

INTRODUCTION TO FILM

EDWIN S. PORTER *THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY*

NAME _____

PERIOD _____

BASED ON THE INFORMATION FROM THE TEXT:

1. **IN 1895, WHAT COMPANY IN AMERICA DID PORTER BEGIN WORK?**
2. **WHAT FILMING TECHNIQUES USED BY PORTER'S (IN LIFE OF AN AMERICAN FIREMAN) MADE HIS FILM MORE DRAMATIC THAN TECHNIQUES USED BY MELIES?**
3. **BY WHAT ELEMENTS DID PORTER'S *GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY* BENEFIT?**
 - A.
 - B.
 - C.
 - D.
4. **WHAT SURREALISTIC EFFECT DOES PORTER'S *GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY* SUGGEST?**
5. **HOW DOES PORTER USE PANS IN THE *GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY*?**
 - A.
 - B.
6. **ON WHAT WRITTEN STORY WAS *THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY* BASED?**
7. **WHAT INNOVATIVE TECHNIQUES WERE USED BY PORTER IN *THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY*?**
 - A.
 - B.
 - C.
 - D.
8. **WHAT OFF-REPEATED CLICHÉD ACTION WAS USED BY PORTER IN *THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY*?**
9. **IN THE ENDING (OR BEGINNING) WHAT GAVE PORTER'S *THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY* A PLACE IN THE HISTORY BOOKS?**

EDWIN S. PORTER



Edwin S. Porter emigrated from his native Italy to America in 1895 and joined the Vitascope Marketing Company where his experience with electrical engineering was called into use.

Whilst at Vitascope, Porter was central in the organization of the first projected movie show in New York on the 23rd April 1896. He continued to use his engineering skills in the laboratory at Edison's Manufacturing Company but left to become a freelance projectionist at the Eden Musee Theatre in 1898.

Whilst working as a projectionist, one of Porter's many duties included the illegal duplication of Méliès films. He would take apart one act reels and combine several of these into a fifteen minute programme.

In addition, he attempted to create his own camera and projector but his efforts were in vain and in 1900 he returned to Edison's Company not in an engineering capacity but as a producer and director at Edison's East 21st Street Skylight studio.

A fan of the films of Georges Méliès, Porter tried to emulate the trick photography which Méliès had introduced to the world and had proved incredibly successful, in films such as 'The Finish of Bridget McKean' (1901) and 'Jack and the Beanstalk' (1902). Porter was also one of the first directors to shoot at night in his 'Pan-American Exposition by Night'.

Porter's skill with editing and methods of projection were used to great effect in some of his earliest films. He combined documentary footage with his own footage in films like 'The Execution of Czoyosz' (which he made with actor and set painter George S. Fleming); in 'Life of an American Fireman' he adopted a documentary style of filmmaking.

'Life of an American Fireman' combined stock actuality footage of fires, firemen and fire engines with dramatized scenes which Porter shot, this juxtaposition added tension and release to the film making it truly dramatic in contemporary setting, unlike Méliès whose filmatic drama was derived from his films' fantasy settings.

Porter was convinced, from the audience reaction that he had discovered a new way of telling stories and developed his ideas the following year with the release of 'The Great Train Robbery', perhaps the most influential film of that decade.

'The Great Train Robbery' benefited from a strong storyline, well composed, sophisticated camera work and an excellent climax, joined together by Porter's excellent use of editing.

Although it was not the first 'Western', 'The Great Train Robbery' was the first Epic Western, which boasted a cast of forty actors working to an actual script.

During his time at Edison, he made many films for the company; in fact he was the mainstay of their film production for over five years. He left in 1909 and took senior production posts with a number of new independent companies.

Six years later, In 1915 Porter returned to his first enthusiasm - projectors and remained involved with projection for the rest of his working life.

THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY

Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) is often thought of as a film that launched the Western genre. This is certainly an important aspect of it. But it is also a crime story, showing a robbery and the tracking down of the crooks. It seems to be an influence on crime dramas to come.

The Great Train Robbery reminds one of Louis Feuillade's subsequent works in the thriller genre. Partly this is Porter's expertise in depth staging. Partly it is subject matter. Feuillade's *Les Vampires* (1915) has train scenes, just as in this film. The chase through the forest recalls the equally wooded country scenery in later parts of *Les Vampires*. In both films, it is the criminals who flee through the countryside. The scenes of the Vampire gang dancing recall the party in this film. Both show a lot of rough characters having an exuberant celebration. There is a communal feel to both dances, and a sense that when the armed characters aren't working, that they love to relax with their women folk. In both films, we feel that we are in a subculture, one that has its own social rituals, rituals that both mirror and surrealistically mock those of society at large.

Both films show in detail gangs of identically dressed menacing figures ambushing and robbing unsuspecting respectable people. Porter's point of view is with the robbers, just as Feuillade's often is. These scenes are often quite disquieting, showing conventional life suddenly and unexpectedly disrupted by criminals. This is a surrealistic effect in both directors. Porter's film suggests that disaster can suddenly come to everyday life, a frightening truth. Both Porter's and Feuillade's gangs are quite murderous, having little scruple in taking life. The scene where the robbers assemble the passengers from the train and rob them of their valuables anticipates Chapter 5 of *Les Vampires*, where the party goers are systematically robbed as a group.

