

History of the motion picture

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History of the motion picture, history of cinema from the 19th century to the present.

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tap dance: Film

An entirely new arena for tap dancers opened up with the introduction of “talking” motion pictures. Although the technology for sound on film had been around for several years, it was not until *The Jazz Singer* (1927) that the public accepted this new medium....

Early Years, 1830–1910

Origins

The illusion of motion pictures is based on the optical phenomena known as [persistence of vision](#) and the [phi phenomenon](#). The first of these causes the brain to retain images cast upon the retina of the eye for a fraction of a second beyond their disappearance from the field of sight, while the latter creates apparent movement between images when they succeed one another rapidly. Together these phenomena permit the succession of still frames on a motion-picture film strip to represent continuous movement when projected at the proper speed (traditionally 16 frames per second for silent films and 24 frames per second for sound films). Before the invention of photography, a variety of optical toys exploited this effect by mounting successive phase drawings of things in motion on the face of a twirling disk (the [phenakistoscope](#), c. 1832) or inside a rotating drum (the zoetrope, c. 1834). Then, in 1839, [Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre](#), a French painter, perfected the positive photographic process known as daguerreotypy, and that same year the English scientist [William Henry Fox Talbot](#) successfully demonstrated a [negative](#) photographic process that theoretically allowed unlimited positive prints to be produced from each negative. As photography was innovated and refined over the next few decades, it became possible to replace the phase drawings in the early optical toys and devices with individually posed phase photographs, a practice that was widely and popularly carried out.

There would be no true motion pictures, however, until live action could be photographed spontaneously and simultaneously. This required a reduction in exposure time from the hour or so necessary for the pioneer photographic processes to the one-hundredth (and, ultimately, one-thousandth) of a second achieved in 1870. It also required the development of the technology of series photography by the British [American](#) photographer [Eadweard Muybridge](#) between 1872 and 1877. During that time, Muybridge was employed by Gov. [Leland Stanford](#) of California, a zealous racehorse breeder, to prove that at some point in its gallop a running horse lifts all four hooves off the ground at once. Conventions of 19th-century illustration suggested otherwise, and the movement itself occurred too rapidly for perception by the naked eye, so Muybridge experimented with multiple cameras to take successive

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Muybridge la  magic lantern, they produced a "moving picture" of the horse at full gallop as it had actually occurred in life.

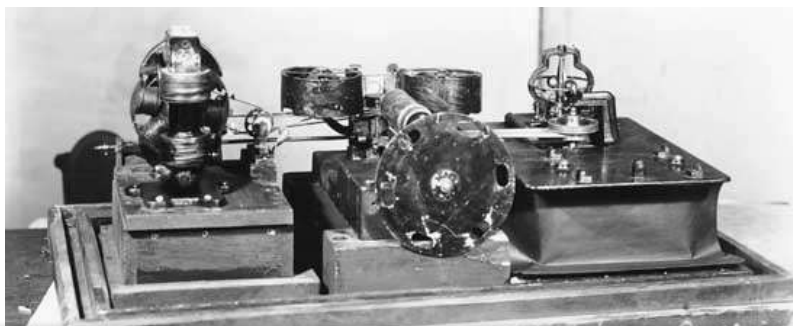
The French physiologist [Étienne-Jules Marey](#) took the first series photographs with a single instrument in 1882; once again the impetus was the analysis of motion too rapid for perception by the human eye. Marey invented the chronophotographic gun, a [camera](#) shaped like a rifle that recorded 12 successive photographs per second, in order to study the movement of birds in flight. These images were imprinted on a rotating glass plate (later, paper roll film), and Marey subsequently attempted to project them. Like Muybridge, however, Marey was interested in deconstructing movement rather than synthesizing it, and he did not carry his experiments much beyond the realm of high-speed, or instantaneous, series photography. Muybridge and Marey, in fact, conducted their work in the spirit of scientific inquiry; they both extended and elaborated existing technologies in order to probe and analyze events that occurred beyond the threshold of human perception. Those who came after would return their discoveries to the realm of normal human vision and exploit them for profit.

