

The origin and development of the American moving picture poster

Gary D. Rhodes

From the silent film days to the present the movie poster has been a centerpiece of feature motion picture marketing. Poster designs have become indelibly linked with the movies they advertise, often to the degree that their images act as embodiments of their films for collective memory. Long after their initial marketing responsibilities conclude, the posters remain iconic images in film history and culture at large.

Though film posters were not prized by museums and collectors until the latter years of the twentieth century, discussion of their importance dates back to their early usage. In 1914, for example, poster designer Scotson Clark of the Cheltenham Advertising Service offered a detailed vision of what posters should do for the moving picture community and of what he himself attempted to create for the Mutual Film Corporation:

It is evident that the mission of the poster is to attract people. The poster must bring the people across the street. Secondly, having gotten them there, you must tell them in as few words as possible what they will see when they get inside. You must excite their curiosity sufficiently to make them part with their nickel, dime, or quarter. Thirdly, you must appeal to their artistic sense, and managers are apt to underrate this quality of the general public's mind.¹

Clark's assessment of the poster's mission has not been undermined or changed over the passing years. Aside from the relative consistency of their usage during the twentieth century, however, movie posters present a fascinating array of issues related to their origins, development, and problems. Their

story through 1915 – at which point their early development was largely complete and controversies regarding their nature basically settled – is a key element of film history that has largely gone unaddressed.

The birth of the moving picture poster was an outgrowth of the pre-existing tradition of 'show printing', the type regularly advertised in the pages of such turn of the century trade publications as *The New York Clipper*. Advertisements for such companies as the Hitchcock Publishing Company, the Great American Show Print, Incorporated, and the Thomas & Wylie Litho Co. (all of New York), as well as the Erie Lithographic and Printing Company (in Pennsylvania with a New York branch) and the Great Western Printing Co. (in Missouri), show the importance and the commonplace status of lithograph publicity posters.² These companies offered posters for 'circus' and 'show' usage in the earliest years of the twentieth century, with an emphasis on color (one or two being the most common) and on size.

With regard to size, the nomenclature soon associated with movie posters was already in place: half-sheet, one-sheet, three-sheet, and even the twenty-four sheet that would eventually advertise US films on city billboards. Even the sizes of these posters were quite similar to what later became the stand-

Gary D. Rhodes, formerly an Assistant Professor at the University of Oklahoma Film & Video Studies Program, is currently Lecturer in Film Studies at The Queen's University-Belfast, Northern Ireland. He is a writer/director of film documentaries and the author of such books as *Lugosi* (1997), *White Zombie* (2001) and *Alma Rubens, Silent Snowbird* (2006, with Alexander Webb).
Correspondence to gdrhodes@gmail.com



ard dimensions of the US movie poster. Hitchcock Publishing offered half sheets at 21 x 28 and one-sheets at 28 x 42, whereas later Hollywood would standardize these sizes into a 22 x 28 half-sheet and a 27 x 41 one-sheet.³ Hitchcock even offered half-sheet 'long hangers' at 14 x 42, very close to Hollywood's later insert posters that measured 14 x 36 inches.⁴

These similarities of measurement and imagery (e.g. garish colors and large typeface) are not coincidental. It is very clear that the early film industry believed that the circus poster had led to the creation of the moving picture poster.⁵ A 1911 issue of the *Moving Picture World* [hereafter *MPW*] claimed, 'The poster in the form we now know it originated with the American circus'.⁶ Later, a 1918 issue of *Motion Picture News* said, '[t]he first moving picture posters were obviously inspired by the old fashioned circus posters, and they were handled in much the same manner – they were striking and lurid, and had a color scheme consisting of about twenty-eight different shades of red'.⁷

The industry also noted similarities in how posters were displayed. For example, a 1915 issue of the *Exhibitors Film Exchange* wrote that, 'Many current productions – which are exquisite works of art – are exploited in the lobby and in front of the

theater with billboard and handbill ideas that have carried over from the early days of the circus in America'.⁸ Acknowledging these roots, however, hardly made them acceptable to some members of the film community. In 1911 *Motography* had asked, 'Circus and side-show enterprises – here today and gone tomorrow – make good use of the poster, but is a moving picture theater on a par with such amusements or something higher? We know they are higher'.⁹

Born out of the circus poster tradition, the moving picture poster certainly was a presence as early as 1900 and was flourishing by the years 1910–1915. A 1913 *Chicago Daily Tribune* article suggested that '[a] review of recent moving picture posters may not be amiss, although any adequate account of them would rival the vastness of the Congressional record, so many and wonderful are they'.¹⁰ The development and proliferation of the poster in the period from 1910–1915, however, was fraught with debates and difficulties over their alleged offensive and even immoral imagery.

Development of the US moving picture poster

The date of the earliest moving picture poster in the US is difficult to discern. The dawn of film exhibition in the 1890s was accompanied by various forms of publicity, such as newspaper announcements, handbills and posters. What we do know is that the first moving picture posters performed the generalized function of promoting not an individual film or film type, but instead heralded the simple fact that moving pictures were being screened at a given venue.

A catalogue published in 1900 by Sears, Roebuck and Company of Chicago, Illinois, offers one of the earliest discussions of the movie poster in the US, a discussion that seems to have been aimed at the travelling exhibitor. Their 'Special Poster List' offered 14 x 21 inch posters 'illustrated with appropriate and very attractive engravings' promoting their 'Optigraph Moving Pictures'.¹¹ They also offered 'Double Combination Entertainment' posters paired with either their stereopticon or their graphophone (Sears' 'talking machine' version of the gramophone) in the slightly bigger size of 18 x 24. The final option – the 'Triple Combination Entertainment' poster – advertised all three devices using the slightly larger size of 19 x 25. The catalogue also offered 'Rubber Printing Outfits' that could add the 'dates, places where ex-

Fig. 1. A Hennegan stock poster as illustrated in their 1906–07 "special catalogue" *Posters, Tickets, Window Cards, Etc.*

hibitions are to be given, prices for admission', or any other information that the exhibitor believed necessary.¹²

Two years later, a more lengthy discussion of posters appeared on a 'Question and Answer' page included in a 1902 catalogue by the Kleine Optical Company. In promoting their posters, Kleine declared that, 'We are firm believers in good printing and have gone to considerable expense in devising cuts and posters to accompany our outfits, our customers being charged but a small part of the cost as we throw in a large part free of charge'.¹³ The key phrase in that text, however, is 'a large part.' Posters, of course, did generally cost exhibitors money, rather than being provided free by film companies.

A major question for early exhibitors was where best to obtain posters. In the early years of the twentieth century the creation and distribution of moving picture posters was largely the purview of companies *other* than those who actually manufactured films. For example, a 1904 Kleine Optical Company catalogue says that '[i]t is not practical for the dealer in moving picture machines to furnish all of the various sizes of posters that may be required, especially the larger sizes. It is advised that the exhibitor deal directly with the printers who make a specialty of show printing'.¹⁴ That advice did not keep Kleine from selling a small number of posters itself, however. Their own posters were available in four different designs and in sizes of 18 x 24 and 24 x 36 inches. For the frugal exhibitor, the Kleine images were created to be 'general in character so that they can be used for practically any outfit'.¹⁵ This approach is similar to that of the 1900 Sears, Roebuck catalogue, and was repeated in many early offerings. In 1906, for example, the 'Crescent Eng-Ptg. Co' of Evansville, Indiana, advertised 'Moving Picture Posters, Artistic Designs in Colors'.¹⁶ Their purpose was apparently to promote the screening of films, but not any particular film.

