a mounted reel, showing the construction in which printed cards are affixed to a metal hub. The viewer turned the crank, thereby flipping the pictures, and watched the motion picture through the peep hole. Image, from the April 17, 1897 issue of Scientific American, courtesy the British Film Institute.](image)

Although Dickson and the others had perfected a camera, the Mutograph, and were working on a projector, the Biograph, the company’s name proves that they saw the Mutoscope as their most marketable asset.\footnote{Gordon Hendricks, Beginnings of the Biograph: The Story of the Invention of the Mutoscope and the Biograph and Their Supplying Camera (Brooklyn: Theodore Gaus’ Sons, 1964) 24.} Their confidence was well-founded. The
hundreds of films that the company made on the rooftop stage over their New York headquarters were seen by more people than any other early studio, and the business made the proprietors wealthy men. Mutoscope parlors began opening in American cities in 1896, and immediately began cutting into Edison’s Kinetoscope business.\(^2\) Dickson, naturally the company’s first film producer and director, created a diverse slate of subjects, from simple but titillating films of strongmen and dancers to joke shorts like *Hard Wash* and actualities like *United States Flag* and *Bicycle Parade on Boulevard*. As early as 1896, Dickson films like *Boys Bathing at Atlantic City* and *Niagara Falls* promised viewers inexpensive sensory escapes from the repetitive rhythms of daily urban life.\(^3\) These quick glimpses of extraordinary circumstances, far-off locales, and fantastic sights became the Mutoscope’s trademarks (fig. 4).

Figure 4: A woman operating a cast-iron Mutoscope viewer in the late 1890s, an illustration from the cover of the 1899 promotional pamphlet “The Mutoscope and How it Makes Money”. Image courtesy the National Museum of American History Photographic History Collection.

After the successful debut of the Biograph projector in 1896, Dickson began making longer and more complex films as well, and he taught a number of the company’s

\(^{2}\) Ibid 60.  
\(^{3}\) Hendricks 36.
employees to operate the cameras. Among these was a young engineer named Billy Bitzer, who accompanied Dickson to Canton, Ohio in September 1896 and became the first cameraman to film a president, William McKinley. Bitzer became the company’s leading cinematographer, and in 1908, began a partnership with rising directorial talent D.W. Griffith that would lead him to film *The Birth of a Nation* just five years later.\(^{54}\)

The Biograph developed a reputation for superior projection because it used the wider and more stable film stock that Dickson had developed to avoid infringement on Edison’s patents. It became the dominant projector in the field, and was forcing competitors out of business, by the end of 1896, and in 1899, the company changed its name to American Mutoscope and Biograph.\(^{55}\)

Still, Mutoscope viewers remained the company’s lifeblood through its first decade of existence. Motion picture shows were luxuries, and the twenty-five cent admission that many theaters charged was indeed expensive for many working class Americans, but movies became extremely popular in the early years of the twentieth century, especially when people could experience them in a form that was “inexpensive, brief, and, especially, accessible.”\(^{56}\) These factors gave the Mutoscope a popular lifespan far beyond that of its direct competitors, including Edison’s Kinetoscope. Local entrepreneurs in cities across America, many of them immigrants, integrated Mutoscopes in to their amusement parks, penny arcades, and even movie theater lobbies. They could order reels for the machines from a vast back catalog, thereby keeping their machine’s subjects fresh and relevant to the clienteles that they served. The price of a Mutoscope show, usually one cent, was much cheaper than that of a projected movie screening, and

\(^{54}\) Hendricks 41-43.  
\(^{55}\) Ibid 65.  
the shorter length of the film gave patrons the choice of watching as much as they wanted. Longer features were often broken into shorter segments to be made into Mutoscope shorts, and in this setup, viewers could pick which scenes warranted their entertainment dollar. Title cards above the machines advertised the subject shown within, and could either offer a tantalizing teaser to entice a patron to view the reel, or, just as often, included ample pictures and descriptions to help viewers make their choice (fig. 5).

![Figure 5: Three Mutoscope title cards from the Photographic History Collection, representative of the enticing and sensational nature of these posters, which encouraged viewers to exercise choice. Images courtesy the National Museum of American History.](image)

American Mutoscope and Biograph followed trends in the emerging motion picture industry and, by 1904, switched the focus of their production schedule to longer-length narrative feature films meant for projection.^{57} The following year, the first Nickelodeon opened in Pittsburgh, and around the country, and the cinema became a national obsession. Contemporary accounts pay testimony to the fact that movies

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^{57} Robinson 125.
appealed to everyone, “rich and poor, intelligent and unintelligent,” and that theater audiences contained people of all ethnic and class backgrounds.\(^58\) For some movie-goers, especially immigrants, the movie-going experience may have been one of acculturation to American consumerist and social values.\(^59\) In other instances, the darkened and unchaperoned corners of leisure places like movie houses offered an opportunity to evade and challenge such social codes. Moral reformers soon began decrying the negative influence of motion pictures in working class neighborhoods, where they saw “crowds of men and women, unescorted girls and unsupervised young children studying lurid posters, streaming into one theater and out of another…couples paying more attention to each other than to the movie.”\(^60\)

At the same time increased competition between movie companies as well as between cinema and other forms of urban leisure like burlesque and vaudeville forced producers to loosen standards on film content. In the early 1900s, popular films like *Trapeze Disrobing Act*, *The Corset Model*, and *From Showgirl to Burlesque Queen* pushed the limits on sexual content, featuring near-nudity, actresses in tight-fitting leotards, and heavy doses of sexual innuendo. *How They Do Things on the Bowery* and *The Execution of Czolgosz with Panorama of Auburn Prison* were among an emerging genre of crime and execution films that sought to shock and thrill with scenes of violence and degeneration.\(^61\) It wasn’t soon before moral reformers began calling theaters

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\(^{58}\) Robinson 94.


\(^{60}\) Sklar, *Movie-Made America* 19.

\(^{61}\) Ibid 23.
“recruiting stations of vice” and calling for the formation of local censorship boards to “uplift, ennoble, and purify” film content.\textsuperscript{62}

To critics of cinema culture, there was something fundamentally unsettling about the socially, economically, and ethnically mixed audiences that were meeting in darkened spaces to watch films of uncertain moral value. Many conservative commentators worried as much about the milieu as the substance of the films. Such critics believed that motion picture technology had empowered Jews, immigrants, and other social undesirables who produced and exhibited films to “[project] their grotesque exaggeration, their extravagance, violence and sexual license, on a screen as large as the world.”\textsuperscript{63} Modernity had apparently removed the traditional restraints on popular entertainment as the popularity of movie-going was a visible reminder of the brisk pace of technological change, the working class’s newfound leisure time and independence, and the growing number of immigrants in American cities. The attempts of wealthy urban elites to redirect workers’ leisure hours to such culturally enlightening institutions as museums, libraries, opera houses, and parks seemed to have faltered against the novel and uncontrollable attraction of the movie theater.\textsuperscript{64} Ironically, the same elite individuals who had encouraged such institutions to cultivate a more highbrow, selective audience a generation before now realized working people weren’t interested in patronizing them.