In 1887 in Newark, New Jersey, an Episcopalian minister named [Hannibal Goodwin](#) developed the idea of using [celluloid](#) as a base for photographic emulsions. The inventor and industrialist [George Eastman](#), who had earlier experimented with sensitized paper rolls for still photography, began manufacturing celluloid roll [film](#) in 1889 at his plant in Rochester, New York. This event was crucial to the development of [cinematography](#): series photography such as Marey's chronophotography could employ glass plates or paper strip film because it recorded events of short duration in a relatively small number of images, but cinematography would inevitably find its subjects in longer, more complicated events, requiring thousands of images and therefore just the kind of flexible but durable recording medium represented by celluloid. It remained for someone to combine the principles embodied in the apparatuses of Muybridge and Marey with celluloid strip film to arrive at a viable motion-picture camera.

Such a device was created by French-born inventor Louis Le Prince in the late 1880s. He shot several short films in Leeds, England, in 1888, and the following year he began using the newly invented celluloid film. He was scheduled to show his work in New York City in 1890, but he disappeared while traveling in France. The exhibition never occurred, and Le Prince's contribution to cinema remained little known for decades. Instead it was [William Kennedy Laurie Dickson](#), working in the West Orange, New Jersey, laboratories of the Edison Company, who created what was widely regarded as the first motion-picture camera.

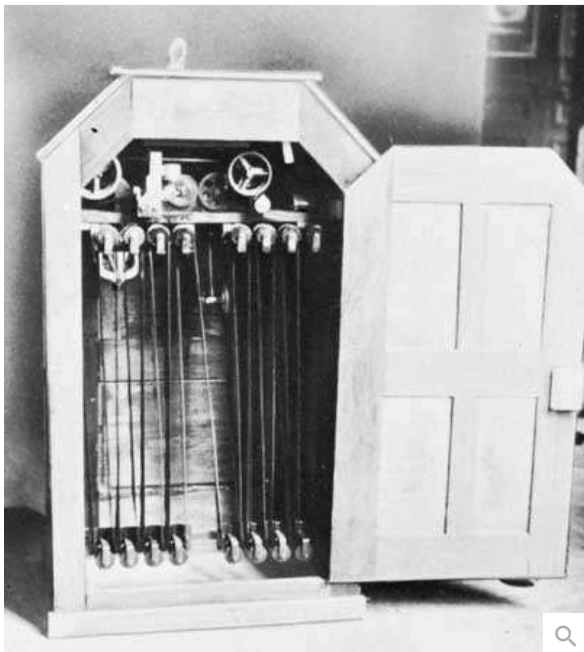
Edison and the Lumière brothers

[Thomas Alva Edison](#) invented the phonograph in 1877, and it quickly became the most popular home-entertainment device of the century. Seeking to provide a visual accompaniment to the phonograph, Edison commissioned Dickson, a young laboratory assistant, to invent a motion-picture camera in 1888. Building upon the work of Muybridge and Marey, Dickson combined the two final essentials of motion-picture recording and viewing technology. These were a device, adapted from the escapement mechanism of a clock, to ensure the intermittent but regular motion of the film strip through the camera and a regularly perforated celluloid film strip to ensure precise synchronization between the film strip and the shutter. Dickson's camera, the [Kinetograph](#), initially imprinted up to 50 feet (15 metres) of celluloid film at the rate of about 40 frames per second.



Dickson was not the only person who had been tackling the problem of recording and reproducing moving images. Inventors throughout the world had been trying for years to devise working motion-picture machines. In fact, several European inventors, including the Englishman William Friese-Greene, applied for patents on various cameras, projectors, and camera-projector combinations contemporaneously or even before Edison and his associates did.