Still, by 1903, the exhibitor had to question whether such a generic 'stock' poster was the best advertisement, or whether he/she should turn to the emerging single-film poster.¹⁷ In May of that year a French catalogue printed in English and distributed in the US indicated the availability of 'large' posters promoting six individual titles, including *Samson and Delilah*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, and *Ali-Baba and the Forty Thieves*.¹⁸ Similarly, in a December 1903 issue of *The New York Clipper*, the Donaldson Lithograph Company of Newport, Kentucky advertised 'Lithos

for Motion Pictures', announcing the availability of lithographs promoting '*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Fairyland*, and many other scenes'.¹⁹

This trend continued the following year as individual film posters increasingly began to be offered in various sizes. In April 1904 The Ackermann-Quigley Lithograph Company of Kansas City advertised 'moving picture paper' in *The New York Clipper* for films of the Japanese-Russian War and the St. Louis World's Fair. Exhibitors could purchase eight-sheets, three-sheets, one-sheets or half-sheets for either film topic.²⁰

An examination of the Chicago Projecting Company's 'Entertainers Supplies' catalogue of 1907 shows a continuing drive towards posters promoting individual films or film topics. They offered 18 x 24 posters advertising their specific moving picture and stereopticon package of 'The Spanish American and Filipino Wars', which included views entitled 'A Trip Through Cuba, Porto Rico, and the Phillipine Islands'.²¹ At the same time, they offered posters simply advertising 'the Motion Pictures'.²² Despite a growing number of single-film posters, it is true that the vast majority of moving pictures in this period did not have pre-printed posters available. For this reason (as well as others possibly, such as cost efficiency), exhibitors still required posters with a more general approach.²³

Hennegan and Company

Perhaps the most notable of the early lithographic companies printing moving picture posters – at least in terms of the sheer number of trade ads run – was the Hennegan Company of Cincinnati, Ohio. In 1904 Hennegan offered 21 x 28 half-sheets that featured generic phrases like 'Marvelous Moving Pictures' and 'Don't Fail to See the Great Moving Pictures', both available in quantities as low as 50, apparently aiming for the price-conscious exhibitor.²⁴ They also offered three-sheets (at '7 Feet high by 3 1/2 Feet wide') and six-sheets (at '7 Feet high by 7 Feet wide') that were promoted as suitable 'for any moving picture show'.²⁵

That same year, Hennegan also featured four-color half-sheet posters for at least seventeen specific films, including *The Great Train Robbery*, *Charge of the Rough Riders* and *Geisha Dancing Girls*, and promised 'other up-to-date views, as film is issued'.²⁶ In some cases they offered more than one poster for a single film, apparently for those films they believed to be among the most popular with audiences. For

example, two of their featured titles, *The Eruption of Mount Pelee* and *The Passion Play*, were each offered in two different styles. A smaller number of these titles, including *The Passion Play*, were also offered as three-sheets that could be bought in quantities as small as ten.²⁷ Hennegan also attempted to bridge the gap between posters for individual films and more generalized posters with such two-sheets as *Prize Fight*, which could promote 'any' fight film.²⁸

Their ca. 1905 catalogue offered a larger range of three-sheets promoting individual films, with such titles as *Tracked by Bloodhounds* and *The Bold Bank Robbery*. The catalogue also includes posters for relatively generic scenes, such as *Base Ball*, *Fire Rescue* and *Fire Department* that – like their earlier *Prize Fight* poster – were able to be used with any number of films addressing the subject matter. A range of 11 x 14 'Window Show Cards' pictured such individual titles as *The Bold Bank Robbery* and more general images like *President Roosevelt*.²⁹

Hennegan repeatedly announced their generalized 'Moving Picture Printing' in advertisements in *The New York Clipper* in 1905.³⁰ The rather simple ad appeared numerous times until in mid-1906 the company began to promote one of their specific posters, *The Destruction of San Francisco*.³¹ This poster was similar to *Prize Fight* in that it could promote any film about the San Francisco earthquake. But *Destruction of San Francisco* was also unique in that it was the first specific moving picture poster that Hennegan advertised in a trade publication.

Along with their trade publication ads and catalogs in the US, Hennegan had decided by 1907 to advertise their wares in England as well. Their 'Moving Picture Printing' ad appeared that year in the British publication *The Optical Magic Lantern and Cinematograph Journal*.³² Although it is not verifiable, perhaps the advertisement abroad was an attempt to bring new customers to a business that was by that time failing. At any rate, the ads ended by 1908.

Indeed, by 1906–07, lists of Hennegan posters had expanded only by a few specific film titles, such as half-sheets for *Meet Me at the Fountain*, *The Counterfeiters* and *Highway Robbery*. They still featured a large line of generic film posters with such phrases as 'A Show that Pleases Both Old and Young' and 'Three Hours of Fun and Frolic'.³³ After 1907, however, the catalogs and ads in the *Clipper* seem to stop. It is difficult to determine the fate of the company, which quite possibly went out of business or shifted to other pursuits.³⁴

**MOVING PICTURE
::PRINTING::
DESTRUCTION OF
San Francisco.**

Best Line of Paper to Advertise any Moving Picture Show.
See it for Catalogue. It Tells How to Succeed.

San Francisco Book, 16 pages, illustrated cover—100, \$2.50; 500, \$10; 1,000,
\$15. Sample by mail, postpaid, 10 cents. Cash with order.

HENNEGAN & CO., Cincinnati, O.

Moving picture posters from other lithographic companies

The creation and distribution of posters was not consistent in early US cinema. Advertisements and articles in the pre-1915 trades imply that the bulk of posters in that period were developed by a variety of lithographic companies who were not owned by the film manufacturers. Rather, the film manufacturers contracted with lithographic companies who developed and printed the posters for their films. By 1910, ads suggest that these posters were overwhelmingly created to promote single films, not generic film screenings. An example of such an arrangement would be the Goes Lithographing Company of Chicago, which produced eight-sheet posters in 1911 for such films as *Crusaders, or Jerusalem Delivered*.³⁵ Similarly, the A.B.C. Company of Cleveland, Ohio – cited by Epes Winthrop Sargent as having originated 'true-to-the-film' moving picture posters – offered lithographs for Kalem features in 1912.³⁶

By 1912, exhibitors could increasingly acquire posters from lithographic companies like A.B.C. at film exchanges in major cities where they also obtained the moving pictures themselves.³⁷ That same year, *MPW* wrote that '[u]ntil the system employed by the exchanges is altered to permit houses to know well in advance what they are to have, the pictorial paper cannot be used to the greatest advantage'.³⁸ The argument here was that exhibitors did not have enough knowledge of what posters were available and when they could be purchased. This affected the exhibitor's ability to budget for them, as well as obtain them in time to benefit from the kind of advance publicity they could offer in the days before a screening.

As opposed to going to their local exchanges, exhibitors could in some cases purchase posters directly from the lithographic companies themselves,

Fig. 2. Hennegan's first advertisement promoting a poster for an individual film subject, *Destruction of San Francisco*. *The Billboard* (2 June 1906): 43.

who advertised their offerings in trade publications. The Exhibitor's Advertising and Specialty Company was one of the more prominent advertisers of posters in the early 1910s.³⁹ Headed by Arthur D. Jacobs and based in New York, the company featured a large number of specific films in some of their ads, including titles like *Shrinking Rawhide*, *The Diamond 'S' Ranch*, *Patchwork Quilt* and the *Battle of Pottsburg Bridge*. They also featured a series of color, 28 x 42 one-sheet poster portraits of 'America's Popular Photoplayers', with the featured stars including John Bunny, Alice Joyce, Gene Gauntier and Maurice Costello.⁴⁰

The Photo Play Advertising and Specialty Co. of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, offered similar star portraits in 1912. In color and sized as one-sheets (at 28 x 42), the featured actors included Florence Turner, G.M. 'Broncho Billy' Anderson, and the same players (with different graphics) offered by Exhibitor's Advertising. These images were in addition to Photo Play's wide selection of specific moving picture posters for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Cinderella*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *East Lynne* and many others.⁴¹

Curiously, their listed posters also included films like *Shrinking Rawhide* and *The Diamond S Ranch*, titles also offered by the Exhibitor's Advertising and Specialty Company. As Photo Play Advertising claimed to be a 'licensed and independent' company with 'something new every week', this duplication begs the question of whether some film manufacturers were allowing more than one firm to create posters for given titles, or whether more than one company was printing and/or selling the same poster images.⁴²

Regardless, in 1912 Photo Play Advertising revealed in an industry trade journal that they had just had a major transaction at a trade show called the Motion Picture Exhibitors' League: the customer was 'Montgomery, the live wire from Jacksonville, Florida'.⁴³ Their triumph with Montgomery was important, as Frank Montgomery, also known as the 'Moving Picture Man', was well-known in the industry for his advertising expertise. He was someone who, through careful advertising, had helped transform numerous failing moving picture theaters into successful enterprises. Montgomery's advertising technique generally meant flamboyant newspaper promotions; as he once said to *MPW*, 'I use lithographs, but not many ...'.⁴⁴ Convincing him to buy more posters than he had in the past was good reason for Photo Play to celebrate.