Some of the similarities between Porter and Feuillade might be purely technological. Both films combine patently artificial interior sets with highly authentic looking outdoor scenes. This is perhaps just a common feature of films of the era. Still, both directors' interiors seem dream like, as do their films as a whole.

Both films have precocious small children, who aid the good guy grown-ups in the movie. The children act surprisingly adult-like in both films.

People are always climbing over things in both directors. In Porter, this is the robbers climbing the sides of train cars, and standing on top of them. In Feuillade, it is criminals climbing the sides of buildings, and walking on roofs, a more elaborate effect than in Porter. In both films, the climbing is disorienting, a surrealistic change from daily life. It also looks dangerous, and thrilling.

The criminal gangs in both films launch complex crime schemes. These are unified, multi-stage processes, designed to achieve a single goal. Clearly they are planned out in advance. They take up an entire episode or sequence. The whole first section of Porter's film is such a unified scheme. The robbers are not acting at random; everything they do is part of a larger plan. In both filmmakers, the scheme often involves with intervening in a respectable process of middle-class life, and derailing it. In Feuillade, this can be a bank messenger's tasks or a wedding party. In Porter's film, it is the operation of the train. This systematic disruption of daily reality is quite frightening. It has a surrealistic quality: someone out to systematically change the texture and pattern of daily life.

There are many differences between Porter and Feuillade. Porter's film has no individual characters, to speak of. There are gang members on the one hand, and the posse on the other. In Feuillade, there are many vivid characters on both sides of the law.

Pans

The Great Train Robbery has sophisticated panning shots. The pans seem a bit wobbly. But otherwise they function much like pans in later film. The pan left to the hillside, and then panning down the side, seems especially complex and sophisticated. Porter sometimes pans to include new plot elements. For example, after the men cross the stream, Porter pans left to their horses, which they mount. The pan reveals this new element, and advances the story. Other pans seem simply to focus attention. Near the start of the film, after the robbers emerge from their hiding place at screen left and board the train on screen right, Porter pans over to the right, apparently to concentrate the action there.

One of the milestones in film history was the first narrative film, *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), directed and photographed by Edwin S. Porter - a former Thomas Edison cameraman. It was a primitive one-reeler action picture, about 10 minutes long, with 14-scenes, filmed in November 1903 - not in the western expanse of Wyoming but on the East Coast in various locales in New Jersey (at Edison's New York studio, at Essex County Park in New Jersey, and along the Lackawanna railroad).

The precursor to the western film genre was based on an 1896 story by Scott Marble. The film's title was also the same as a popular contemporary stage melodrama. It was the most popular and commercially successful film of the pre-nickelodeon era.

The film was originally advertised as "a faithful duplication of the genuine 'Hold Ups' made famous by various outlaw bands in the far West." The plot was inspired by a true event that occurred on August 29, 1900, when four members of George Leroy Parker's

(Butch Cassidy) 'Hole in the Wall' gang halted the No. 3 train on the Union Pacific Railroad tracks toward Table Rock, Wyoming. The bandits forced the conductor to uncouple the passenger cars from the rest of the train and then blew up the safe in the mail car to escape with about \$5,000 in cash.

The film used a number of innovative techniques, many of them for the first time, including parallel editing, minor camera movement, location shooting and less stage-bound camera placement. Jump-cuts or cross-cuts were a new, sophisticated editing technique, showing two separate lines of action or events happening continuously at identical times but in different places. The film is intercut from the bandits beating up the telegraph operator (scene one) to the operator's daughter discovering her father (scene ten), to the operator's recruitment of a dance hall posse (scene eleven), to the bandits being pursued (scene twelve), and splitting up the booty and having a final shoot-out (scene thirteen). The film also employed the first pan shots (in scenes eight and nine), and the use of an ellipsis (in scene eleven). Rather than follow the telegraph operator to the dance, the film cut directly to the dance where the telegraph operator enters. It was also the first film in which gunshots forced someone to dance (in scene eleven) - an oft-repeated, clichéd action in many westerns. And the spectacle of the fireman (replaced by a dummy with a jump cut in scene four) being thrown off the moving train was a first in screen history.

In the film's fourteen scenes, a narrative story with multiple plot lines - whose elements were copied repeatedly afterwards - was told of a train holdup with six-shooters, a daring robbery accompanied by violence and death, a hastily-assembled posse's chase on horseback after the fleeing bandits, and the apprehension of the desperadoes after a showdown in the woods. The steam locomotive always provided a point of reference from different filming perspectives. The first cowboy star, Gilbert M. 'Broncho Billy' Anderson played several roles: a bandit, a wounded passenger, and a tenderfoot dancer. The remarkable film was greeted with the same kind of fanfare that Sam Peckinpah's violent *The Wild Bunch* (1969) received many years later.

The action of each scene was told with only one shot. Almost every shot was a static, long shot, confining the action to the perspective of the camera at eye level. Tension and excitement was achieved by moving the players, rather than moving the camera angles. The ending (or the beginning - it was interchangeable) gave the film a place in history books - a gun was pointed straight at the audience and fired right in their faces to startle them.