Because Edison had originally conceived of motion pictures as an adjunct to his phonograph, he did not commission the invention of a projector to accompany the Kinetograph. Rather, he had Dickson design a type of peep-show viewing device called the [Kinetoscope](#), in which a continuous 47-foot (14-metre) film loop ran on spools between an incandescent lamp and a shutter for individual viewing. Starting in 1894, Kinetoscopes were marketed commercially through the firm of Raff and Gammon for \$250 to \$300 apiece. The Edison Company established its own Kinetograph studio (a single-room building called the “Black Maria” that rotated on tracks to follow the sun) in West Orange, New Jersey, to supply films for the Kinetoscopes that Raff and Gammon were installing in penny arcades, hotel lobbies, amusement parks, and other such semipublic places. In April of that year the first Kinetoscope parlour was opened in a converted storefront in New York City. The parlour charged 25 cents for admission to a bank of five machines.



Kinetoscope, invented by Thomas A. Edison and William Dickson in 1891

The Bettmann Archive

The syndicate of Maguire and Baucus acquired the foreign rights to the Kinetoscope in 1894 and began to market the machines. Edison opted not to file for international patents on either his camera or his viewing device, and, as a result, the machines were widely and legally copied throughout Europe, where they were modified and improved far beyond the American originals. In fact, it was a Kinetoscope exhibition in Paris that inspired the [Lumière brothers](#), [Auguste](#) and [Louis](#), to invent the first commercially viable [projector](#). Their [cinématographe](#), which functioned as a camera and printer as well as a projector, ran at the economical speed of 16 frames per second. It was given its first commercial demonstration on Dec. 28, 1895.

Unlike the Kinetograph, which was battery-driven and weighed more than 1,000 pounds (453 kg), the *cinématographe* was hand-cranked, lightweight (less than 20 pounds [9 kg]), and relatively portable. This naturally affected the kinds of films that were made with each machine: Edison films initially featured material such as circus or vaudeville acts that could be taken into a small studio to perform before an inert camera, while early Lumière films were mainly [documentary](#) views, or “actualities,” shot outdoors on location. In both cases, however, the films themselves were composed of a single unedited shot emphasizing lifelike movement; they contained little or no narrative content. (After a few years design changes in the machines made it possible for Edison and the Lumières to

shoot the same kinds of subjects.) In general, Lumière technology became the European standard during the early primitive era, and, because the Lumières sent their cameramen all over the world in search of exotic subjects, the *cinématographe* became the founding instrument of distant cinemas in Russia, Australia, and Japan.

In the United States the Kinetoscope installation business had reached the saturation point by the summer of 1895, although it was still quite profitable for Edison as a supplier of films. Raff and Gammon persuaded Edison to buy the rights to a state-of-the-art projector, developed by [Thomas Armat](#) of Washington, D.C., which incorporated a superior [intermittent](#) movement mechanism and a loop-forming device (known as the [Latham loop](#), after its earliest promoters, Grey Latham and Otway Latham) to reduce film breakage, and in early 1896 Edison began to manufacture and market this machine as his own invention. Given its first public demonstration on April 23, 1896, at Koster and Bial's Music Hall in New York City, the Edison [Vitascope](#) brought projection to the United States and established the format for American film exhibition for the next several years. It also encouraged the activities of such successful Edison rivals as the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, which was formed in 1896 to exploit the Mutoscope peep-show device and the American Biograph camera and projector patented by W.K.L. Dickson in 1896. During this time, which has been characterized as the "novelty period," emphasis fell on the projection device itself, and films achieved their main popularity as self-contained vaudeville attractions. Vaudeville houses, locked in intense competition at the turn of the century, headlined the name of the machines rather than the films (e.g., "The Vitascope—Edison's Latest Marvel," "The Amazing Cinématographe"). The producer, or manufacturer, supplied projectors along with an operator and a program of shorts. These films, whether they were Edison-style theatrical variety shorts or Lumière-style actualities, were perceived by their original audiences not as motion pictures in the modern sense of the term but as "animated photographs" or "living pictures," emphasizing their continuity with more familiar media of the time.