For exhibitors, the buying of single-film posters from lithographic companies became a question of *which* single-film posters to buy and display. The 1913 US release of *Quo Vadis* is an example of the increasing variety of advertising paper that was being created. For that one film, the Otis Lithograph Company of Cleveland, Ohio, offered two different one-sheets, two different three-sheets, two different six-sheets, a sixteen sheet, two different twenty-four sheets, and a thirty-two sheet poster for the film.⁴⁵ Exhibitors could choose to buy any combination of these posters, including just one of them. More likely, though, the variety of images and sizes suggests an exhibitor demand for many different posters to use at their theater and elsewhere in their town or city.

Moving picture posters from film companies

In the years between 1910–1915, US film industry trade publications indicate through both articles and advertisements that several key moving picture manufacturers had begun to offer posters directly to exhibitors. The trend illustrates a move by some manufacturers to assume greater control over the marketing of their product. For example, Bison Films announced free, four-color lithograph posters offering either images or plot synopses in 1910. That these were available gratis was a rarity, and a benefit that exhibitors had seldom previously enjoyed; presumably, though, the posters had to be returned to Bison after use.⁴⁶ That same year the Méliès Company in the US offered one-sheet posters for weekly releases that combined 'picture illustrations' and 'reading matter'.⁴⁷

Kleine, 'in pursuance of its always progressive and "uplift policy"', announced an 'experiment' in the first quarter of 1911 in which they opted to reproduce a photographic image from their films on posters rather than using illustrations.⁴⁸ Though most examples of posters appearing in trades continued to use artwork rather than photographs, in 1912 the Great Northern Film Company did offer (for a 'small cost') 16 x 20 glossy posters showing multiple photographs to accompany their two- and three-reel films.⁴⁹ That same year, Gaumont also offered a half-sheet 'photo-poster' to US film exchanges for their release *Written in Blood*.⁵⁰

During this period the trades discussed a number of specific posters that film manufacturers offered. Thanhouser's *Romeo and Juliet* (1911) received special attention for being the first 'regular

release on a manufacturer's regular release day' to be 'honored with a three-sheet poster', as opposed to the more standard one-sheet.⁵¹ The following year Thanhouser also made news by augmenting their by-then standard posters (two different one-sheets and a three-sheet) with much larger eight-sheet posters for the film *Jess* (1912).⁵² Echoing Thanhouser's approach, the Buffalo and Pawnee Bill Film Company offered eight-sheets for *The Life of Buffalo Bill* (1912), as well as a 'full variety' of other poster sizes and images in an effort to avoid the 'shortage of paper' that had apparently occurred with numerous films of the immediate past.⁵³

The increasing involvement of film companies with posters created for their own films might have made it easier for an exhibitor to obtain both film and advertising materials from the same source. The number of film prints and relevant posters at film exchanges grew and became better coordinated. In 1913 *Motography* called it a 'sine qua non that the middleman handling the sale of films should also supply the poster'.⁵⁴ Such coordination of efforts continued with the industry's movement towards the studio system.

By 1914, for example, Universal contracted with the Morgan Lithograph Company 'to establish a separate art department for our special benefit ...'.⁵⁵ The much-publicized agreement involved over one million dollars, allegedly the largest contract 'in the history of lithography'.⁵⁶ While still relying on a lithographic company rather than creating posters in house, Universal possessed greater control than ever over their poster image creation and printing. Universal's P.D. Cochrane – the 'Man Behind the Poster' – oversaw ten Morgan artists, all 'masters of oil and water color' who devoted themselves 'exclusively to work on the Universal posters'; the artists were even situated in a building adjoining the studio's premises.⁵⁷ The resulting success of Universal's agreement with Morgan led the way to studios consolidating control of poster creation in the months and years after 1914.

'Home-made' moving picture posters

Of course, obtaining pre-printed posters was not the only option in this period. In May 1909 a two-part article in *MPW* discussed the need for better posters and suggested that one way to proceed was for exhibitors to create their own. The author gave directions on how to approach the task, including the need to hire a professional artist locally and not to 'haggle



Fig. 3. A George Kleine trade ad promoting the availability of posters and heralds in various sizes and formats. (*Moving Picture World*, 21 December 1912): 1158.

over a few dollars'.⁵⁸ Discussion of 'home-made' posters continued nearly three years later in a 1912 *MPW*, their status at the time judged to be 'generally the result of intelligent workmanship'.⁵⁹

At the same time, the trade advised exhibitors to trust only 'competent hands' because '[b]ad spelling, bad English, and foolish sentences' occasionally crept into the posters.⁶⁰ 'Only yesterday while walking along Sixth Avenue we saw a tremendous banner with this 'strange device': 'Driving Home the Cows', 'A Great Civil War Drama', *MPW* wrote.⁶¹ The two films were separate, but in the hands of the designer, the poster's mention of the Civil War seemed more a description of the cows. These problems, though, did not detract overall from some very artistic 'home-made' posters that some theaters created. One 'M. Rosenberg' hired artists to take the pre-printed posters for *Dante's Inferno* as a foundation and then create new artwork for the film 'by drawing and the airbrush process'.⁶²

As late as 1915, Epes Winthrop Sargent wrote that carefully-constructed 'home-made' posters could be 'an ideal form of decoration, but few exhibitors can afford to maintain a staff of artists.' He added, 'Some [managers] feel that they cannot even afford to employ a sign letterer occasionally, but in a small town it is often possible to make the painter



Fig. 4. An exhibitor's hand-made advertising art supplements IMP's own posters for *From the Bottom of the Sea* (1911). From *Picture Theatre Facts* (1912).

come to the house'. Sargent even suggested giving a local painter free rent in exchange for creating a 'specified amount' of poster work.⁶³

Displaying the poster

Once an exhibitor decided to purchase, rent, or create posters, he or she still had to determine how to use them effectively. Questions over how many posters to use and where to hang them were common. In 1906, a booklet for Enterprise Instruments and Outfits suggested that, 'it is only necessary to see that [our posters] are distributed and posted up in conspicuous places, on fences, buildings, in store windows, etc.'⁶⁴ Here the advice might well have been aimed at the travelling exhibitor whose screenings would not have been anchored at the same geographical location for lengthy periods of time.

As the number of moving picture theaters grew, the issue of posters displayed on their premises became more important. A 1912 discussion by one exhibitor gave the following description of their poster strategy:

When we started using the three-sheets – *Martin Chuzzlewit* was the first – we had two nice looking galvanized stands with small lights across the top and part way down the sides made to fit around the corner of the lobby. They proved to be such an attraction ... that we decided to build two three- and one six-sheet stands on the side of our building which forms one side of an alleyway.⁶⁵

The theater's success with patrons through use of these posters led them to obtain even more stands to hold posters on the other side of the theater and inside the lobby.⁶⁶

In 1913 *Motography* warned exhibitors that '[c]arelessly placed posters can easily ruin the architectural effect of the theater'.⁶⁷ The placement and number of posters to be used were key to the discussion. One 1912 manual for theatre managers advised, 'The lobby should not be filled with posters. For a high class theatre only two or three are required ...'.⁶⁸ Also important was the relative condition of the posters, some of which could be badly worn after lengthy use at more than one theater. For *Motography*, this was a more important factor than the number of posters; they suggested that '[y]ou can't use enough posters in front of your house if you are using fresh, clean, new ones'.⁶⁹

To keep posters fresh and clean, the trade publications offered numerous suggestions. 'Do You Mount Your Posters?' a brief article in a 1912 *MPW* asked readers. It suggested that the answer to this question of backing posters on some supporting surface should be a resounding yes. They promoted the Poster Mounting Company of New York, who had 'been in the business for some time' and helped 'picture men' prolong 'the life of their posters'.⁷⁰

An article by Joe Brandt in a 1914 *Motography* also commented on poster mounting, suggesting that it was a method of keeping posters in good shape when they were displayed by one theater, returned to an exchange, and then used by yet another theater. Nevertheless, Brandt described a conversation with a film exchange worker in which he learned that:

[N]o matter how careful [the exchange] shipping department was when the paper went out, when it came back nine cases out of ten it had been so badly handled and so badly creased that when unfolded it looked like a checkerboard. It doesn't take long to put a piece of mounted paper in an awful state. Sometimes even a ten-day runner customer will get a piece of paper that will be so badly bunged up that it is a disgrace to have it hanging in his lobby.⁷¹

Brandt added his belief that 'mussed up posters' were a certain way to achieve a 'black eye from the public before it has even entered your theater'.⁷² Strangely, no mention is made by Brandt about any 'black eye' given by the exchange to exhibitors who returned posters in noticeably worse condition.