None of these commentators could deny, however, that by the late 1920s, film culture had entered and began to dominate national popular culture. Intellectuals mounted a persistent set of criticisms against this mass culture, which they judged to be a

\textsuperscript{62} Robinson 109.
\textsuperscript{63} Sklar, \textit{Movie-Made America} 104.
corrupting force in American life. Cinema culture was the foremost representation of the ways that immigration, technological change, and modernity challenged traditional American lifestyles, and so perhaps their fear is understandable. Conservative intellectuals condemned the crassness and vulgarity of modern popular culture as manifested in film while, meanwhile, leftists fretted over the masses’ susceptibility to propagandist or immoral mass media messages.65

There were documentary and didactic uses for the motion picture, of course, and educational institutions used films for this purpose from the earliest days of the medium’s existence. Charles Musser and Carol Nelson’s *High-Class Moving Pictures: Lyman H. Howe and the Forgotten Era of Traveling Exhibition, 1880-1920* details the early efforts of one showman to define film as a medium of illustration for itinerant lecturers. Howe was the most successful of these pioneers, who recognized both the potential of film and its limitations within a conservative cultural context. By merging the motion picture with extant forms of accepted cultural expression and leisure, Howe contributed to a “culture of reassurance,” in the words of historian Neil Harris, where exhibitors could mediate between the hope for modernity and progress and the perceived challenge to traditional values inherent in film’s early reviews.66 Howe’s “illustrated lectures” in and around Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania showcased natural and industrial processes, war footage, political figures, and travelogues through notable locations, among other subjects. Cultural institutions’ use of these educational films was one important step on the road to legitimacy for motion picture, and in turn, cinema’s defenders began to call for the

recognition of film as a cultural institution in its own right. In 1915 a commentator in *Moving Picture World* was even so audacious as to suggest that in the future, universities would be judged on their collections of great movies just as they are judged by their libraries of great books.  

The ongoing cultural debates over the value and nature of film spilled over into the museum, where some enterprising curators sought to arbitrate motion pictures’ cultural value. While there were calls for preservation of notable pictures from the earliest days of film production, the movement gained little traction until the 1930s, when film archives were first founded in the United States and France. In part, these were responses to a general demand from the museum-going public, as “film became a way by which such institutions might also maintain their own relevance and expand their mandates by responding to what was clearly an overwhelming interest in movies, their stories, and their stars.” But more often, the earliest film archivists fought against donors’ and critics’ image of the cinema as a lowbrow, culturally degenerate entertainment form, arguing that there was cultural value in the most artistic and historic films.  

Still, art and history museums and archives had to figure out how they would collect and exhibit motion picture objects. Despite the heightened interest, there was little precedent for museums that wanted to begin such collections, and a number of physical and intellectual barriers made it a difficult move. 

Physically, the storage of highly flammable nitrate film stock was the greatest limiting factor for institutional interest in film archives. Before the invention and

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67 Wasson 10.  
68 Ibid 10.  
69 Caroline J. Frick, "Restoration Nation: Motion Picture Archives and 'American' Film Heritage," (PhD Diss., The University of Texas, 2005) 4.
adoption of safety film stock, studios regularly melted down nitrate to recover its silver content, and few museums were willing to even accept a donation of such a volatile and dangerous form of media.\(^{70}\) The nature of cinema as a cultural phenomenon made movie objects problematic as well. Museums collect art objects with the intention to display these works to an audience under favorable viewing conditions. Films were created for and experienced through exhibition, and yet the projection process was prohibitively complicated and expensive; therefore, it was unclear how museums could effectively display film content the way that audiences understood and connected with the object. In the days before portable projectors and, of course, televisions and recordable media, showing films meant the construction of a specialized space, purchasing seating, sealing off light, adding musical and amplification infrastructure, building a fireproof projection box, and staffing the whole endeavor with trained professionals.

Another problem unique to motion pictures in museum was that, to exhibit film, curators would need to be able to reproduce from the original object. This was a daunting proposition, not only because it threatened to make museums miniature editing studios, but also because it countered museum standards for properly handling objects. Few museums could afford to reproduce, edit, and fix film, and it is important to keep in mind that the creation of a film archive was and still is a costly and labor-intensive proposition. For those institutions which made film a priority despite it all, solutions to these problems were varied, and reflected institutional imperatives and unique collections mission of each agency.\(^{71}\)

\(^{70}\) Frick 107.
\(^{71}\) Wasson 8-12.
Meanwhile, the motion picture industry approached museums directly in an attempt to add their voices to the debate over film through trade organizations. The industry had fought politicians’ and reformers’ attempts to enforce censorship codes for years, and when calls for industry regulation began reaching Congress in the first two decades of the twentieth century, the industry’s leading production companies decided to take action. In 1921, Hollywood’s major studios chartered the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America as the industry’s new trade association, and installed Postmaster General Will Hays to lead the new organization. Hays was a shrewd politician, and courted government officials in an attempt to stave off regulation and to establish a national film archive that might cement the motion picture as a culturally legitimate art. Hays worked to fulfill MPPDA’s founding mission, which included gaining the industry “the consideration and dignity to which it is entitled,” and by the 1930s, the organization was actively lobbying the federal government to include feature films in the collections of the National Archives.72

The Society of Motion Picture Engineers (SMPE), the professional association of movie projectionists, cinematographers, editors, and mechanics founded in 1916, also sought to use federal repositories to bring legitimacy to their industry. One of the organization’s first actions was to form a Historical Committee to collect members’ noteworthy equipment and advocate for a suitable museum home for motion picture technology. The Committee was charged with gathering a “collection of old films and motion picture apparatus of historical interest and [placing] these in a suitable depository, such as the National Museum at Washington, D. C.”73 In 1923, the organization did just

72 Frick 52-58.
that, donating a significant collection of early motion picture objects to the Smithsonian, having recognized that its Photographic Section was the best-equipped collections agency to understand and advocate for their organizational objectives. The SMPE hoped to see motion picture technology represented in the evolutionary exhibit on the history of photography in the National Museum’s Arts and Industries building, thereby injecting the history of its members’ livelihood into the established narrative of American innovation which the museum was privileged to arbitrate.  