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During the novelty period, the film industry was autonomous and unitary, with production companies leasing a complete film service of projector, operator, and shorts to the vaudeville market as a single, self-contained act. Starting about 1897, however, manufacturers began to sell both projectors and films to itinerant exhibitors who traveled with their programs from one temporary location (vaudeville theatres, fairgrounds, circus tents, lyceums) to another as the novelty of their films wore off at a given site. This new mode of screening by circuit marked the first separation of exhibition from production and gave the exhibitors a large measure of control over early film form, since they were responsible for arranging the one-shot films purchased from the producers into audience-pleasing programs. The putting together of these programs—which often involved narration, sound effects, and music—was in effect a primitive form of editing, so that it is possible to regard the itinerant projectionists working between 1896 and 1904 as the earliest directors of motion pictures. Several of them, notably [Edwin S. Porter](#), were, in fact, hired as directors by production companies after the industry stabilized in the first decade of the 20th century.

By encouraging the practice of peripatetic exhibition, the American producers' policy of outright sales inhibited the development of permanent film theatres in the United States until nearly a decade after their appearance in Europe, where [England](#) and France had taken an early lead in both production and exhibition. Britain's first projector, the theatrograph (later the animatograph), had been demonstrated in 1896 by the scientific-instrument maker Robert W. Paul. In 1899 Paul formed his own production company for the manufacture of actualities and trick films, and

until 1905 Paul's Animatograph Works, Ltd., was England's largest producer, turning out an average of 50 films per year. Between 1896 and 1898, two Brighton photographers, George Albert Smith and James Williamson, constructed their own motion-picture cameras and began producing trick films featuring superimpositions (*The Corsican Brothers*, 1897) and interpolated close-ups (*Grandma's Reading Glass*, 1900; *The Big Swallow*, 1901). Smith subsequently developed the first commercially successful photographic colour process ([Kinemacolor](#), c. 1906–08, with Charles Urban), while Williamson experimented with parallel editing as early as 1900 (*Attack on a Chinese Mission Station*) and became a pioneer of the chase film (*Stop Thief!*, 1901; *Fire!*, 1901). Both Smith and Williamson had built studios at Brighton by 1902 and, with their associates, came to be known as members of the "Brighton school," although they did not represent a coherent movement. Another important early British filmmaker was Cecil Hepworth, whose *Rescued by Rover* (1905) is regarded by many historians as the most skillfully edited narrative produced before the Biograph shorts of D.W. Griffith.

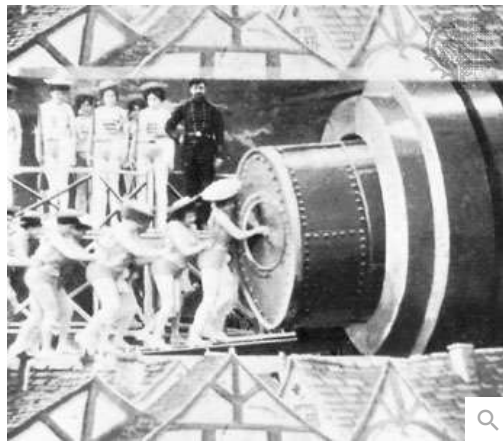
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Méliès and Porter

The shift in consciousness away from films as animated photographs to films as stories, or narratives, began to take place about the turn of the century and is most evident in the work of the French filmmaker [Georges Méliès](#). Méliès was a professional magician who had become interested in the illusionist possibilities of the *cinématographe*; when the Lumières refused to sell him one, he bought an animatograph projector from Paul in 1896 and reversed its mechanical principles to design his own camera. The following year he organized the Star Film company and constructed a small glass-enclosed studio on the grounds of his house at Montreuil, where he produced, directed, photographed, and acted in more than 500 films between 1896 and 1913.

Initially Méliès used stop-motion photography (the camera and action are stopped while something is added to or removed from the scene; then filming and action are continued) to make one-shot "trick" films in which objects disappeared and reappeared or transformed themselves into other objects entirely. These films were widely imitated by producers in England and the United States. Soon, however, Méliès began to experiment with brief multiscene films, such as *L'Affaire Dreyfus* (*The Dreyfus Affair*, 1899), his first, which followed the logic of linear temporality to establish causal sequences and tell simple stories. By 1902 he had produced the influential 30-scene narrative *Le Voyage dans la lune* ([A Trip to the Moon](#)). Adapted from a novel by Jules Verne, it was nearly one reel in length (about 825 feet [251 metres], or 14 minutes).