With poster mounting alone not sufficient to the task of keeping posters in good shape, poster frames grew in popularity. The Exhibitors' Advertising

Company, who also manufactured posters, offered a frame on an easel stand for ten dollars that included an opening within the frame for the theater's name on a printed card, as well as six other narrow placards to offer greetings to the potential ticket buyer ('Welcome'), or announce ticket prices ('Admission 5 Cents'). Remaining spaces could announce up to three moving picture titles with both a plot synopsis and photograph from each, and an announcement of other programmed events (e.g. 'Illustrated Songs').⁷³

Another company marketing theater frames was the Chicago Metal Covering Company, which offered large one-sheet frames with removal backs that, if desired, featured a locking mechanism. The company also promoted the soldered joints of the frame as a key selling feature. The frames were also available without an easel, so they could be displayed on the theater's walls. As with the Exhibitor's Advertising frames, those made by Chicago Metal were seemingly intended for both interior and exterior use.⁷⁴

Film companies themselves also saw an opportunity in marketing poster frames, seeing a link between frames and their own marketing strategies. Imp sold an oak one for five dollars in 1911 without an easel; it could be used with an easel the theater already owned or hung on the theater 'front.' The Imp frame offered ten openings for photos/posters, and it was shipped with ten 'fine photos' of Imp stars.⁷⁵ In 1912 an ad in *The Kinetogram* offered 'The New Edison Lobby Display Frame' that also came with ten photos, each in this case being of the 'Popular Edison Players'.⁷⁶ That same year the Great Northern Special Feature Film Company also offered its own frame, which *MPW* described as 'an improvement on anything ever put forth in the way of Lobby Displays'.⁷⁷ The frame needed no easel on which to stand or nail on which to hang. It was a tall, tri-fold frame that stood on its own and featured fifteen openings for 11 x 14 poster 'photogelatins' of the type later called lobby cards.⁷⁸

Though frames attempted to protect the poster and enhance its display, they too could act as a perceived eyesore. Epes Winthrop Sargent wrote in a 1912 issue of *MPW* about screening 'The Special Release'. In it, he reminded exhibitors to:

[r]emove damaged pictures from frames and see that all glasses are whole. If you have many frames remove some [so] that there may be



Fig. 5. Poster frame advertised by the Chicago Metal Covering Company. (*Moving Picture World*, 5 July 1913): 72.

plenty of space for those who wait to gain admission. Only those frames that hang on the walls should be retained for photographic display. Take the easel frames inside and hang them up, storing the easels somewhere where they will not be in the way.⁷⁹

By 1915 Sargent's advice grew more grandiose, suggesting that moving picture posters should be surrounded with attractive props appropriate to the film subject. For example, for the film *Mother's Roses* (1915), he advised 'natural flowers and ferns', with the entire display covered with a 'glass front' to keep out dust and 'meddling fingers'.⁸⁰

Key figures in early poster sales

Rarely were posters offered to exhibitors free of charge; the aforementioned free 1910 Bison posters were somewhat of an anomaly. To the extent that this did happen, *MPW* wrote in 1911 that the free use of posters was an 'abused' system, as theaters were not generally returning them. As a result, no posters were available to other theaters that screened the same motion picture during the weeks after its initial



Fig. 6.

Three-sheet posters plastered on the wall of the Liberty Theatre in Salt Lake City. (*Moving Picture World*, 24 August 1912): 762.

release.⁸¹ The trade concluded that it was better to 'charge every exhibitor ten cents per poster and allow a rebate of five cents for every one returned' in reuseable condition to the area film exchange where most exhibitors obtained their rented films.⁸²

Given the cost of posters and debates over their merits, sales persons were sometimes necessary to persuade exhibitors to purchase or rent posters. Other sales persons were hired by lithographic companies to persuade film companies to hire their firm for poster creation. Little is known about the people who pioneered poster sales in those two areas, but they provided a crucial role in gaining posters increased acceptance. It was due in part to their diligence and success that displaying posters moved from an option to a necessity.

In 1912, for example, *MPW* wrote about Arthur Brady, 'The Poster Man', who had made his start with poster publicity during the 'infancy' of film exhibition. At that time, under his (rather formal) nickname 'The Aesthetic Sign Painter', Brady devoted his attention to designing cards and banners promoting films.⁸³ He soon shifted from this work to selling movie post-

ers, which over time became the biggest part of his business. *MPW* called his poster company 'one of the largest in this country by the simple process of evolution'.⁸⁴

Another notable figure in poster sales was Jeannette A. Cohen, whom *MPW* declared in late 1913 to be the only woman involved in that part of the film industry.⁸⁵ In the spring of that year Cohen had decided to pursue the poster business by teaming with the H.C. Miner Litho Company of New York to sell posters to moving picture manufacturers for their films. She created a poster department at Miner, but rapidly moved on to the Metro Litho Company where she developed moving picture posters for sale to exhibitors. The trade attributed Cohen's rapid rise to fame in the poster world to her 'straightforward business way'.⁸⁶

The industry also lauded the efforts of Joseph S. Edelman, president of the Sterling Advertising Service and, beginning in 1914, the director of advertising for the World Film Corporation. Prior to that time, he was known for various successful advertising campaigns associated with Ingersoll watches and with real estate man Joseph P. Day. Edelman's entry into the film world resulted from his theory that posters were the key way to promote feature films. In 1914, *The Atlanta Constitution* carried his statement that:

I hope to do for the World Film corporation [*sic*] what the moving pictures did for the films by their 'close-up' method. I intend to concentrate results on the posters, by using the most artistic means possible. There has been no parallel development in the advertising of films that has kept step with the wonderful development of film production. The result has been that the best work is secured and by getting close to the film itself, one can see that printed matter is a matter of prime importance. There is a crying need for posters that have the imprint of thought and ability . . . In the material gotten out at present, there is little that can be recommended, yet what is more important than advertising matter to draw out an audience?⁸⁷

Like Brady and Cohen, Edelman clearly believed in the value of the poster. Their efforts – along with the work of the many salespersons whose stories were not chronicled by the press – proved critical in achieving a growing acceptance and proliferation of moving picture posters.

Industry discussion of posters

Discussion of the early film industry is hampered by the fact that US trade publications devoted to moving pictures do not emerge until 1906 with *Views and Film Index* and 1907 with *The Moving Picture World*. And the arrival of the trades did not immediately herald printed discussion of certain topics: discussion of the moving picture poster did not occur in them to any real degree for two to three years after they began publication.

The earliest film industry article on poster usage seems to be one that appeared in *The Optical Lantern and Cinematograph Journal* in 1905; though published in England, the trade was distributed in the US. The advice given in 'A Lesson in Advertising' may not have penetrated everyday US exhibition practice, but it does offer some early advice:

It should be remembered that it is cheaper to have 500 posters of one kind than 100 each of five different wordings. The continual appearance of the same poster makes a lasting impression, and consequently the reader begins to have its striking lines fixed on his mind. Most likely, after casually seeing the poster once or twice, he will ultimately stop and carefully read through, and if the matter is attractively put will want to know more and finally visit the show.⁸⁸

The need for strong poster presentation is also discussed in the article, with the unnamed author admonishing exhibitors to use 'neatly dressed' men in sandwich boards for roving displays of film posters.⁸⁹

One of the earliest poster discussions of any length by a US trade came in the February 1909 issue of *The Nickelodeon*, which believed, even at that late date, that a need existed to describe the use of the poster to readers:

The poster is nothing more than a large, detached display advertisement. As a matter of fact, the same layout that was used in the newspaper display might serve very well as a poster, everything being proportionally larger. Posters may be any size from 12 by 18 inches to the big 'three-sheet' billboard poster. However, 24 x 36 inches is about as large as the picture theater manager will ever care to use.⁹⁰

The article went on to suggest the need for lithographs to include an illustration, rather than text alone, but noted that the illustration might well be a

'picture of the theater building' rather than any other kind of image.⁹¹

Only one week later *MPW* offered an editorial entitled 'The Poster End' that proclaimed:

The poster is or has been the Ishmael of the moving picture business. Until recently nobody seemed to care for him. Any old thing in the way of a crude design and crude printing suited your indifferent moving picture theater exhibitor – any old thing with some idea of the dramatic situation and plenty of crude color was considered good enough to put outside the moving picture theater ... Shall we see fine specimens of color printing, good designs and all the rest of it, advertising the films all over the country? Are we, in short, to witness the theatricalization of the moving picture at the poster end of matters? ... If we are on the eve of a reform in the poster end of matters, and if we should get an artistic and commercial development of the moving picture poster, the mind is staggered by the possible extent of the business, which is bound, in the nature of things, to multiply so enormously that the existing manufacturers will hardly be able to cope with the demand likely to be thus created.⁹²

The editorial ended with an admission that the author was aware of the increasing attempts made in the direction of a higher class of poster. Such language as 'theatricalization' suggests a hope that the moving picture poster would move from its circus poster origins to the perceived higher class of the legitimate stage/theater poster.

