

HPHI5903: Cinema and War

Week 2: Early Cinema and the
Spanish-American War

“The projection of light and waves had replaced the old projection of arrows and javelins”

Virilio, Paul. *War and Cinema: The Logics of Perception*. Verso. London. 1984. (P.76)

April 1898 to July 1898



Britannica

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Spanish-American War

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Facts & Related Content

Spanish-American War, (1898), conflict between the [United States](#) and [Spain](#) that ended Spanish colonial rule in the Americas and resulted in U.S. acquisition of territories in the western Pacific and [Latin America](#).

Origins of the war

The war originated in the [Cuban struggle for independence](#) from Spain, which began in February 1895. The Cuban conflict was injurious to U.S. investments in the island, which were estimated at \$50 million, and almost ended U.S. trade with Cuban ports, normally valued at \$100 million annually. On the [insurgent](#) side, the war was waged largely against property and led to the destruction of sugarcane and sugar mills. Of

[See all media](#)

Category: [History & Society](#)

Date: April 21, 1898 - July 17, 1898

Location: [Cuba](#) • [Manila Bay](#) • [Philippines](#)

Participants: [Spain](#) • [United States](#)

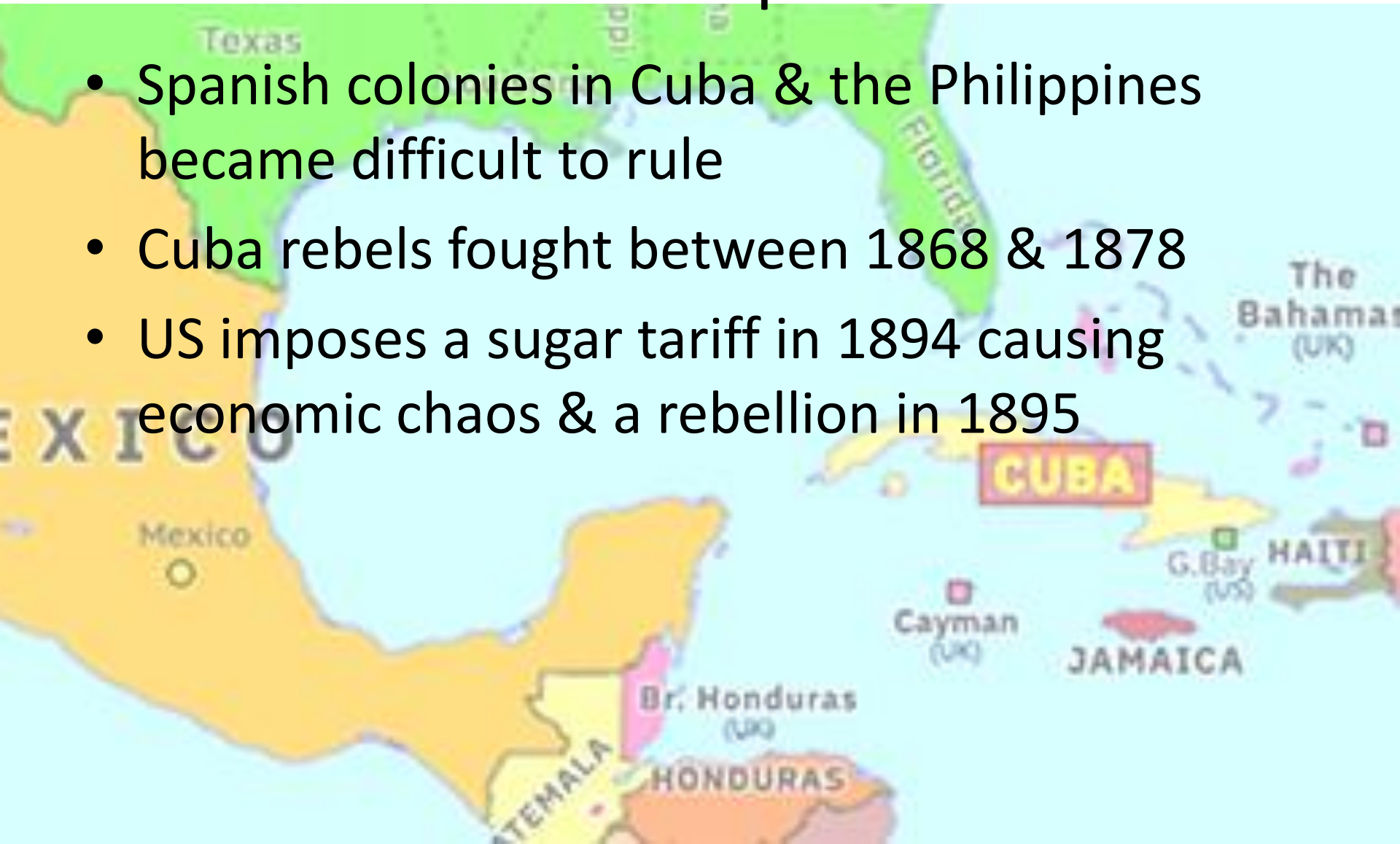
Context: [destruction of the Maine](#)