The first film to achieve international distribution (mainly through piracy), *Le Voyage dans la lune* was an enormous popular success. It helped to make Star Film one of the world's largest producers (an American branch was opened in 1903) and to establish the fiction film as the cinema's mainstream product. In both respects Méliès dethroned the Lumières' cinema of actuality. Despite his innovations, Méliès's productions remained essentially filmed stage plays. He conceived them quite literally as successions of living pictures or, as he termed them, "artificially arranged scenes." From his earliest trick films through his last successful fantasy, *La Conquête du pôle* ("The Conquest of the Pole," 1912), Méliès treated the frame of the film as the proscenium arch of a theatre stage, never once moving his camera or changing its position within a scene. He ultimately lost his audience in the late 1910s to filmmakers with more sophisticated narrative techniques.



Le Voyage dans la lune (1902), directed by Georges Méliès.
Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive, New York

The origination of many such techniques is closely associated with the work of [Edwin S. Porter](#), a freelance projectionist and engineer who joined the Edison Company in 1900 as production head of its new skylight studio on East 21st Street in New York City. For the next few years, he served as director-cameraman for much of Edison's output, starting with simple one-shot films (*Kansas Saloon Smashers*, 1901) and progressing rapidly to trick films (*The Finish of Bridget McKeen*, 1901) and short multiscene narratives based on political cartoons and contemporary events (*Sampson-Schley Controversy*, 1901; *Execution of Czolgosz, with Panorama of Auburn Prison*, 1901). Porter also filmed the extraordinary *Pan-American Exposition by Night* (1901), which used time-lapse photography to produce a circular panorama of the exposition's electrical illumination, and the 10-scene *Jack and the Beanstalk* (1902), a narrative that simulates the sequencing of lantern slides to achieve a logical, if elliptical, spatial continuity.

It was probably Porter's experience as a projectionist at the Eden Musée theatre in 1898 that ultimately led him in the early 1900s to the practice of continuity editing. The process of selecting one-shot films and arranging them into a 15-minute program for screen presentation was very much like that of constructing a single film out of a series of separate shots. Porter, by his own admission, was also influenced by other filmmakers—especially Méliès, whose *Le Voyage dans la lune* he came to know well in the process of duplicating it for illegal distribution by Edison in October 1902. Years later Porter claimed that the Méliès film had given him the notion of “telling a story in continuity form,” which resulted in *The Life of an American Fireman* (about 400 feet [122 metres], or six minutes, produced in late 1902 and released in January 1903). This film, which was also influenced by James Williamson's *Fire!*, combined archival footage with staged scenes to create a nine-shot narrative of a dramatic rescue from a burning building. It was for years the subject of controversy because in a later version the last two scenes were intercut, or crosscut, into a 14-shot parallel sequence. It is now generally believed that in the earliest version of the film these scenes, which repeat the same rescue operation from an interior and exterior point of view, were shown in their entirety, one after the other. This repetition, or overlapping continuity, which owes much to magic lantern shows, clearly defines the spatial relationships between scenes but leaves temporal relationships underdeveloped and, to modern sensibilities, confused. Contemporary audiences, however, were conditioned by lantern slide projections and even comic strips; they understood a sequence of motion-picture shots to be a series of individual moving photographs, each of which was self-contained within its frame. Spatial relationships were clear in such earlier narrative forms because their only medium was space.

Motion pictures, however, exist in time as well as space, and the major problem for early filmmakers was the establishment of temporal continuity from one shot to the next. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) is widely acknowledged to be the first narrative film to have achieved such continuity of action. Comprising 14 separate shots of noncontinuous, nonoverlapping action, the film contains an early example of parallel editing, two credible [back](#), or rear, projections (the projection from the rear of previously filmed action or scenery onto a translucent screen to provide the background for new action filmed in front of the screen), two camera pans, and several shots composed diagonally and staged in depth—a major departure from the frontally composed, theatrical staging of Méliès.