Outside of industry groups, individual motion picture personalities also attempted to use object donations to ensure their favorable inclusion in museums’ treatment of motion picture history. In 1897, Charles Francis Jenkins offered Smithsonian Photography Custodian Thomas Smillie a group of projector parts and editing equipment related to “the development of the Phantoscope, or the art of chronophotography” as a donation. Alongside Thomas Armat, Jenkins had built the Phantoscope, the first successful American film projector, and exhibited the machine at the Cotton States Exposition in Atlanta, Georgia in September 1895. After the heralded first projection, Jenkins travelled to Indiana with one of the Phantoscopes in order to exhibit it there, but never returned to Armat with the machine. Soon afterward, Armat signed a contract with Thomas Edison, who bought the rights to the projector, redubbed the Vitascope, and began marketing the machine under his own name. Though the two men had submitted a joint patent application for the crucial intermittent mechanism that drove their projector, Jenkins filed a separate application in November claiming sole responsibility for the

74 Accession file: Society of Motion Picture Engineers, Accession Number 71052, Photographic History Department, National Museum of American History, Washington D.C.
invention. Though he was the mechanical mind behind most of the innovative features of the projector, Jenkins somewhat unscrupulously decided he would make a concerted effort to pass the projector as his own invention.76

Realizing the legitimating power of the museum, especially one with the stature of the Smithsonian National Museum, Jenkins began a campaign to make the institution recognize him as the sole inventor of the motion picture projector. First, in 1895, Jenkins unveiled the Phantoscope to America’s engineering community in a presentation at Philadelphia’s Franklin Institute, “the most important technical organization in the country.” 77 He not only received that institution’s blessing, but also their highest award, the Ellicott Cresson medal, for the invention of the motion picture projector, thereby cementing his reputation among many of the country’s men of science. While the Franklin Institute investigated an indignant letter of protest from Thomas Armat, Jenkins next began his correspondence with Thomas Smillie at the National Museum.

Jenkins’ donation of eighteen pieces of motion picture apparatus and seemingly unmatched knowledge of the emerging art of projection convinced Smillie to accept the inventor’s claims without hesitation. In 1897, the Smithsonian’s first motion picture exhibit showcased one of Jenkins’ donated Phantoscopes as the latest step in the development of the projector. The machine was labeled “Intermittent film projector/Invented by C. Francis Jenkins,” without a mention of Thomas Armat. It would be another twenty three years until Armat’s written pleas for reevaluation and a subsequent Smithsonian investigation revised the National Museum’s exhibit. Jenkins’ targeted campaign had won him the Smithsonian’s recognition as sole inventor for the

77 Ibid 4-5.
intervening years, during which he had built on that reputation to become a successful pioneer of television technology. 78

While inventors and industry groups sometimes manipulated museums to propagate their historical agendas, cultural institutions had their own reasons for pursuing and creating motion picture collections. New York’s Museum of Modern Art built the first and largest American film library by wholeheartedly endorsing the paradigm of film as art. Iris Barry, the museum’s first librarian, was an early evangelist for motion pictures’ place in serious art museums, despite most critics’ valuation of the cinema as lowbrow. In her 1926 book Let’s Go to the Movies, Barry wrote:

“Critics arise, invent terms, lay down canons, derive from your categories, heap up nonsense with sense, when you have done, the cinemas will still be open and we can all flock in as proudly as we do now to the theatre and the opera, which indeed it is regarded as meritorious and noble to support.” 79

Barry insisted that film be taken seriously as modern art and that, by pioneering the collection and exhibition of the best of what was to come, the avant garde of art, the young Museum of Modern Art would set itself apart from the stodgy and pretentious established art world.

Barry and her husband John Abbott helped to found the Film Library at MoMA in 1935 and undertook the task of “saving and exhibiting films in danger of being forever lost to public view.” 80 Film historian Haidee Wasson, in her Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema, wrote that the impetus to establish the film library was concomitant with the film industry’s efforts to gain recognition. MoMA’s early decision to become the premier American institution for the screening of

78 Gosser 6-11.
79 Frick 74.
80 Wasson 1.
noteworthy movies meant that the museum’s staff would take on both the physical difficulties of storing and showing films but also the issue of building an audience for such screenings and instructing them in reception of film as art. Wasson notes that there were no “marble sculptures of gun-toting villains or oil portraits of gravity-defying heroines” which museum visitors might, through familiarity with codes of behavior regarding classical “fine art,” extrapolate similar codes for viewing film.  

MoMA’s bold assertion that film was art did much to advance the preservation and scholarly appreciation of the medium, to be sure. However, the Film Library’s success in claiming cinema as museum-worthy modern art had an inherent limiting effect. The museum curators’ selection criteria narrowed the categorical range of noteworthy cinema - the goal was to “shape public taste as a method of reforming American mass-produced art”.  

For the curators at MoMA, the films that were deemed worthy of collecting were often self-consciously intellectual, European or European-influenced works that borrowed motifs and intellectual content from the “established” world of still and theatrical art. While Hollywood’s studio system dominated American production, MoMA curators only accepted exemplary works of feature-length drama to the film art canon, and anything that seemed excessively commercial or unserious was excluded outright.  

By legitimizing film art, making significant films available through preservation, and encouraging scholarship, MoMA’s film library aided the development of Film Studies as a scholarly discipline and convinced motion picture producers of the market for old films, which studios thereafter endeavored to save. This legacy, however, was

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81 Wasson 1.  
subordinate to MoMA’s institutional objectives, and therefore, in the words of Caroline
Jane Frick, the museum’s film library “helped define and, indeed, limit the range of
material deemed worthy of preservation and future scholastic inquiry.”

Whereas the Museum of Modern Art was primarily interested in film’s aesthetic
value, the Library of Congress began collecting film in line with its institutional mission
to serve as the nation’s copyright archive, the paradigm of film as intellectual property.
Established in 1789 to house books and other materials the nation’s legislators would
need to govern, in 1870, under the leadership of Librarian Ainsworth Spofford, the
Library of Congress also became the nation’s copyright repository. With the explosion
of visual culture that accompanied America’s transformation to a modern, industrial
society, the Library took on the functions of a national media collection and sought to
help patrons navigate the new media-rich world.

On October 6, 1893, W.K.L. Dickson registered the first copyright for a
commercially distributed motion picture, Edison Kinetoscopic Record of a Sneeze, and
submitted a paper print copy of the film with his application, marking the birth of both
the film industry and film archiving in the United States. From that date until 1912,
motion picture film prints submitted to the Copyright Office for registration were
deposited at the Library of Congress after processing. Because of the flammability of
nitrate stock, the Library began copying the prints to 16mm strips of sensitized paper,
thereby preserving the motion picture image without the risk of explosion or fire. The
Library’s Paper Print Collection, created from film prints deposited for copyright
between 1893 and 1915, consists of three thousand complete films, fragments of another

83 Frick 4.
84 Ibid 68.
85 Robinson IX.
six thousand features, and related documentation, “forming the basis of what is recognized today as the most complete collection of surviving early American films in the world,” according to the Library’s institutional history.\textsuperscript{86}

After 1912, changes in copyright law freed the Library from its obligation to keep physical copies of registered films, and a series of conservative Librarians cancelled the paper print deposit project.\textsuperscript{87} In 1942, new Librarian Archibald MacLeish reinvigorated the LOC’s motion picture collection in collaboration with the Museum of Modern Art. MacLeish’s new policy required the Library to once again collect copyright deposit prints of American films, but in this new iteration, the staff was only to retain the prints of films which experts at MoMA recommended as historically or culturally significant.\textsuperscript{88}

Between these two collections, the exhaustive pre-1912 paper print deposits and the post-1942 pool of notable American film, the Library of Congress positioned itself as the institutional home of America’s film heritage. In narrowly defining this charge to the archiving of significant film media, the Library effectively made its film collection activities an outgrowth of its long-standing mission to curate American media.