Later in 1909 an article in *MPW* expressed disappointment with the current poster situation. Writer Hans Leigh had received 'a consignment of about twenty posters to illustrate the most recent films on the market' and found that '[i]n nearly every case a man and a girl were looking at each other, but neither was doing anything in particular ... Now, wouldn't it be just as easy, and just as cheap, to make these people doing something [sic] that would make a passerby want to pay a nickel to see?'⁹³ Leigh explained to lithographic companies that the public wanted to see action over subtle suggestion.

By the following year, though, it seemed the sheer number of posters for individual film titles was increasing. In June of 1910, F.H. Richardson wrote in *MPW* of a 'poster bug' that seemed to him extensive enough to term it 'posteritis'.⁹⁴ He had witnessed



Fig. 7. Patrons repulsed by “crude and inartistic” film posters. (*Motography*, 4 January 1913): 7.

a major shift in 1910 from limited poster usage at theaters in New York City to their possible overuse. Though Richardson did not dismiss the possibility that ‘one or two neatly printed, framed posters [can add] to the attractiveness of the average theater front’, he decried the ‘garish, poster-plastered, cheap-looking, tawdry get-up’ he saw at many theaters.⁹⁵ His best advice was to decorate theaters in a ‘quiet’ way, rather than plastering them ‘with cheap looking posters in all the colors of the rainbow’.⁹⁶

Richardson was not alone, as another 1910 article in *MPW* quoted an unnamed, ‘eminent critic’ saying that ‘if the [photo]plays in the theater are anything like the posters on the walls, I never want to visit and see them’. The article continued to suggest that only ‘cheaper and poorer’ theaters used the available ‘crude and inartistic’ posters with their ‘flaming, glaring colors’; moving picture posters were ‘very seldom seen in front of the best houses’.⁹⁷ Bearing in mind their circus origins, the critic here drew a link between poster usage and lesser-quality moving picture theaters.

Similarly, in November 1911, *Motography* addressed the question of the poster’s merits:

The poster proposition is a severe tax on the motion picture industry. Does it fill a real need or is it only an imaginary necessity? ... There is no profit in posters, except it be to the poster manufacturer. The film makers consider them a nuisance, the film exchanges a bother, and the exhibitor an extra tax on his pocket-book; and what actual benefit are they? Of the pa-

trons of a moving picture theater, ninety percent never read the posters in front.⁹⁸

The belief that ‘ninety percent’ of the patrons did not read the posters seems here to be little more than speculation, as no kind of survey or study is cited.

At any rate, complaints from such critics hardly quelled the growth in the number of posters and poster types. According to *The Nickelodeon* in 1910, ‘Nearly every film manufacturer now gets out a different poster for every release’, even though ‘gets out’ still meant collaboration of some kind with lithographic companies.⁹⁹ Indicative of this increasing usage, the De Witt C. Wheeler Company and the Jerome H. Remick Company worked together in 1910 to create one-sheets for individual song slides of tunes played in moving theaters for use in their displays. *The Film Index* reported that ‘... Mr. Wheeler has been overflowed with requests for these posters’.¹⁰⁰ The rise of posters like these, as well as the proliferation of single-film posters, suggest that the days of the more generic images were largely over by 1910.

To the degree that exhibitors themselves complained about posters, it was primarily on the question of poster cost and availability, as *The Nickelodeon* reported in 1910.¹⁰¹ The following year new complaints arose as to whether the rising number of single-film posters was actually creating less distinction among poster images rather than more. In 1911, for example, *MPW* conveyed complaints from exhibitors in New York City and Cincinnati that involved the ‘sameness in appearance of one company’s posters and others in which the title of the film is made the least prominent [feature]’.¹⁰² It added the belief of some exhibitors that a simple display of a good film title might well draw more audience members that garish colors.¹⁰³

Controversies over poster images

The relatively limited number of surviving pre-1915 moving picture posters makes a modern study of their images a necessarily incomplete task.¹⁰⁴ However, printed editorials and articles in both industry trades and newspapers suggest a robust and at times extremely heated debate about early poster imagery. Part of the controversy erupted from the belief that all too often a poster’s artwork did not accurately reflect the content of the film it promoted. *The Nickelodeon* complained in 1910 that:

Either to reduce the expense of posters, or to fill a vacancy, many exhibitors use posters that are not at all in keeping with the subject of the film. This practice, in many instances, has the effect of deceiving the public, and if allowed to run is bound to work a detriment to the business.¹⁰⁵

The writer added that '... if each exhibitor would use a new, fresh poster of the kind prepared by the manufacturers, there would be an end to the question ...'.¹⁰⁶ The implication of that remark suggests that some exhibitors did not always bother keeping up to date with their displayed posters, which may have meant the theater exterior promoted a different film than was projected in the theater interior. Another trade mention of this problem suggested that sometimes exchanges – against the wishes of the manufacturer of the film – knowingly supplied incorrect posters.¹⁰⁷

The *MPW* of 1911 went even further, decrying the 'lying showman' who was a 'discredit to the business as a whole. He is fooling himself and not the public.' The lie was, of course, the display of posters for films that weren't being screened. Even P.T. Barnum gave the public more reality than this breed of exhibitor, it was claimed. 'There are no intricacies to the ethics of the poster. They can be summed up in one word: "Truth"'.¹⁰⁸

In some cases, however, exhibitors had problems because they *did* use the correct poster, but the poster's art misrepresented what the film was about. In 1913 an editorial in *The Chicago Daily Tribune* claimed, '[i]t is said that many times the dramas shown on the screen 'inside' are not remotely like the posters 'outside.' Whether this may be construed to mean relief or disappointment for the public is food for conjecture'.¹⁰⁹ Along with joking about the accuracy of poster imagery, the author recounted one situation in which an exhibitor took the poster-film disconnection very seriously, writing that '[i]n desperation the manager hung the following placard in a conspicuous place: "We show pictures on the inside not shown on the outside"'.¹¹⁰ That the exhibitor still displayed the posters, however, is a sign of their perceived necessity by 1913.

It does seem that at least one film company understood the complaints and attempted to address them in their own posters. In 1910 *MPW* congratulated Vitagraph for accurately representing images from their films, rather than opting for the '...

usual flashy thing, which generally gives a wrong impression of the character of the subject'.¹¹¹ The same issue chided companies releasing posters that 'exaggerated' what scenes were in the actual moving picture. In particular, *MPW* decried posters for the film *Richelieu*, which featured artwork of men dressed in 1910 fashions rather than the more historically-correct costumes seen in the film.¹¹²

On some occasions, poster artwork depicting images not seen in the films were not mistakes or intentional deception, but instead a kind of artistic license. For example, in 1912 *MPW* reported the Solax Company's plan: '[i]nstead of a scene from the picture this enterprising concern has incorporated in its posters a combination of artistic effects which bring out the central theme of the picture'.¹¹³ Still, some exhibitors and filmgoers viewed such thematic artwork as fraudulent. The same *MPW* article announced that, '[o]ne exhibitor has taken the stand that he and his patrons are misled [*sic*] by showing a scene or an object that is not seen in the picture. The exhibitor maintained that such practices hurt the industry and had a tendency to arouse distrust'.¹¹⁴ Discussion on this topic decreased in the trades after 1912, but that may be less due to its disappearance as a problem than press coverage of a different poster debate.

Both industry trades and city newspapers began to address the belief that too many moving picture posters drew only on the violent aspects of the films they advertised. In 1912 *MPW* wrote that '[t]oo often the most sensational or shocking scene is taken for the subject of the lithograph. Such a poster gives no true idea of the reel, which it is supposed to advertise. The poster is worthless, unless it accomplishes that much'.¹¹⁵ Some exhibitors may have believed that view, but clearly many others who displayed these 'shocking' posters did not; more likely, they saw the sensationalism as a method of gaining audience members.