The Great Train Robbery (1903), directed by Edwin S. Porter.

Library of Congress Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division, Washington, D.C.

The industry's first spectacular box-office success, *The Great Train Robbery* is credited with establishing the realistic narrative, as opposed to Méliès-style fantasy, as the commercial cinema's dominant form. The film's popularity encouraged investors and led to the establishment of the first permanent film theatres, or nickelodeons, across the country. Running about 12 minutes, it also helped to boost standard film length toward one reel, or 1,000 feet (305 metres [about 16 minutes at the average silent speed]). Despite the film's success, Porter continued to practice overlapping action in such conventional narratives as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903) and the social justice dramas *The Ex-Convict* (1904) and *The Kleptomaniac* (1905). He experimented with model animation in *The Dream of a Rarebit Fiend* (1906) and *The Teddy Bears* (1907) but lost interest in the creative aspects of filmmaking as the process became increasingly industrialized. He left Edison in 1909 to pursue a career as a producer and equipment manufacturer. Porter, like Méliès, could not adapt to the linear narrative modes and assembly-line production systems that were developing.



The Great Train Robbery

Scene from *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), directed by Edwin S. Porter.

From a private collection

Early growth of the film industry

Méliès's decline was assisted by the industrialization of the French and, for a time, the entire European cinema by the [Pathé Frères company](#), founded in 1896 by the former phonograph importer [Charles Pathé](#). Financed by some of France's largest corporations, Pathé acquired the Lumière patents in 1902 and commissioned the design of an improved studio camera that soon dominated the market on both sides of the Atlantic (it has been estimated that, before 1918, 60 percent of all films were shot with a Pathé camera). Pathé also manufactured his own film stock and in 1902 established a vast production facility at Vincennes where films were turned out on an assembly-line basis under the managing direction of Ferdinand Zecca. The following year, Pathé began to open foreign sales agencies, which would soon become full-blown production companies—Hispano Film (1906), Pathé-Rouss, Moscow (1907),

Film d'Arte Italiano (1909), Pathé-Britannica, London (1909), and Pathé-America (1910). He acquired permanent exhibition sites, building the world's first luxury cinema (the Omnia-Pathé) in Paris in 1906. In 1911 Pathé became Méliès's distributor and helped to drive Star Film out of business.

Pathé's only serious rival on the Continent at this time was [Gaumont Pictures](#), founded by the engineer-inventor Léon Gaumont in 1895. Though never more than one-fourth the size of Pathé, Gaumont followed the same pattern of expansion, manufacturing its own equipment and mass-producing films under a supervising director (through 1906, Alice Guy, the cinema's first female director; afterward, Louis Feuillade). Like Pathé, Gaumont opened foreign offices and acquired theatre chains. From 1905 to 1914 its studios at La Villette, France, were the largest in the world. Pathé and Gaumont dominated pre-World War I motion-picture production, exhibition, and sales in Europe, and they effectively brought to an end the artisanal mode of filmmaking practiced by Méliès and his British contemporaries.

In the United States a similar pattern was emerging through the formation of film exchanges and the consolidation of an industrywide monopoly based on the pooling of patent rights. About 1897 producers had adopted the practice of selling prints outright, which had the effect of promoting itinerant exhibition and discriminating against the owners of permanent sites. In 1903, in response to the needs of theatre owners, Harry J. Miles and Herbert Miles opened a film exchange in San Francisco. The exchange functioned as a broker between producers and exhibitors, buying prints from the former and leasing them to the latter for 25 percent of the purchase price (in subsequent practice, rental fees were calculated on individual production costs and box-office receipts). The exchange system of distribution quickly caught on because it profited nearly everyone: the new middlemen made fortunes by collecting multiple revenues on the same prints; exhibitors were able to reduce their overheads and vary their programs without financial risk; and, ultimately, producers experienced a tremendous surge in demand for their product as exhibition and distribution boomed nationwide. (Between November 1906 and March 1907, for example, producers increased their weekly output from 10,000 to 28,000 feet [3,000 to 8,500 metres] and still could not meet demand.)