Thus, in the early decades of the twentieth century, the Museum of Modern Art built the world’s premier collection of significant art film and the Library of Congress firmly established itself as the archive for America’s historic film deposits, but there remained a great deal of motion picture culture that remained orphaned, without an institutional home. What lay outside of the institutional objectives of both art museums and archives or libraries were the machines used to record, edit, and exhibit movies.

\textsuperscript{86} Library of Congress, \textit{Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recorded Sound Division and Collections}, Unpublished report, 10.
\textsuperscript{87} Frick 68.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid 74-75.
Whereas industry groups had successfully fostered and benefitted from the establishment of archives at MoMA and the Library of Congress, there was no clear institutional home for the significant cameras, film perforators, projectors, and other machines which helped to shape the cinema. As previously mentioned, throughout the first quarter of the twentieth century, the Society of Motion Picture Engineers wrestled with finding a home for historic hardware. The minutes of the society’s historical committee speak to the members’ real fear that movie machines might not find an institutional home, thereby depriving the people who used them the professional and cultural legitimacy granted the filmmakers and innovators whose work was elsewhere preserved. In 1930, Historical Committee Chair Merritt Crawford lamented that:

> Too often the contrivances and machines built by early workers in an art, after a brief though strenuous existence, find their way to the junk heap long before their value as historical documents becomes apparent. Once in a while fragments survive, and occasionally whole machines find a safe resting place and later come to life, although somewhat battered by the vicissitudes through which it passed.  

Some movie machines did find their way into collections at such diverse institutions as the Eastman House, a private photography museum, the Franklin Institute, a museum of science and industry, and the Smithsonian National Museum’s Photographic Section.

The Smithsonian’s photography outfit was originally tasked merely with recording the Institution’s collections and continuing research, but by the turn of the nineteenth century, had begun collecting objects related to the history of the medium. When inventors and innovators began donating motion picture machines to the Smithsonian in the industry’s early days, precedent and necessity dictated that such taxonomically frustrating objects would end up in the hands of the institution’s

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photographic curators. Movie machines did not fit neatly into the Smithsonian’s existing categories of collection, but contemporary administrators perceived them as specialized instruments of photographic art, and therefore consigned them to the only department with the technical know-how to care for and explain the machines. At the same time, the photographic curators were perhaps the only Smithsonian employees who might be able to use the objects to further the institution’s own unique mission, to which they seemed at most tangentially correlated, at least in the contemporary conception.

The history of the motion picture collection at the Smithsonian is a most useful case study of the museological challenges inherent in the collection and exhibition of emerging technology, controversial media, and problematic materials. Within the historical context of the American museum’s development from egalitarian educational institutions to elite-controlled enforcers of normative cultural hierarchies, the Smithsonian Institution occupies a unique position as the de facto national museum of the United States. However, the collection’s history is far from unusual, and therefore affords an illustrative example of the limiting power of cultural hierarchy, unchecked curatorial idiosyncrasies, and strictly defined institutional and categorical objectives in the modern American history museum.
Chapter 3: Mutoscopes and the Photographic History Collection

The Smithsonian Institution’s Photographic Section was established in 1896 to provide a home for the institution’s young but notable collection of objects relating to the development of photography. This curatorial division within the institution’s National Museum was the first collection of photography in any American museum.90 Thomas Smillie, a skilled photographer who had trained many of the photographers who documented the American west on recent government expeditions, was hired as the Smithsonian’s first photographer in 1870. Smillie was at first merely tasked with taking photos, but when the National Museum’s Preparation Department acquired Samuel F. B. Morse’s Daguerreotype camera in 1888, he also became a curator. He was perhaps the only Smithsonian employee with the technical know-how and disciplinary perspective to steward the collecting of a still-new technology and art. Smillie was appointed honorary custodian of the new Photographic Section, where his task was to create an interpretive approach by which the Smithsonian, and by default, the greater museum world, might understand, collect, and exhibit photography.91

At the time, cultural elites were nearly unanimous in their denunciation of photography, a process that allowed amateurs to create expressive art, a threat to the elite sacralization of “fine art” in the late 19th century.92 British critic Joseph Pennell wrote in 1898 that photography “has lowered the standard with a public that instinctively prefers

92 Levine 161.
the sham and the machine-made and the microscopic; it has reduced the artists to a demoralizing struggle with the amateur simply to get his bread.” Cultural critics viewed photography as somehow less than “real,” and therefore, its status as an object as well as an art form would be suspect for decades. In light of this cultural debate, which shaped the way that cultural critics understood photography in a museum setting, Smillie and the successive curators of the Photographic Section (after 1972, the Photographic History Collection) were obligated to prove photography’s lasting importance as an art form, but also its cultural relevance as a technology.

The curators of the Photographic Section, who were all recognized photographers in their own right, had a series of tasks to perform as their museum curators in order to advance the cultural currency of the art. Through their choices of what to collect and exhibit in the National Museum, the curators had to battle the perception that photography was a mechanical art, dominated by amateurs taking insignificant snapshots, and that nothing produced by a chemical process could stake a claim to artistry. Given the specific institutional objectives of the National Museum (and later, the National Museum of History and Technology/American History), these curators had to also make the story of photography as told through their collections germane to the story of American ingenuity and industry.

Therefore, the Photographic Division, among many other Smithsonian curatorial departments, developed a collections and exhibition philosophy that privileged the great men, great leaps, and great machines that shaped photography’s history. The division’s first several curators had all been amateur or professional photographers, which meant

93 Levine 161.
94 Ibid 161-3.
that they were acutely familiar with the mechanical and chemical aspects of the medium. Through the first century of photography’s existence, practitioners of the art were also scientists – skilled photographic engineers – and the department’s curators saw their work through the lens of such nomenclature. They heavily weighted the collection towards technology while the smaller number media objects they acquired showcased great works from art and scientific photographers, rather than a systematic attempt to catalog the whole range of photography and its culture.  

The first motion picture objects accessioned by the Smithsonian fell immediately under the jurisdiction of Smillie’s Photographic Section. While a modern curator might categorize motion pictures as most relevant to entertainment or popular culture history, before the cinema’s twentieth century ascendance to its modern status as the foundation of popular entertainment culture, the technological correlation was more apparent. The Photographic Section became the Smithsonian’s motion picture collection unit because late nineteenth century movie cameras and projectors were essentially experimental photographic apparatus. Within the institution, only the curators of photography had the specialized knowledge necessary to interpret these machines. It was a decision based on the physical or material taxonomy which dictated collection policy throughout the institution, rather than an intellectual choice based on the social and cultural aspects of cinema culture. The curators therefore simply applied their methods of collecting and exhibiting the world of still photography to their new curatorial assignment, the motion picture (fig. 6). In accordance with their existing mission to document the history of photography through the major technological breakthroughs and the individuals who

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were their inventors, the curators collected machines. Motion picture media, therefore, was considered an auxiliary and unsolicited component of the collection. Film, promotional material, posters, and personal objects were, for the most part, only accepted as part of a larger gift of apparatus.