Major Events: [Battle of Manila Bay](#) • [Battle of Santiago de Cuba](#) • [Battle of San Juan Hill](#)

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The Spanish-American War and American Imperialism

- Spanish colonies in Cuba & the Philippines became difficult to rule
- Cuba rebels fought between 1868 & 1878
- US imposes a sugar tariff in 1894 causing economic chaos & a rebellion in 1895



- US newspapers support the rebels
- Feb 1898, **USS Maine** blows up in Havana Harbour
- Spain is blamed & US press whips up hysteria
- US declares war on Spain in April 1898



- The war last four months
- US annexes the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam.
- **AMERICA BECOMES AN EMPIRE**
- Teddy Roosevelt (**1901** onwards) continues empire expansion



history of film

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history of film summary

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history of film, also called **history of the motion picture**, history of [cinema](#), a popular form of [mass media](#), from the 19th century to the present.

([Read Martin Scorsese's Britannica essay on film preservation.](#))

Early years, 1830–1910

Origins



The Passion of Joan of Arc

[See all media](#)

“It was 1861, whilst travelling on a paddle-steamer and watching its wheel, that the future colonel Gatling hit upon the idea of a **cylindrical, crank-driven machine-gun**.

In 1874 the Frenchman Jules Janssen took inspiration from the multi-chambered Colt (patented in 1832) to invent an astronomical revolving unit that could take a series of photographs.

On the basis of this idea, in 1882 Etienne-Jules Marey then perfected his **chronophotgraphic rifle**, which allowed the user to aim at and photograph an object moving through space”

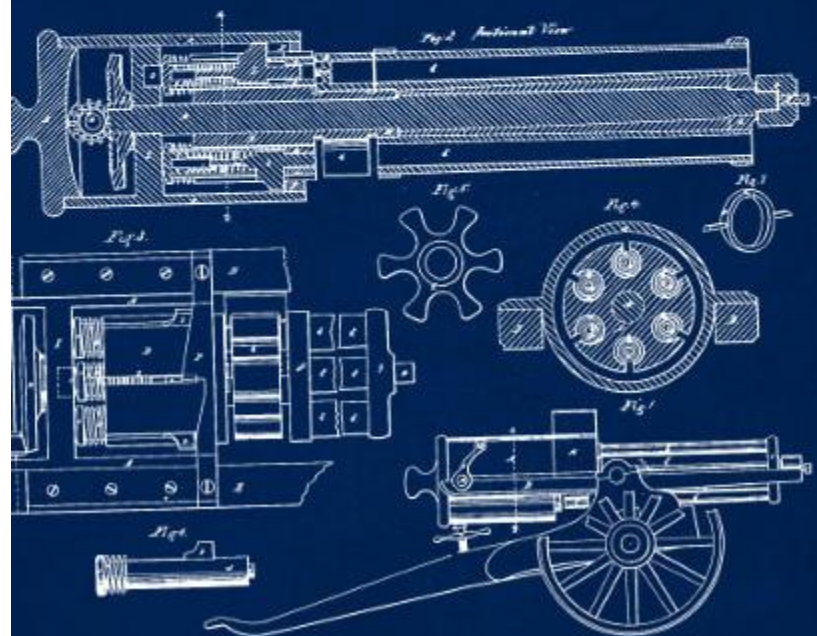


UNITED STATES PATENT OFFICE.