More problematic than concerns over the advertising ability of a 'shocking' poster were negative responses from moral groups and local authorities. For example, in a 1909 article in *The Boston Globe* entitled 'High Public Morals', the Archdiocesan Federation of Catholic Societies held a meeting at which they decided 'to undertake a crusade for a higher public moral standing' against not only moving picture shows but also moving picture posters.¹¹⁶ This crusade included recommendations for 'more stringent legislation', as well as commendations for poli-

ticians of any party that showed 'a disposition' towards curbing such 'offensive' problems.¹¹⁷

In some cities, these concerns were raised specifically on behalf of area children. *The Washington Post* in 1911 spoke about a law against the exhibition of posters 'presenting to the youth of the District pictorial representations of the commission of or attempts to commit crime'.¹¹⁸ The law prohibited such scenes in moving picture posters as well as in circus publicity. To show a willingness to enforce this law, the police 'inaugurated a crusade' against exhibitors in violation.¹¹⁹ They soon found a violator in Joseph D. Coblentz, proprietor of a moving picture theater that displayed a poster 'depicting the James boys holding up a train and firing a volley in the air with their pistols to intimidate the passengers'.¹²⁰ Coblentz was brought before a judge on 30 March 1911 and pled ignorance of the law. The judge took the exhibitor's bond and released him, the 'test case' serving apparently to act as a serious warning to theater owners against 'any further exhibits of lurid lithographs on the street'.¹²¹

Debates over 'lurid lithographs' grew after the Washington DC incident. *MPW* suggested in April 1912 that '[m]any exhibitors have complained to us that there is too much display of guns and masks and weapons of all kinds on the posters. This, unfortunately, is but too true.'¹²² In a separate editorial that year, the *World* also complained that:

[i]t sickens us every time to look at the huge banners displayed on the streets of New York, wherever traffic is the heaviest, announcing motion pictures of 'famous bandits' and 'terrible crimes.' Millions of people pass these places, see these awful banners (and posters), and not unreasonably conclude that the motion picture is little better than a pictorial Police Gazette in motion. Thus for the sake of a few wretched nickels, incalculable harm is done to this great industry.¹²³

The moral question over the posters was then linked to the long-term economic well-being of the industry. Discussion of posters and economics extended to examining the question of why moving pictures did not draw the upper classes in large numbers. In 1913 *Motography* had '... no difficulty in finding an adequate reply to this obvious question.' Their answer was the 'common, vulgar, garish posters' that needed to be 'abolished' in order to attract wealthy patrons.¹²⁴ The publication proceeded to

speculate that any live theater event 'would be ruined' by the exhibition of such images, which were, '50 per cent worse than the most atrocious poster advertising the most plebian play in the vilest and most poverty stricken purlieus [sic] frequented by the veriest riff-raff of the amusement going public'.¹²⁵ The industry's concerns about poster problems of this type seemed to reach their peak in 1913, as did the outrage over posters in city newspapers.

For example, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* noted in May 1913 the sheer amount of questionable poster images and their 'lurid lettering', mentioning that '[i]t is strange that somebody has not suggested the more offensive poster is a proper field for censorship'.¹²⁶ What the journalist did not seemingly realize was that other cities had already begun censoring posters. Exhibitors in Cleveland in January 1913 announced their plan to end their use of poster displays, a plan that was 'thrust upon them under penalty for violation by Mayor Baker and Chief of Police Kohler'.¹²⁷ In other words, the exhibitors faced arrest if they had not collectively decided to discontinue using posters. This in the city that was home to the A.B.C. Company which had helped trailblaze the single-film poster.

By March 1913, Mayor John F. Fitzgerald of Boston sent a letter to the managers of local movie theaters in which he decried the awful state of posters depicting scenes of 'robbery, safe-breaking, stage robberies, murder, suicide, and other crimes' to vulnerable passersby like children.¹²⁸ Mayor Fitzgerald felt the 'morals of the community' demanded his insistence that absolutely no posters of any kind could be displayed outside the moving picture theaters without having been approved by the mayor's office. The penalty was not arrest, but perhaps something even worse: 'the suspension or revocation' of the theater's license to operate.¹²⁹

The intensity of anti-poster sentiment was strong enough for *MPW* to note that the police in one unnamed city improperly arrested an exhibitor for displaying an offensive poster image. The moving picture the poster advertised had passed an area board of censors, which automatically meant the poster promoting it was lawful to display. The exhibitor was quickly released, with the board of censors apparently not considering how much poster images could vary from the content of the films they promoted. Regardless, the exhibitor's release very much pleased *MPW*, a trade that was opposed to



and very worried about potentially offensive posters.¹³⁰

Likely as a result of the industry and public outcry, some poster designers and theater exhibitors moved in the direction of creating and displaying less offensive imagery. In a July 1913 issue of *MPW*, author W. Stephen Bush wrote that:

There is a wholesome and commendable tendency just now to keep away from flamboyant lithos and to make the lobby display attractive to others than dime-novel readers. This is particularly noticeable in the cheaper sections of the city. Prominent thoroughfares that were but a year ago plastered over with hideous blotches, giving a leprous aspect to a whole block, are now comparatively clean.¹³¹

Bush claimed the clientele stopping to look at these more appropriate posters was of a higher 'quality', presumably meaning the kind of upper-class demographic *Motography* had suggested were offended by lurid poster images.¹³²

A December 1913 *Motography* editorial on 'The Poster Censorship Question' included opinions by J.V. Ritchey, a one-time exhibitor who had 'become active in the poster end of the motion picture art'.¹³³ He believed that 'almost every' poster was

designed with the help of an actual still photograph from the moving picture and chosen with the 'thought of the National Board of Censorship requirements continually acting as a standard.' He also believed that the 'amount of objectionable posters' was quite small.¹³⁴ *Motography* agreed that, if the situation was as Mr. Ritchey described, there would be no cause for concern or censorship. But they seemed uncertain that the reality comported with Ritchey's description that most posters were not offensive. Instead, they hoped for a 'natural improvement' based upon the 'frame of mind' that Ritchey and hopefully other lithographers held.¹³⁵

A 'natural improvement' of the type *Motography* hoped for showed some signs of occurring. Bush's beliefs were echoed in 1914 at a New York City convention, where a 'practical and experienced man' gave a poster talk about the trend towards 'the rational and the sensible' in posters.¹³⁶ At the same time, it does seem certain that this trend had not completely overtaken the more sensational and offensive imagery of prior years. In January 1914, for example, *MPW* editorialized about the ongoing use of violence in posters and suggested that they would soon be reading poster critiques like:

[t]he drops of blood on the six sheets were most realistic. It is suggested that the bottom of the mounted six sheet be saturated with red ink and that the crimson fluid be permitted to flow dropwise into a bucket under the banner'.¹³⁷

Although *MPW* was joking about the amount of blood on posters, in Chicago the poster situation was so heated during 1913 as to cause action at the beginning of the following year. Censorship was in place by February 1914, as Chicago's Chief of Police instructed police officers to remove 'all large signs, posters, and other obstructions [presumably easels] in front of moving picture theaters.' Owners would first have to apply for permits from his office to display posters.¹³⁸

In May 1914 the mayor of Springfield, Missouri banned all moving picture posters, then quickly told exhibitors that he was conditionally rescinding the ban. The reason for his change of heart is unknown, but once again theaters could display posters. New rules, however, meant that they were limited to displaying two one-sheets and two three-sheets, all of which had to be placed in frames.¹³⁹ The ill-feeling towards posters in Springfield was based less on

Fig. 8. Cleveland exhibitors under threat of police poster censorship. From the *Cleveland Leader* (1913) as reproduced in Stephen Bottomore, *I Want to See This Annie Mattygraph* (Pordenone: Giornate del Cinema Muto, 1995): 157.