Figure 6: The motion picture exhibit in the Smithsonian’s Arts and Industries buildings ca. 1946 illustrates the technological focus of the National Museum’s photographic curators. Image courtesy the National Museum of American History Photographic History Collection.

Smillie probably was primarily interested in the ability of motion pictures to capture motion, as were the scientists Étienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge, often called the fathers of the motion picture for their experiments with serial high speed photography. Film historian Robert Sklar noted that “the men who invented motion pictures…were nineteenth-century men of science, and they became interested in the principles of photography and motion toys because they were seeking to make visible what was not apparent to the human eye.” 96 This work piqued Smillie’s photographic and scientific curiosity long before motion pictures were being made for entertainment,

and he collected a large number of sequential collotype prints from Eadweard Muybridge’s landmark *Animal Locomotion* study.

The section’s first accession to be filed under the term “motion picture” was the aforementioned group of projector parts and editing apparatus donated by Charles Francis Jenkins in 1898. Among this first accession was a strip of film of unknown length showing the inauguration of President William McKinley, but the piece of film was not considered a crucial component of the collection, lacking a devoted catalog card in departmental records, for instance, until the late twentieth century. In an anecdote indicative of the technological focus of the Photographic Section’s collections, he McKinley inauguration film was apparently never imaged or exhibited, and was last seen in the Photographic History Collection’s cold storage freezer in 1983.  

Like the art-focused Film Library at the Museum of Modern Art and the historic film archive at the Library of Congress, the motion picture history collection at the National Museum developed within a specific set of institutional objectives unique to that museum. Since George Browne Goode’s assistant secretaryship in the second half of the nineteenth century, the National Museum had been dedicated to the celebration of American technological achievement and innovation.  

So far as photographic history curators could link the development of film to the established “American ingenuity and socioeconomic mobility” narrative of celebrated men like Thomas Edison, collecting motion picture objects served the purpose of reinforcing the museum’s objectives. The Institution, unlike the Museum of Modern Art, had no intention of willingly becoming a

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battleground in the war over the cultural value of cinema, and, unlike the Library of Congress, never sought to become a repository for exemplary American film.

Despite these limitations, the eight curators who tended the Smithsonian’s photographic history collection in all of its appellations acquired one of the world’s largest and most complete collections of objects related to the history of the cinema. Despite lukewarm and sometimes reticent attempts to expand and care for this collection, fate, as well as the incomparable stature of the Smithsonian Institution, led independent collectors, industry groups, inventors, and movie producers to endow the National Museum with an unparalleled number of movie cameras, projectors, editing apparatus, and viewers, and a much smaller library of film prints, posters, and promotional material. The division’s curators, cognizant of the already enumerated difficulties endemic to an archive of motion picture film, never tried to collect it, and as other institutions developed specialized facilities and missions to archive historic film, the curators tried to systematically expunge such media from their collection.

The National Museum of History and Technology and Library of Congress entered into a “gentleman’s agreement” by the mid-twentieth century by which the two collections agencies would endeavor to split existing and new motion picture collections into groups of film objects and apparatus, then transfer the unwanted items to the respective other repository. This collection philosophy worked well for conventional film objects, but the photographic section’s Mutoscope collection presented a problem. The curators acquired the Mutograph cameras, Biograph projectors, Mutoscope viewers,

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reels, and title cards that comprise the collection in a series of transactions over the course of a half-century, from the first loan in 1926 to a final purchase in 1972.

Though the collection’s reels are indeed movie media, their three dimensional, mixed material composition makes them poor subjects for a film archive in most senses of the phrase, and it is perhaps principally this taxonomical problem which primarily prevented their transfer from the Smithsonian. Although they may have been ambivalent about the Mutoscopes’ inclusion in their collection, the photographic curators eventually found ways to make use of the Mutoscope reels and title cards, albeit in all violation of modern preservation standards. The history of the Mutoscope collection is a revealing chronicle of the limits of strict museum taxonomies.

Figure 7: Fun, One Cent, by John Sloan, 1905. The drawing depicts a group of young women exploring the “seedy” Mutoscope subculture of the theatrical feature era of motion picture history. Image reproduced from Dan Streible’s “Children at the Mutoscope”.

As the motion picture industry changed drastically in the first decade of the twentieth century, the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company devoted greater resources to the production of feature-length films, attracting talented directors and actors, and transforming itself into a divided-labor, modern studio. Reform groups waged especially zealous attempts to censor and eliminate Mutoscope viewers, which
developed a reputation for both vulgarity and accessibility to children following the ascendance of projected, feature length film exhibition (fig. 7)\(^{100}\).

In 1899, William Randolph Hearst’s *New York Journal* launched a somewhat successful campaign to shut down the city’s Mutoscope establishments. With all necessary caveats pertaining to such yellow journalism, the articles’ salacious descriptions of peep show parlors are among the few existing sources documenting Mutoscopes’ changed reputation once projection became dominant. One writer described “vulgar and suggestive pictures” of obscene content, made available to children for the price of a penny at such establishments as the Moorish Palace, Gaiety Museum, and La Tosca, and he urged police to crack down on such immoral entertainments. Mutoscope sales and popularity, meanwhile, didn’t appreciably decrease, but when American Mutoscope and Biograph changed its name to the Biograph Company in 1909, it spun off the Mutoscope division to focus on its theatrical features.\(^{101}\)

In 1923, William Rabkin’s International Mutoscope Reel Company bought the Mutoscope franchise, and this arcade machine manufacturer continued to produce both Mutoscope viewers and reels for amusement parks, arcades, and other leisure areas. Although little has been written about Mutoscope culture in the early- to mid-twentieth century, the viewers had a long life in American popular culture, judging from anecdotal documentary and visual evidence. Among this evidence is a series of FSA photographs by Russell Lee that prove the machines were still common features at state fairs in the late 1930s (fig. 7).\(^{102}\) William Rabkin was the president of International Mutoscope, and in 1923, he offered the three original Mutograph cameras and a collection of early


\(^{101}\) Ibid 96-104, 110.

\(^{102}\) Ibid 96.
Mutoscope viewers and reels to the Smithsonian’s Photographic Section. Rabkin may have been motivated to make the loan in order to cement the technology’s status as an important early medium of film exhibition at a time when his company’s namesake product was fast becoming a marginal movie subculture.