RICHARD J. GATLING, OF INDIANAPOLIS, INDIANA.

IMPROVEMENT IN REVOLVING BATTERY-GUNS.

Specification forming part of Letters Patent No. 36,536, dated November 4, 1862.



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Admiral Dewey leading land parade, no. 2



Colored troops disembarking



Pack mules with ammunition on the



Roosevelt's Rough Riders



Wreck of the battleship "Maine"

<https://www.loc.gov/collections/spanish-american-war-in-motion-pictures/about-this-collection/>

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Articles and Essays

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Articles and Essays



The Motion Picture Camera Goes to War

"Remember the Maine": The Beginnings of War. Soon after their invention, motion pictures became a popular attraction in vaudeville and variety stage venues. Events such as the Spanish-American War increased the movies' popularity, since films of the war sparked great interest and patriotism in theater-goers. Their interest was certainly strengthened by the press which exploited the events occurring in Cuba in order to attract...

[The Paper Print Film Collection at the Library of Congress](#)

Tearing Down the Spanish Flag

R: J. Stuart Blackton. K: Albert E. Smith. P: Vitagraph Company of America. USA
1898 Filming Locations: Brooklyn, New York City

“Almost as soon as war was declared, **J. Stuart Blackton** and **Albert E. Smith** of the Vitagraph Co. produced what is often called the **world's first war movie**. The film was called *Tearing Down the Spanish Flag*, and it caused a sensation. The film was simply a close-up of Blackton's hands pulling down a Spanish flag and replacing it with the American standard. 'It was taken in a 10 x 12 studio room, the background a building next door', Blackton explained in a lecture at the University of Southern California in 1929. 'We had a flag pole and two 18-inch flags. Smith operated the machine and I, with this very hand, grabbed the Spanish flag and tore it down from the pole and pulled the Stars and Stripes to the top of the flag pole. That was our very first dramatic picture and it is surprising how much dramatic effect it created... the people went wild.' [movie movie](#)

S Tearing Down the Spanish Flag - 1898 - Vitagraph

Watch



Pause (k)

0:20 / 0:39



YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2Sutv2zhT4>



Wreck of the Battleship "Maine"

© Edison, Apr. 21, 1898

Restored by the LoC (1997)
From the Paper Print Collection



00:09

01:14



emory.loc.gov...

Cameramen Billy Bitzer and Arthur Marvin were sent almost immediately by Biograph to Cuba to film events related to the increasing tensions. There they filmed the wreckage of the *Maine* and other motion pictures in Havana. Other Biograph film crews were sent to Washington, D.C., to film ships, cavalry, and Theodore Roosevelt. **The resulting motion pictures proved very popular to vaudeville audiences who were eager to see views of the situation.**

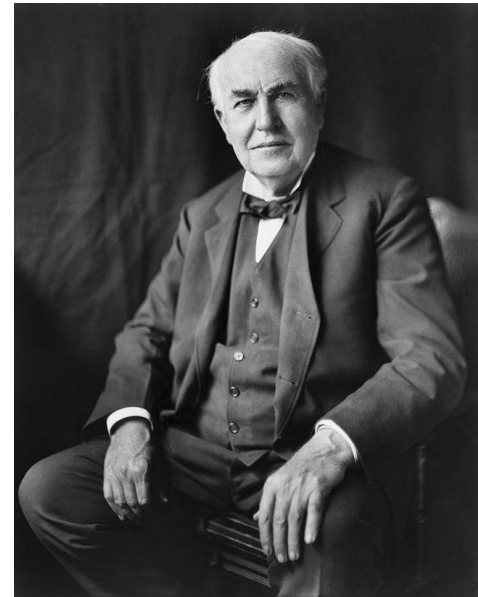
Key Points

Thomas Edison's film company, among others, recognized the potential of the emerging motion picture technology to document and convey current events.