Fig. 9. Large 6-sheet posters, "thrilling in intensity," promoted by Gaumont in *Moving Picture World* (17 January 1914): 325.



lurid images than on their large size and ragged quality. These rules would have displeased exhibitors who had come to rely on the size of three- and six-sheet posters.¹⁴⁰

A year later, in July 1915, *MPW* ran a story about the censor board in Portland, Oregon, who decried the posters at local moving picture theaters.¹⁴¹ Along with claims that their images were misleading in terms of the actual moving pictures screened and that they presented violent scenes, the board was particularly worried about children who saw them. Mrs. E.B. Colwell, secretary of the censorship board, claimed that '...one often sees groups of youngsters standing in theater lobbies examining posters in minute detail.' The censor board's report suggested that 'film "paper" as well as the film itself should be subjected to official scrutiny before being presented to the public gaze'.¹⁴²

It does not seem as if the Portland censor board got its wish, but their beliefs were certainly shared by many persons inside and outside the film industry. The controversies over image relevance and (im)morality seem to have reached a peak between 1910–1915. Of this era in poster history, a 1914 issue of *Motography* concluded that '[a] collection of such crude, inartistic posters would make a very fine pictorial chamber of horrors'.¹⁴³

End of the poster evil

By the year 1915 posters were firmly in place as a key part of marketing moving pictures. That does not mean that questions about them had disappeared, however. An article in the 7 November 1915 issue of *The Washington Post* featured the thoughts of the Reverend E.A. Sexsmith, who believed that films were 'one of the most potent opponents of the church that exist', and proclaimed that moving picture posters were 'poisoning the minds of the public'.¹⁴⁴

Some of these continuing complaints still drew on the circus origins of the poster. The *Exhibitors Film Exchange* of 30 October 1915:

It is difficult to conceive of a more unsuitable manner of advertising many excellent productions of the day than by the gaudy, bizarre circus banners and paper which many exhibitors hang out in front of their theatres. Exhibitors are far from an intelligent understanding of the patrons of the better-class theaters when they are under the impression that stuff of this sort can possibly attract the intelligent patron into the playhouses.¹⁴⁵

The article continued to admonish theaters against calling up 'the idea of a circus sideshow rather than a modern photoplay'.¹⁴⁶

Though arguments of image morality and aesthetics continued, it does seem that they had lessened. In September 1914, for example, *Motography* wrote that '[t]he poster question is receiving more and more attention from film manufacturers, and the standards today are considerably higher than they were even twelve months ago'.¹⁴⁷ In May 1915 *MPW* discussed the same issue, stating:

No doubt there has been an improvement in this respect. Time was when many exhibitors merely demanded to see 'the flash' and cared next to nothing about the picture. We have evolved from this stage which, nobody objecting, we will call the cave period of filmdom.¹⁴⁸

By the end of the year *MPW* announced: 'There is talk of standardizing the posters. Many things in the industry need standardization more or less urgently, but posters are entitled to first place of the calendar'.¹⁴⁹ The trade admitted that there were 'signs that the poster evil has abated somewhat. Indeed, if there had not been some change for the better the harm done by the lurid poster might have wrought incalculable injury to the whole industry', but

at the same time they believed that there were 'still booking agents and exhibitors who say they care more for 'the paper' than for the pictures ... Such a sentiment is born in ignorance and is a menace to the industry'.¹⁵⁰ In their view, even at the end of 1915, not every exhibitor had quite come out of that 'cave'.

By 1915, however, the poster was moving towards standardization. Emerging studios worked closely with lithographic companies and later developed their own departments for those purposes. Exhibitors believed in the advertising value of posters and certainly displayed them with growing skill at their theaters. They could obtain individual film posters for essentially every release at their local exchanges. Despite the variety of troubles the moving picture poster faced, it became a permanent and integral part of the film industry. *Motion Picture News* in 1919 wrote that, '... in their day and time, [posters] served their purpose – certainly they got results, for the motion picture had an immediate audience. For that, the poster was largely responsible, as it was the direct link between the exhibitor and the public'.¹⁵¹



Fig. 10. Morgan Lithograph Company promoting posters designed to 'make people think about you!' (*Motion Picture News*, 3 April 1915, inside back cover.)

Notes

1. Stephen W. Bush, 'A New Wrinkle in Posters', *Moving Picture World* [MPW] (26 September 1914): 1766.
2. Advertisements for these companies appear repeatedly throughout 1901–1902 in *The New York Clipper*.
3. Advertisement for the Hitchcock Publishing Company, *The New York Clipper* (3 May 1902): 236.
4. *Ibid.*
5. It is true that some of the largest US circuses at times utilized very elegant poster images printed in Europe. For example, see Jack Rennart, *100 Posters of Buffalo Bill's Wild West* (New York: Darien House, 1976). However, trade publications like those cited here are quite definitive and repetitive in their use of the term 'circus' as a derogatory reference to the origin of the moving picture poster. The allusion was likely to lesser-quality posters printed in the US and used by the vast array of small and mid-sized circuses in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Perhaps this perceived distinction between European and US designs and printing even explains an advertisement for Pathé Films [*The New York Clipper* (21 January 1905): 1141] in which they declared as an apparent advantage that their moving picture posters were 'imported'.
6. 'The Ethics of the Poster', *MPW* (13 May 1911): 1054–1055.
7. Daniel Petigor, 'The Development of the Poster', *Motion Picture News* [MPN] (4 October 1919): 2858.
8. 'Passing of Circus Display', *Exhibitors Film Exchange* (30 October 1915): 10.
9. 'The Poster Proposition', *Motography* (November 1911): 206.
10. 'Gaudy Posters Lure to "Movies"', *Chicago Daily Tribune* (4 May 1913): B4.
11. *Public Exhibition Outlets – Moving Picture Machines, Talking Machines* (Chicago, Illinois: Sears, Roebuck, and Co., Inc., 1900): 85. Available in *A Guide to Motion Picture Catalogs by American Producers and Distributors, 1894–1908: A Microfilm Edition* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers, 1985), Reel 5.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Complete Illustrated Catalog of Moving Picture Machines, Stereopticons, Magic Lanterns, Accessories, and Stereopticon Views* (Chicago: Kleine Optical Company, June 1902): 160. Available in *A Guide to Motion Picture Catalogs by American Producers and Distributors, 1894–1908: A Microfilm Edition*, Reel 5.
14. *Complete Illustrated Catalog of Moving Picture Machines, Stereopticons, Slides, Films* (Chicago: Kleine Optical Company, October 1904): 119. Available in *A Guide to Motion Picture Catalogs by American Producers and Distributors, 1894–1908: A Microfilm Edition*, Reel 5.

15. Ibid.
16. Advertisement for the Crescent Eng-Ptg. Co, *The Billboard* (12 May 1906): 3.
17. Epes Withrop Sargent, *Picture Theatre Advertising* (New York: MPW, 1915): 59, discusses these two kinds of posters with the terms 'stock paper' and 'true-to-the-film paper'.
18. *Compagnie Générale de Phonographes Cinematographes et Appareils de Précision* (Paris: Pathé Frères, May 1903): 8. Available in *A Guide to Motion Picture Catalogs by American Producers and Distributors, 1894–1908: A Microfilm Edition*, Reel 4.
19. Advertisement for the Donaldson Lithograph Company. *New York Clipper* (5 December 1903): 987.
20. Advertisement for the Ackermann-Quigley Lithograph Company. *New York Clipper* (30 April 1904): 231.
21. *Catalogue of Stereopticons, Motion Picture Machines, Lantern Slides, Film Accessories and Supplies for the Optical Projection Trade*, Catalogue No. 120 (Chicago: Chicago Projecting Company, 1907): 418. Available in *A Guide to Motion Picture Catalogs by American Producers and Distributors, 1894–1908: A Microfilm Edition*, Reel 6.
22. Ibid.
23. Sargent, *Picture Theatre Advertising*: 59, claims that in the early days of moving picture posters '[True-to-the-film/single-film] paper cost more than double what stock [generic] paper did'.
24. *Complete Illustrated Catalog of Moving Picture Machines, Stereopticons, Slides, Films* (Chicago: Kleine Optical Company, October 1904): 119–120. Available in *A Guide to Motion Picture Catalogs by American Producers and Distributors, 1894–1908: A Microfilm Edition*, Reel 5.
25. Ibid., 120.
26. Ibid., 119.
27. Ibid., 120.
28. Ibid., 120.
29. *Catalogue of Stands, Streamers, Posters, Window Shop Cards, Heralds, Tickets, Novelty Folders* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Hennegan and Co., 1904). Available in *A Guide to Motion Picture Catalogs by American Producers and Distributors, 1894–1908: A Microfilm Edition*, Reel 6.
30. Examples of their ads can be found in *The New York Clipper* (25 February 1905): 28; (15 April 1905): 211; and (21 October 1905): 904.
31. Advertisement for Hennegan and Company, *The Billboard* (2 June 1906): 43.
32. Advertisement for Hennegan and Company, *Optical Magic Lantern and Cinematograph Journal* (February 1907): 101.
33. *Posters, Tickets, Window Cards, Etc.: Special Catalogue* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Hennegan and Co., ca. 1906–1907). Available in *A Guide to Motion Picture Catalogs by American Producers and Distributors, 1894–1908: A Microfilm Edition*, Reel 6.
34. Stephen Rebello and Richard Allen, *Reel Art: Great Posters from the Golden Age of the Silver Screen* (New York: Abbeville, 1988): 19, claim that 'Hennegan Show Print thrived into the teens with work for many film companies, some released by Triangle'.
35. 'Unique Posters', *MPN* (26 August 1911): 6.
36. An advertisement in *MPW* (10 August 1912): 392, confirms this point. See also Sargent, *Picture Theatre Advertising*: 59.
37. For example, an advertisement for a series of four Pathé color posters of film stars [*New York Dramatic Mirror* (29 November 1914): 29] lists 22 different film exchanges nationally where posters could be obtained.
38. 'Billboards', *MPW* (24 August 1912): 763.
39. Advertisement for the Exhibitor's Advertising and Specialty Company, *MPW* (9 March 1912): 880.
40. Ibid.
41. Advertisement for the Photo Play Advertising and Specialty Co., *MPW* (13 April 1912): 175.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. 'Secrets of Success', *MPW* (7 September 1912): 982.
45. 'Most Magnificent Line of Pictorial Printing Ever Made for a Film' [Advertisement], *MPW* (12 July 1913): 269.
46. Advertisement for Bison Films, *MPW* (22 January 1910): 106.
47. 'Melies Has New Poster', *The Film Index* (17 December 1910): 6.
48. 'A Scenic Poster', *The Nickelodeon* (4 March 1911): 254.
49. 'Attractive Lobby Display', *MPW* (27 July 1912): 357.
50. 'Gaumont Issues Photo-Poster', *MPW* (29 June 1912): 1238.
51. '3-Sheets and Booklets with *Romeo and Juliet*', *MPN* (26 August 1911): 7.
52. 'Eight-Sheets, Too, for *Jess*', *MPN* (18 May 1912): 21.
53. 'Posters for Feature Films', *MPW* (24 August 1912): 779.
54. Harry Furniss, 'The Poster – A Poser', *Motography* (4 January 1913): 7.
55. Joe Brandt, 'A Straightforward Talk on Posters', *Motography* (11 July 1914): 41. Brandt's article was actually a transcript of his address at the Convention of the International Motion Picture Association in New York.