On January 4, 1926, Smithsonian Photographic Section Custodian Arthur J. Olmstead acknowledged receipt of six Mutoscope-related machines, a Biograph projector, three early Mutograph cameras, and two film magazines that Rabkin sent to the museum as a long-term loan. Some of this material may have immediately gone on display in the Arts and Industries building, if existing 1940s-era photographs of the jam-

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103 United States National Museum, Accession Memorandum Number 90396, International Mutoscope Reel Company Accession File, NMAH Photographic History Department, Washington D.C.
packed cases of the motion picture exhibit are any judge of the division’s contemporary exhibit design philosophy. At least one Mutograph camera was on display by 1946, and in 1954, the large and heavy original Biograph projector sat in its own display case, proof of the curators’ understanding of its importance in the development of film projection, even if it was mislabeled “The Mutoscope Projector.”

In October 1956, Photographic Division curator Alexander J. Wedderburn purchased six Mutoscope viewers from New York arcade vendor Mike Munves Corporation.\(^{105}\) The Photographic History Collection accession and exhibit files offer no evidence of Wedderburn’s intentions for these machines, but photographic evidence again confirms that the curator made the Mutoscope technology an integral part of the permanent motion picture exhibit (fig. 9). Wedderburn may have intended the open-cased machine and accompanying mounted reel to serve as a shorthand demonstration for the photographic principles that underlie the moving image, but the lack of exhibit script makes any further analysis purely speculative.\(^{106}\)

In 1971, curator Eugene Ostroff ordered six more Mutoscope viewers from Mike Munves, the last purchase of Mutoscope materials documented in departmental files. The Photographic History Collection owns sixty Mutoscope reels and fifty-three title card posters, but of these, only four reels have documentation related to their acquisition – one reel was acquired as part of movie machine collector Gatewood Dunston’s 1957 bequest to the museum, and three were manufactured for exhibition at the National Air and Space

\(^{105}\) “Mutoscope Collection Scope and Content Notes,” NMAH Photographic History Department, Washington D.C.

\(^{106}\) Exhibit photo file, NMAH Photographic History Department, Washington D.C.
Museum in 1971 from film shot by Smithsonian employee John Hiller.\textsuperscript{107} As opposed to the scant photographic evidence that exists to testify to prior Mutoscope exhibits, Ostroff’s treatment of the Mutoscope collection is relatively well-documented. As curator of the photographic collections from 1960 to 1994, Ostroff had the unique opportunity to set collections and exhibition policies during the move to the new National Museum of History and Technology in 1964. He and his direct predecessor Wedderburn collected the vast majority of the Mutoscope collection, including all of its reels and posters, and his treatment of the collection is therefore of the most interest.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{Iron_clam_shell_style_Mutoscope_viewer_on_display_in_the_Smithsonian_Arts_and_Industries_Building_in_March_1962,_under_the_curation_of_Alexander_J._Wedderburn.}
\caption{Iron clam-shell style Mutoscope viewer on display in the Smithsonian Arts and Industries Building in March 1962, under the curation of Alexander J. Wedderburn. Image courtesy the Photographic History Collection, National Museum of American History.}
\end{figure}

Ostroff was by all accounts a conflicted man, and had a mixed record of stewarding the collection during his tenure. His colleagues remember him to have had a keen interest in art photography and the history of capturing images, but the record shows

\textsuperscript{107} “Mutoscope Collection Scope and Content Notes,” NMAH Photographic History Department, Washington D.C.
that, ironically, at a time of national interest in the preservation of America’s film heritage, he was perhaps the least interested of the collection’s twentieth century curators in the motion picture.

Ostroff was responsible for the transfer of the small but significant motion picture film collection in Photographic History to the Library of Congress in the 1960s. This film collection included ninety separate 16mm prints of noteworthy silent films which had been donated as part of Gatewood Dunston’s 1957 bequest to the museum. Among the copied films were complete prints of D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*, Charlie Chaplin’s *Burlesque on Carmen*, and Edwin S. Porter’s *Great Train Robbery*.

Departmental documentation attests to his fervent desire to be rid of the film, which he couched in vague terms about the museum’s inadequate facilities to handle the material. Longtime associate David Haberstich said that Ostroff hoped to force the films through the museum’s acquisition committee, then responsible for intra-governmental transfers, based on contemporary fears of nitrate film’s volatility. Ostroff knew that 16mm film had never been produced on nitrate stock, and yet he hoped the mere invocation of a nitrate fire like that which had devastated the George Eastman House two months before would help him get his way. Haberstich recalled that Ostroff decided to send all of the collection’s film to the Library of Congress even though the museum’s division of Community Life was interested in an internal transfer.

Ostroff was not an irrational foe of motion pictures at the Smithsonian; rather, he did not see the cinema as a necessary component of “photographic history” as it was his

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mission to collect. Beginning with the professionalization of the discipline in the 1960s and 1970s, public history was defined by its methodological difference from its scholastic cousin, academic, university-based history. As a museum curator in the mid-twentieth century, Ostroff was in the middle of the debate over the extent to which public historians were responsible for the creation of knowledge, in addition to the more clearly defined role of interpreting and disseminating historical scholarship. Ostroff was clearly dedicated to both objectives, and he worked throughout his career on a broad, definitive, and never-published history of photography based on the objects in the Smithsonian’s collections. He seems to have felt somewhat uncomfortable with the idea that the museum had a responsibility to public accessibility.

At least at the end of his career, while working on his final unpublished book, he became hesitant to open the Photographic History collections to scholars while working on his final unpublished book, perhaps fearing that he might be “scooped” in his research. Haberstich noted that Ostroff was not an expert in motion picture technology and, “because of that, there wasn’t an effective collecting plan” for cinematic history. The only motion picture collecting that Ostroff did was in relation to the Hall of Photography, where he found that movie machines, and the Mutoscope in particular, were engaging shorthand for certain photographic principles – devices for illustrating the importance of photography to modern life, but not photographic objects themselves.111

The Hall of Photography was one of the cornerstone permanent exhibits in the National Museum of History and Technology, which opened its dedicated museum building on the National Mall in 1964. The Hall, which existed from 1972 to 1992, divided the history of photography into chronologically-arranged subjects to teach

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111 Haberstich, Personal interview, June 30, 2008.
visitors about the historic progression of photography’s many forms. One section was devoted to the history of the motion picture, presented through a small sample of the Photographic History Collection’s film machines, including Mutoscopes. The thematic décor of the Mutoscope portion of the exhibit, the “Amusement Arcade,” trivialized the objects presented therein by assigning them a specific chronological context (fig. 10).


The lighted high arches and Arts and Crafts-influenced “Gay Nineties” typeface used in the exhibit signage marked Mutoscopes as belonging solely to that decade, and placed their use squarely in the context of a gaudy arcade much like those that Hearst’s papers railed against in 1899. A dividing wall built between the Mutoscope objects and the rest of the exhibit physically separated this part of history from the larger narrative of photography, and more specifically, the history of motion pictures, which was the theme.

of the exhibit space on the other side of the wall. The divider was lined on the Mutoscope side with panels fabricated to resemble the Mutoscope title cards in the museum’s collection, but reconfigured and reproduced, they were merely used for illustration rather than being exhibited as motion picture history objects, while the originals were literally stuffed in a map drawer in the department’s collection storage.