The Spanish-American War presented a unique opportunity to capture real-life footage, and Edison's team was among those who ventured to do so.

Edison Film Company

- In 1898, the Edison Film Company produced a series of short films related to the Spanish-American War.
- While these early films lacked sound and sophisticated editing, they provided audiences with a glimpse of the war's events in a way that photographs and written accounts couldn't.



Films of the Beginnings of War

- *Burial of the "Maine" Victims*
- *War Correspondents*
- *N.Y. Journal Despatch Yacht "Buccaneer"*
- *Wreck of the Battleship "Maine"*
- *Morro Castle, Havana Harbor*
- *U.S. Battleship "Indiana"*
- *Secretary Long and Captain Sigsbee*
- *"Vizcaya" Under Full Headway*

Films of Military Preparations

- *10th U.S. Infantry, 2nd Battalion Leaving Cars*
- *U.S. Cavalry Supplies Unloading at Tampa, Florida*
- *Colored Troops Disembarking*
- *9th Infantry Boys' Morning Wash*
- *Military Camp at Tampa, Taken from Train*
- *Transport "Whitney" Leaving Dock*
- *Cuban Refugees Waiting for Rations*
- *Troop Ships for the Philippines*
- *Blanket-Tossing a New Recruit*
- *Soldiers Washing Dishes*
- *Trained Cavalry Horses*
- *Roosevelt's Rough Riders Embarking for Santiago*
- *Cuban Volunteers Embarking*
- *Roosevelt's Rough Riders*

Box:

Signs of war: the special, 'indexical' character of actualities

News images are, in the language of semiotics, 'signs' for the events they represent. This theoretical approach helps to clarify what is special about actualities (and why they are of more news-value than, say, faked films). Semiotic theory puts visual signs into three main categories: icon, index and symbol. An 'index' is a sign which is a sample of, or is contiguous with, its signified. An 'icon' is a sign which looks the same as (has a 'topological similarity to') its signified. A 'symbol' is a conventional link between the signifier and signified (without similarity or contiguity).¹³

Staged films fall into the two latter semiotic categories. Fake films are iconic, in that they look roughly the same as the signified event, the battle, but have no actual, physical connection with it. Staged allegorical films are symbolic, for they represent ideas/themes such as national ideals, and do not depict the specifics of the war.

Actualities, including war-related actualities, are indexical, for they depict people or places which were *physically present* at the events of the war.¹⁴ It is this indexical property of actualities – the film effectively being a *sample* of events/people/places from the war – which makes these films so special, so authentic.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mX0fxdRfsQk>

Chaplin Goes to "The Flickers"



Emergence of Early War Films:

- The Spanish-American War marked one of the first instances in which moving images played a role in documenting and conveying the experience of war.
- Although early films and newsreels lacked the sophisticated technology and narrative structure of later cinema, they laid the foundation for war-related storytelling.
- Filmmakers recognized the potential of war as a subject that could attract audiences, and the war's representation in these early films paved the way for future cinematic depictions.

Use of Patriotic Themes:

- The patriotic sentiments surrounding the Spanish-American War influenced subsequent war films. Many early twentieth-century war movies drew upon themes of national pride, heroism, and the defense of American values.
- These themes, rooted in the Spanish-American War's portrayal of the United States as a defender of freedom and justice, persisted in films depicting later conflicts, including World War I and World War II.

Visual Iconography:

- The visual iconography associated with the Spanish-American War, such as military uniforms, naval battles, and the American flag, became recognizable symbols in war cinema.
- Filmmakers used these symbols to convey the themes of sacrifice, duty, and honor, which continued to be prominent in war films throughout the twentieth century.

Narrative Conventions:

- Early war films often followed basic narrative conventions, including a focus on brave soldiers, the depiction of enemy forces as antagonists, and a clear sense of right and wrong.
- These conventions, rooted in the portrayal of the Spanish-American War and other historical conflicts, became established **conventions** in war cinema.