The most immediate effect of the rapid rise of the distribution sector was the [nickelodeon](#) boom, the exponential growth of permanent film theatres in the United States from a mere handful in 1904 to between 8,000 and 10,000 by 1908. Named for the Nickelodeon (ersatz Greek for "nickel theatre"), which opened in Pittsburgh in 1905, these theatres were makeshift facilities lodged in converted storefronts. They showed approximately an hour's worth of films for an admission price of 5 to 10 cents. Originally identified with working-class audiences, nickelodeons appealed increasingly to the middle class as the decade wore on, and they became associated with the rising popularity of the story film. Their spread also forced the standardization of film length at one reel, or 1,000 feet (305 metres), to facilitate high-efficiency production and the trading of products within the industry.

By 1908 there were about 20 motion-picture production companies operating in the United States. They were constantly at war with one another over business practices and patent rights, and they had begun to fear that their fragmentation would cause them to lose control of the industry to the two new sectors of distribution and exhibition. The most powerful among them—Edison, Biograph, Vitagraph, Essanay, Kalem, Selig Polyscope, Lubin, the American branches of the French Star Film and Pathé Frères, and Kleine Optical, the largest domestic distributor of foreign films—therefore entered into a collusive trade agreement to ensure their continued dominance. On Sept. 9, 1908, these companies formed the [Motion Picture Patents Company](#) (MPPC), pooling the 16 most significant U.S. patents for motion-picture technology and entering into an exclusive contract with the Eastman Kodak Company for the supply of raw film stock.

The MPPC, also known as the "Trust," sought to control every segment of the industry and therefore set up a licensing system for assessing royalties. The use of its patents was granted only to licensed equipment manufacturers; film stock could be sold only to licensed producers; licensed producers and importers were required to fix rental prices at a minimum level and to set quotas for foreign footage to reduce competition; MPPC films could be sold only to licensed distributors, who could lease them only to licensed exhibitors; and only licensed exhibitors had the right to use MPPC projectors and rent company films. To solidify its control, in 1910—the same year in which motion-picture attendance in the United States rose to 26 million persons a week—the MPPC formed the General Film Company, which integrated the licensed distributors into a single corporate entity. Although it was clearly

monopolistic in practice and intent, the MPPC helped to stabilize the American film industry during a period of unprecedented growth and change by standardizing exhibition practice, increasing the efficiency of distribution, and regularizing pricing in all three sectors. Its collusive nature, however, provoked a reaction that ultimately destroyed it.

In a sense, the MPPC's ironclad efforts to eliminate competition merely fostered it. Almost from the outset there was widespread resistance to the MPPC on the part of independent distributors (numbering 10 or more in early 1909) and exhibitors (estimated at 2,000 to 2,500), and in January 1909 they formed their own trade association, the Independent Film Protective Association—reorganized that fall as the National Independent Moving Picture Alliance—to provide financial and legal support against the Trust. A more effective and powerful anti-Trust organization was the Motion Picture Distributing and Sales Company, which began operation in May 1910 (three weeks after the inception of General Film) and which eventually came to serve 47 exchanges in 27 cities. For nearly two years, independents were able to present a united front through the company, which finally split into two rival camps in the spring of 1912 (the Mutual Film Corporation and the [Universal Film Manufacturing Company](#)).

By imitating MPPC practices of joining forces and licensing, the early independents were able to compete effectively against the Trust in its first three years of operation, netting about 40 percent of all American film business. In fact, their product, the one-reel short, and their mode of operation were initially fundamentally the same as the MPPC's. The independents later revolutionized the industry, however, by adopting the multiple-reel film as their basic product, a move that caused the MPPC to embrace the one-reeler with a vengeance, hastening its own demise.

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