The Amusement Arcade display included two operable Mutoscope viewers from the collection on the exhibit floor. Haberstich recalled that Ostroff had a real interest in offering visitors a chance to interact with historical objects, but that he also thought the department might raise some revenue through the pennies with which patrons ran the machines. Ostroff’s intentions might seem far-sighted in light of the recent ubiquity of museum interactives if not for the fact that he allowed literally millions of museum visitors to handle accessioned historical objects. The Mutoscope viewers and reels now show visible signs of this breech of professional standards. Those viewers which had been on display have scratched paint, broken parts, and, in at least one case, gum stuck in a coin slot. Most of the museum’s Mutoscope reels, which were rotated in and out of the machines during the time they were available to the public, are uniformly worn and brittle at the tops of their photographic cards, where machine parts rub them during operation. The Hall of Photography closed in 1992, and the Mutoscope viewers were taken off display and shipped to the museum’s off-site storage areas, while the reels were placed in the steel cabinet where they still lay fifteen years later.

The mistreatment of both the Mutoscope reels and the hand-painted, historic, and brittle title cards is representative of the systematic dismissal and curatorial disinterest that plagued the Mutoscope collection over the course of the late twentieth century.

113 Haberstich, Personal interview, June 30, 2008.
Despite a heightened scholarly awareness and interest in the early history of motion pictures, Ostroff, building on the legacy of his predecessors, de-emphasized the PHC’s motion picture holdings to the point that few outsiders knew about the NMAH’s significant motion picture collection. When former Smithsonian Productions filmmaker John Hiller volunteered to help sort out the motion picture holdings of the Photographic History Collection in the early 1990s, even he, an institution insider, was amazed to find the country’s oldest and most significant motion picture apparatus collection at the National Museum of American History.\textsuperscript{114}

After Ostroff retired, two new curators of the Photographic History Collection, Michelle Delaney in 1988 and Shannon Perich in 1994, reinvigorated scholarly interest in the collections by opening them again to researchers and interns, but primarily published and promoted subjects of their own academic interest. Delaney and Perich have set the goal of making the collection as open and accessible as modern technology and politics will allow in the context of Smithsonian and museum culture, but they face some of the same difficulties that have always plagued the objects as a museum collection.

As I began to research the almost completely undocumented Mutoscope collection, I came to realize that the technology’s valuation as lowbrow still affected the way that the museum handled these reels, posters, and machines. The fact that these motion picture objects still reside in the Photographic History Collection guarantees that they will always be treated first as photographic objects. The helpful taxonomic correlation between motion and still photography at the turn of the century became a barrier to scholarly and popular access to these objects when cinema culture developed separately from that of photography. The overall interpretive and preservation
requirements of the Photographic History Collection demand that its curators specialize
in the field, leaving ancillary and aberrant collections without expert attention.

In the context of the culture wars, the late twentieth century political battles over
government cultural spending, museums which receive federal funding now operate
under increased scrutiny. The Smithsonian Institution’s museums especially feel this
pressure, since these most visible national museums hosted several famous battles of the
culture wars in the 1990s. I found that the idea of using federal funds to research,
preserve, and interpret a motion picture technology once publicly decried for exposing
children to pornography and filmed executions raised more than a few eyebrows around
the museum, even in the year 2008. For further evidence of the pervasive influence and
legacy of the culture wars, one need only imagine the very carefully worded grant
proposal which might accompany an attempt to further study the Mutoscope collection.

Should the Photographic History Collection receive a grant to digitize and
distribute the Mutoscope reels, the curatorial staff would still face the vexing issue of the
reels’ physical construction. The movie reels do not lend themselves to exhibition,
except on an individual basis through the viewers. Since neither running the machines
nor subjecting the brittle reels to the rigors of daily use conforms to modern standards of
professional collections management, such a grant would require some creative thinking,
perhaps utilizing new digital imaging technology, to help exhibit the reels. It almost
seems that a curator would need to destroy the Mutoscope reels to save them. Still,
however, the photographic cards mounted on the metal hub might need to be removed,
one by one, and scanned in order to create an archival quality moving image.
Still, the fortunate “rediscovery” of this group of materials adds much to our understanding of the pluralistic, contested nature of early cinema culture. The collection will also offer the chance to study the effects of cultural hierarchy, by which the Mutoscope format suffered both in its active consumer life and when its relics passed into the museum world. At the National Museum of American History, curators’ lowbrow valuation placed the Mutoscope in a specific temporal and social context which obscured the long life and adaptability of the medium. Scholars who were barred from researching and visitors kept from seeing the museum’s motion picture collections had little chance to ask questions about the Mutoscope’s audience, invention, and niche in popular entertainment history. The collection’s completeness, including film media, machines, ephemeral material, and accession/research documentation, make it unique, giving researchers an unparalleled look not only at early film culture, but the collection’s curators must first make it available.
Conclusion: Mining the Museum

The treatment of the Mutoscope Collection over the course of the twentieth century is a case study in the mistakes that museums can make in their attempts to teach about the past through objects. In terms of the history of technology and media, entire cultures, such as that of the movies at the turn of the century, are divided into categories and split among institutions in ways that often divorce objects from their contextual meanings. When the Smithsonian’s photographic curators decided to take on motion picture collection, they ensured that the objects they acquired would be subject to a photographic curatorial department’s research, storage, preservation, and interpretation culture. The history of that collection, as it is revealed through departmental documentation, correspondence, photography, and oral history, makes clear that personal idiosyncrasies and intellectual bias will necessarily color the way that curators give value and meaning to their collections.

The assignment of a subject like the Mutoscope technology to a particular time period, the 1890s, or a particular event to which it is deemed relevant, such as the invention of film, may rob museum objects of their fundamental power to tell stories about the past, especially the histories that we try to derive from them in this revisionist historiographical age. Curators must strive to use their power to create meaning and craft our understanding of the past wisely. They must constantly fight the urge to collect and exhibit objects based on specific categorization, often drawn from the culture of antique collecting, cultural hierarchies, or strict interpretation of institutional objectives. When curators seek to limit their collections to superlatives or objects with priority, they miss
the whole picture. The division and revaluation of objects with cultural connection once they are removed from the greater marketplace and marked for preservation in a museum often leaves orphaned and misunderstood objects locked within the deceptively secure vaults of history museums. Curators are therefore duty-bound to “mine the museum” by raiding these vaults and their own institutional archives, to rediscover and reinterpret disparate and underappreciated objects to reconstitute past cultures and come to a greater understanding of historical context.