Genres and sub-genres

- Reportage (film as news footage)
- Documentary
- Re-enactments
- Feature films
- Propaganda films
- ...amongst many

Exploration of Complex Themes:

- As filmmaking techniques and storytelling evolved, so did the depth and complexity of war narratives. While early war films often presented a straightforward narrative of good versus evil, later films began to explore more nuanced themes, including the psychological toll of war, the moral ambiguity of combat, and the impact of war on civilian populations.
- This evolution reflected changing societal attitudes and the recognition of the complexities of real-world conflicts.

Technological Advancements:

- The Spanish-American War saw the use of new technologies, such as early motion-picture cameras, to capture events.
- As technology advanced, filmmakers in the twentieth century were able to create more realistic and immersive war scenes, contributing to the growth of war cinema as a genre.

Historical Context:

- The Spanish-American War, along with other historical conflicts, provided filmmakers with source material and a historical context for their narratives.
- Many war films set in the early twentieth century, such as "*The Rough Riders*" (1940), drew inspiration from this period, recreating the look and feel of the era.

Stylistic advancements

- Shot types
- Lenses
- Camera movement
- Editing sequences
- re-creations / reenactments
- Staged scenes
- Special effects

ESSAY – worth a read pg.140 onwards

**Filming, faking and propaganda:
The origins of the war film, 1897-1902**

**Film, het vervalsen en propaganda:
De oorsprong van de oorlogsfilm, 1897-1902
(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)**

PART III: AMERICA'S WARS IN CUBA AND THE PHILIPPINES

Chapter 5. The Spanish-American War (1898) – I. Filming for a visual newspaper

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- iii. Filming the war
- iv. Biograph's cameramen: Arthur Marvin and Billy Bitzer
- v. Edison's cameraman: William Paley
- vi. Conclusion: The war, the cinema and the press
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Chapter 6. The Spanish-American War – II: Re-staging a war for the moving pictures

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- ii. Symbolic and flag films
- iii. Staged re-enactments with actors
- iv. Staged re-enactments with scale-models
- v. Conclusion : Staging, symbolism and the press
- vi. Notes

Chapter 7. The Spanish-American War – III: America's war on screen

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- ii. War and the performance media
- iii. Film exhibition in America
- iv. Film exhibition in other countries
- v. Film exhibition in Spain
- vi. Conclusion: The film industry marches on
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A. Actuality war film: a film of real people and events, shot at an actual war-related location, i.e. a non-fiction recording of reality (not with actors, nor filmed in substitute locations nor a studio). This term 'actuality' has the additional benefit that it suggests a film related to topical/current (i.e. newsworthy) events.¹³ This category is divided into three sub-classes, which I call:

- 1) *Conflict-zone actuality*: a film shot in the conflict zone showing military activity. I also call this kind of film, 'battlefield actuality'.
- 2) *Arranged actuality*: a film shot in the conflict zone with genuine troops, but in which the action has been 'set-up' to be filmed. I sometimes call this category 'arranged film' or 'set up film'. Even though such on-location films were prepared 'artificially' to be filmed, I do not use the term 'staging' or 'staged' in this context, as this misleadingly suggests a stage or actors were used.
- 3) *War-related actuality*: a film which, while not shot in the conflict zone at the time of war, is somehow related to the war and shows military activity. I sometimes call this category, 'related film' or 'close substitute' (a substitute for real conflict-zone footage). For more on this category, see my section on 'Conceptual distance' in Chapter 2. I identify three such kinds of film, depicting either:
 - i) a similar kind of *event* to the conflict in question (e.g. general images of charging troops or artillery firing);
 - ii) the *same soldiers/commanders* who fought in the war, but filmed elsewhere (e.g. at exercises or in transit to/ from the front);
 - iii) the *same location* where hostilities took place (often being scenic views of the conflict zone before the war began).