For example, in the specific case of motion pictures, leading film historian Charles Musser has written at length about the necessity of combining textual and contextual analysis of popular media products such as the movies to achieve a full understanding of these objects and the cultures that they inhabited. Musser was a film school student when he became interested in the history of the cinematographic conventions that he was learning. He became a historian of early motion pictures when he found that this field had been inadequately and narrowly explored. Musser’s background in the textual and aesthetic nature of film did not fully prepare him to confront the problems of “historical change, causality, and the transformation of film practice” that require an object-based interpretative analysis of motion picture production and reception in his period of interest. Despite the fragmentary nature of extant artefactual evidence, the first decade of the movie industry is rich terrain for inquiry into the development of film’s form and meaning, since conventions of production, subject, and intended audience were still up for grabs. Musser wrote that “we can grasp the nature of historical change in that epoch with a specificity that is not always possible for later periods,” and insists that physical examination of a range of objects from the

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cinematic past represents an essential part of this sort of historical inquiry. “Time and again, in-depth interrogation of the full sequence of events relevant to a film's production, distribution, and reception has provided opportunities for new interpretive insights. Similar groundings in archival research are undoubtedly basic to the best historical work currently being done in film studies,” according to Musser.\textsuperscript{116}

Among the new growth in this fertile ground of archival revisionism is the recent scholarly attention to the heterogeneous nature of early film culture. Musser noted that a wave of revisionist scholarship on even the existing collections in American film archives had complicated notions of an innocent, non-ideological early cinema:

“Porter's system of production (collaboration rather than hierarchy), his system of representation, and the specific content of his films articulated a coherent old middle-class response to a rapidly changing America. I have pursued such questions with a range of silent film practitioners, including Sigmund Lubin, whose films expressed a petit-bourgeois anarchic fury (as well as a certain envy) at the anti-Semitic establishment; Lyman H. Howe, with his cinema of reassurance; Charlie Chaplin, with his assaults on productive labor and industrial capital; Oscar Micheaux, with his commitment to black cultural nationalism; and Germaine Dulac, with her feminist questioning of patriarchal structures.”\textsuperscript{\textit{117}}

The intriguing range of subjects in the Mutoscope Collection may be fertile ground for investigations into gender relations, dominant views of ethnicity and class conflict. The no holds-barred, blunt humor that the short reels required in order to earn profit may make them among the most direct and illustrator sources for understanding hegemonic late nineteenth century American culture.

Recent scholarship has also reexamined long-held assumptions about early cinema audiences, as well. Whereas many film history scholars have made careers out of contextual analysis of early movies, most studies of motion picture audiences pay little

\textsuperscript{116} Musser, “Historiographic Method and the Study of Early Cinema” 104.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid 106.
more than cursory attention to factors beyond the price of a Mutoscope or Nickelodeon show, or the fact that ticket sales rose in the early 1900s, for example. Social and cultural historians are now trying to probe beneath the surface of film’s meteoric rise to become a shared American popular culture, to understand why people responded to movies in the way that they did, how they integrated films’ messages into their own lives, and what groups were excluded from the community of cinema culture. Mass media scholar Garth S. Jowett wrote that “it is becoming more and more obvious that the movies were no idle innovation, arriving at a propitious time, but that they answered a deep social and cultural need of the American people.”¹¹⁸

Robert Sklar asserted the vital questions facing the newest generation of early cinema historians are “to what extent working-class and immigrant men and women (and children) formed the significant audience for early cinema; what cultural transactions occurred in that audience, whether it constituted an autonomous working-class public sphere or was the site for the absorption of hegemonic domination; and to what degree, and for what purpose, film forms, genres, and subjects were constructed in response to that audience.” Sklar suggests that, by asking these questions, film scholars ground their inquiries on structuralist interest in the fundamental parts of early cinema culture. At the time of this culture’s formation, the ways in which interested parties, both producers and consumers, conceive of and interact with the emerging mass medium fundamentally shaped its eventual form. The Mutoscope collection, unique among museum collections in its historical low class and low brow identification as well as its extent, offers scholars an unparalleled opportunity to take up Sklar and new social historians’ challenge to

“reconstruct a past in which common people struggled to determine their own lives and institutions.”

I have thus far attempted to locate my work within an emerging school of cinema history scholarship which recognizes objects’ unique ability to render multiple meanings when curators treat this material culture objectively, and make the objects accessible to scholars and museum visitors alike. Mining the museum, of course, is a method of shaking cultural institutions out of the complacency which makes them places that stifle intellectual progress. This curatorial model may not only yield intellectual results, but also, perhaps, increase visitation and renew museums’ responsibility to local and national communities.

In the midst of the great demographic, political, and economic changes of the late twentieth century, many museums were forced to confront the reality of these challenges to their foundational collections and exhibition philosophy. In his January 11, 2009 article “In Do or Die Times, Museums Look Inward for Survival,” New York Times Art Critic Holland Cotter examined the efforts of struggling art museums in Detroit, Newark, and Brooklyn to compete with newer, flashier museums and stay connected to their communities by retooling their missions to reinterpret existing collections. The Detroit Institute of Art’s “strategic shifts in emphasis” under Director Graham W. J. Beal included exhibiting African and African-American art more prominently to woo the city’s burgeoning black majority and the reorganization of exhibition areas along thematic lines to emphasize the newest contextual scholarship in art history. The Newark Museum has renewed its foundational mission as a multidisciplinary “people’s museum” with the display of a rich variety of objects emphasizing its ties to the multicultural and

pluralistic community to which it is beholden. The Brooklyn Museum is in the throes of an already decade-long rebirth under Director Arnold L. Lehman to rebrand itself as an institution for the people of its namesake community rather than a “a perpetual, and failed, Met aspirant” by aggressively exhibiting the material culture of hip-hop and other subjects of interest to its targeted audience. In each of these cases, curators mined the museum’s vaults to gather and reinterpret objects which, due to ideological or material conditions in the past, had been passed over for exhibition.

To create the new post-modern, participatory museum, curators must strive to divorce themselves from conceptions of cultural hierarchy – supply-side historicism – and focus on how media is received, used, and altered by individuals. In an age where, as Michael Frisch has written, “the relationship between history and memory is peculiarly and perhaps uniquely fractured,” museum professionals cannot afford to forget the lesson of neglected collections like the Mutoscopes at the National Museum of American History. This most accessible and successful medium of film exhibition, a vital part of the material landscape of the early twentieth century, was discounted as an object of serious historical study because of curators’ adherence to a collections philosophy grounded in a strict lowbrow/highbrow hierarchy. Thus, generations of scholars and museum visitors were robbed of the insights the collection provides into the meaning and use of cinema in the medium’s early days. It is not entirely unreasonable to imagine a similar mistake being made today, a similar curatorial philosophy relegating Flickr images, YouTube videos, or mp3 music files too difficult or too vernacular to collect, leaving a gap in future generations’ understanding of the early days of widespread
participatory internet usage. Museums must still work to stay on the cutting edge of media development, no matter what the challenges.

Though curators can never truly extricate the realities of the structures under which they work from the collections and exhibition work that they perform, they can strive to craft history in the most objective and transparent way possible. Maintaining an open mind, curators must constantly reinterpret and reevaluate their collections in light of the most recent scholarship and changing social values, and document their own work for future generations to understand the way that they have ordered their world. This process is a vital part of public historians’ duty to produce and disseminate accurate, inclusive, and objective knowledge about the past.
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