B. Staged war film: a film about the conflict, shot with actors or scale-models away from the war zone. Another appropriate term might be 'imaginative representation', though I include only those films made at or near the time of the conflict (i.e. excluding much later dramatisations), so a longer but more accurate term would be 'staged film about a current war'.¹⁴ This category is divided into three sub-classes, which I call:

1) *Fake war film*: a staged film which re-enacts an incident or event from the current conflict, and was not made at the real location nor with the real participants. I will sometimes use the term, 're-enactment' for this type of film or 'battlefield reconstruction', or 'faked war incident'. Other terms which have been used for this type of film are 're-constituted newsreel', 'war re-enactment' or 'reproduction'.¹⁵ An objection might be made that the term 'fake' is, strictly speaking, only applicable when there is proven *intent to deceive*, but this would mean that the same film would sometimes be categorized as a fake and sometimes not, depending on what one knows about the intentions of the producer or exhibitors. I will therefore normally use the term 'fake' as a definition of genre, i.e. a staged re-enactment. (I discuss this intent issue elsewhere in the thesis). I further sub-divide fakes into two types:

i) *Re-enacted battlefield incident*: a film made with costumed performers depicting a war incident from the current conflict (the incident may or may not really have happened). Such films were usually staged with actors and shot in studios or on land vaguely resembling the war zone, far from the front. An alternative term is 'acted fake'.

ii) *Re-enacted war film with models*: a staged film using scale models to reproduce a major actual battle of the current conflict, especially a naval battle.

especially a naval battle.

- 2) *Staged allegorical war film*: this type, rather than reproducing specific military incidents, portrays wider allegorical or emblematic themes. Made in pantomime style, such films often include the theme of national victory, with figures such as Britannia, Uncle Sam, et al triumphing over their foreign opponents. Alternative terms are: 'symbolic representation', 'allegorical scene' or 'staged symbolic film'.
- 3) *Dramatised film about the conflict*: a film made during or soon after the conflict which is more elaborate than a mere re-enacted battlefield incident.

Exhibition

- There were no cinemas in 1890's
- Exhibition (screenings) were in a variety of places;

Theatres / Musical Hall (Vaudeville)

Town Halls

Churches

Tents / Marquees

Fairgrounds

Pg. 203 onwards

Theatres and music halls

The first arenas in which public emotion burst forth – and at its most intense – were in the theatres and music halls. In Chicago, for example, many local vaudeville houses featured military songs, as well as naval dramas. These included *The Ensign*, about the adventures of an American officer in Cuba.³

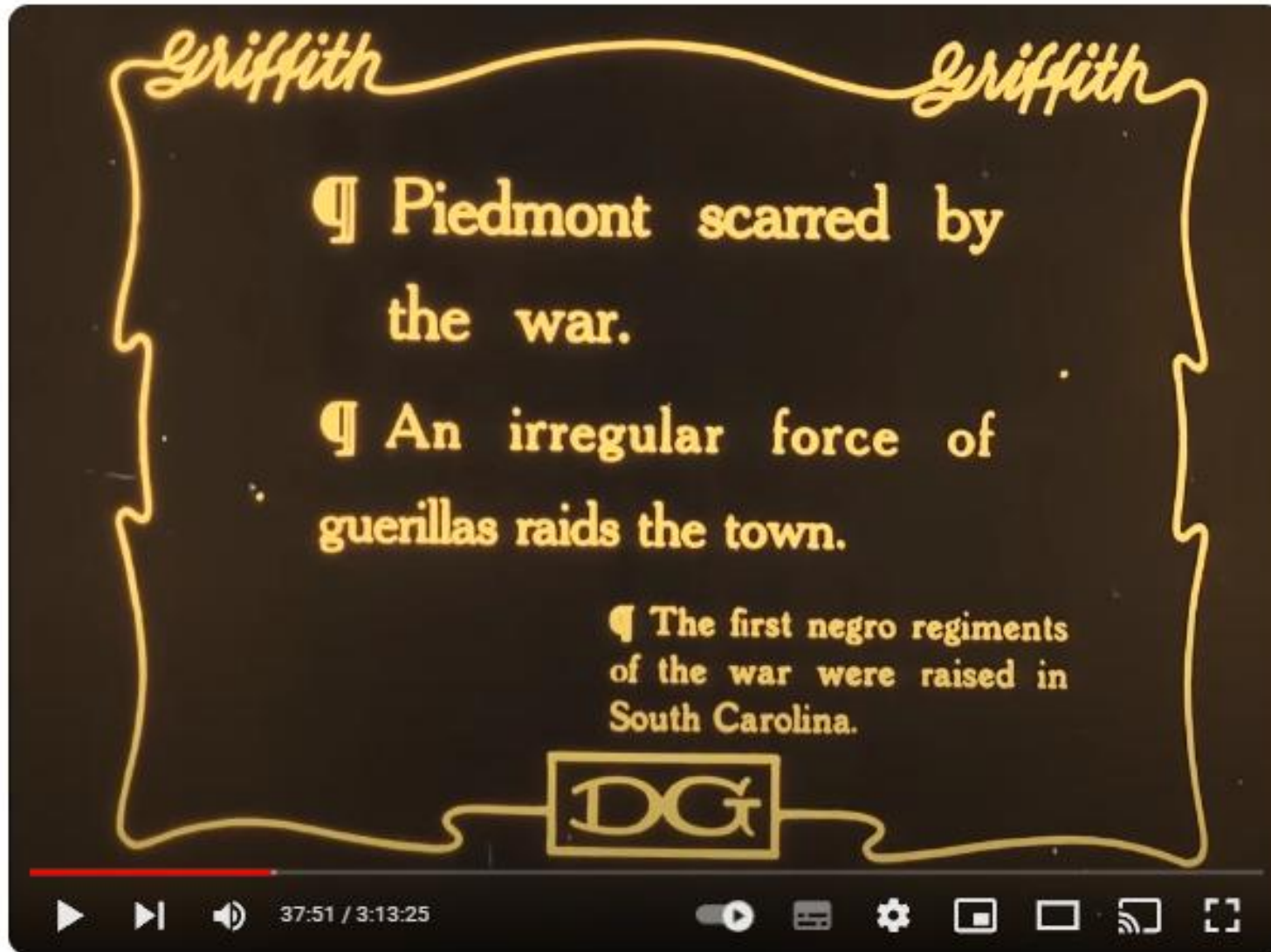
The Birth of a Nation (Griffiths.1915)

- Very problematic “history” film
- Racially inflammatory
- Incredibly successful at the Box Office
- Incredibly accomplished film-making

*“It is claimed that the play [film] is historical:
but history is easy to misuse” Jane Addams.*

Quoted in D.W. Griffith's **the Birth of a Nation: A History of the Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time**. Stokes, Melvyn. Oxford Uni Press. 2008

37 minutes in...



The Birth of a Nation - Full Movie - (1915) HD - The Masterpiece of Racist Cinema

Griffith

Griffith

¶ The town given over to
crazed negroes brought in
by Lynch and Stoneman to
overawe the whites.

DG

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ebtiJH3EOHo>



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From 2hrs
51mins



The Birth of a Nation - Full Movie - (1915) HD - The Masterpiece of Racist Cinema



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RICHARD BRODY

THE WORST THING ABOUT “BIRTH OF A NATION” IS HOW GOOD IT IS

February 1, 2013



The release of “Django Unchained,” and the discussion surrounding it, have brought “Birth of a Nation”—D. W. Griffith’s disgustingly racist yet titanicly original 1915 feature—back to the fore. The movie, set mainly in a South Carolina town before and after the Civil War, depicts slavery in a halcyon light, presents blacks



Problematically, “Birth of a Nation” wasn’t just a seminal commercial spectacle but also a decisively original work of art—in effect, the founding work of cinematic realism, albeit a work that was developed to pass lies off as reality. It’s tempting to think of the film’s influence as evidence of the inherent corruption of realism as a cinematic mode—but it’s even more revealing to acknowledge the disjunction between its beauty, on the one hand, and, on the other, its injustice and falsehood. The movie’s fabricated events shouldn’t lead any viewer to deny the historical facts of slavery and Reconstruction. But they also shouldn’t lead to a denial of the peculiar, disturbingly exalted beauty of “Birth of a Nation,” even in its depiction of immoral actions and its realization of blatant propaganda.

“The cavalry charges of the K.K.K., done with moving cameras that hurtle backward at the speed of the gallop, are visually exhilarating and **viscerally** thrilling, despite the hateful and bloodthirsty repression that they represent; it's the **kinetic model for a century of action scenes.**”