56. 'Morgan-Universal Contract Biggest in History of Lithography', *The Universal Weekly* (14 February 1914): 4.
57. Ibid.
58. William I. Sackheim, 'The Making of Signs and Posters for Moving Picture Theaters', *MPW* (22 May 1909): 670. The second part of Sackheim's article appeared in *MPW* (29 May 1909): 709.
59. 'The Question of Posters', *MPW* (20 April 1912): 205.
60. Ibid.
61. Ibid.
62. Untitled, *MPW* (17 August 1912): 647.
63. Sargent, *Picture Theatre Advertising*: 9.
64. *Instructions and General Information for Motion Picture Exhibitors Who Use Enterprise Instruments and Outfits* (Enterprise Optical Company, 1906): 33. Available in *A Guide to Motion Picture Catalogs by American Producers and Distributors, 1894-1908: A Microfilm Edition*, Reel 6.
65. Epes Winthrop Sargent, 'Advertising for Exhibitors', *MPW* (24 August 1912): 762.
66. Ibid.
67. John B. Rathbun, 'Motion Picture Making and Exhibiting', *Motography* (26 July 1913): 69.
68. James F. Hodges, *Picture Theater Facts*. Also known as *Opening and Operating a Motion Picture Theatre: How It Is Done Successfully* (New York: Scenario, 1912): 18.
69. Brandt: 41.
70. 'Do You Mount Your Posters?', *MPW* (29 June 1912): 1236.
71. Brandt: 41.
72. Ibid.
73. Advertisement for The Exhibitors' Advertising Company, *MPW* (13 April 1912): 182.
74. Advertisement for the Chicago Metal Covering Company, *MPW* (5 July 1913): 72.
75. Advertisement for Imp, *MPW* (6 May 1911): 1048.
76. Advertisement for 'The New Edison Lobby Display Frame', *The Kinetogram* (1 April 1912): 15.
77. 'Innovation in Lobby Frames', *MPW* (11 May 1912): 538.
78. Ibid. The term 'photogelatin' for an 11 x 14 photographic advertisement can be seen in such advertisements as one for Warner's Features, *MPW* (22 November 1913): 915.
79. Sargent, 'Advertising for Exhibitors', *MPW* (23 May 1912): 1058. This is a different article than Sargent's 'Advertising for Exhibitors', *MPW* (24 August 1912): 762.
80. Sargent, *Picture Theatre Advertising*: 17.
81. 'Free Posters With Reels', *MPW* (4 February 1911): 251.
82. Ibid.
83. 'Brady the Poster Man Moves', *MPW* (13 April 1912): 117.
84. Ibid.
85. 'Miss Jeanette A. Cohen - Poster Saleswoman', *MPW* (8 November 1913): 620.
86. Ibid.
87. 'Joe S. Edelman Now With World Film Corp.', *The Atlanta Constitution* (18 October 1914): C11.
88. 'A Lesson in Advertising', *The Optical Lantern and Cinematograph Journal* (October 1905): 262-264.
89. Ibid.
90. James K. Meade, 'Advertising the Show', *The Nickelodeon* (February 1909): 43-44.
91. Ibid.: 44.
92. 'The Poster End', *MPW* (27 November 1909): 752.
93. Hans Leigh, 'Some Poor Posters', *MPW* (4 December 1909): 793.
94. F.H. Richardson, 'Posteritis', *MPW* (11 June 1910): 987.
95. Ibid.
96. Ibid.
97. 'The Posters', *MPW* (19 November 1910): 1161.
98. 'The Poster Proposition', *Motography* (November 1911): 206.
99. 'Posters vs. Bulletins', *The Nickelodeon* (15 December 1910): 337.
100. 'Posters Now For Songs', *The Film Index* (15 October 1910): 3. An advertisement in *MPW* (10 August 1912): 590, offered one-, three-, and six-sheet posters for a large number of songs available from the American Song Slide and Poster Company of Chicago, which suggests these kinds of posters remained in use for at least a few years.
101. 'Posters vs. Bulletins', *The Nickelodeon* (15 December 1915): 337.
102. 'The Poster', *MPW* (6 May 1911): 1007.
103. Ibid.
104. A selection of surviving, pre-1915 US moving picture posters can be viewed online at www.oscars.org/mhl/pc/poster.html
105. 'Posters vs. Bulletins': 337.
106. Ibid.
107. 'Censoring Posters', *Motography* (18 October 1913): 263-264.
108. 'The Ethics of the Poster': 1054.
109. 'Gaudy Posters Lure to "Movies"', *Chicago Daily Tribune* (4 May 1913): B4. Later, this same editorial

- appeared as 'Freakish 'Movie' Posters', *New York Times* (25 May 1913): X4.
110. Ibid.
111. 'Original Posters', *MPW* (29 January 1910): 122.
112. Ibid.
113. 'Solax Posters Excite Criticism', *MPW* (27 July 1912): 356.
114. Ibid.
115. 'The Question of Posters', *MPW* (20 April 1912): 205.
116. 'Higher Public Morals', *The Boston Daily Globe* (21 January 1909): 3.
117. Ibid.
118. 'Bans 'Crime' Posters', *The Washington Post* (31 March 1911): 2.
119. Ibid.
120. Ibid.
121. Ibid.
122. 'The Question of Posters': 205.
123. 'Stamp Out the 'Crime Posters'', *MPW* (27 April 1912): 322.
124. Furniss: 7.
125. Ibid.
126. 'Gaudy Posters': B4.
127. 'To Abolish Posters in Cleveland', *Motography* (18 January 1913): 45.
128. 'Mayor Cautions on the 'Movies'', *The Boston Daily Globe* (19 March 1913): 2.
129. Ibid.
130. 'Observations by Our Man About Time', *MPW* (4 January 1913): 38.
131. W. Stephen Bush, 'Arms and the Film', *MPW* (26 July 1913): 404.
132. Ibid.
133. 'The Poster Censorship Question', *Motography* (13 December 1913): 417.
134. Ibid.
135. Ibid.
136. Ibid.
137. 'Facts and Comments', *MPW* (17 January 1914): 387.
138. 'Gleason Dooms "Movie" Signs', *Chicago Daily Tribune* (17 February 1914): 11.
139. 'Rescind Poster Rule', *The New York Dramatic Mirror* (6 May 1914): 31.
140. For example, in 'Advertising for Exhibitors', *MPW* (24 August 1912): 762, Sargent quotes from a letter by an exhibitor in Salt Lake City who suggested his theatre made regular use of these poster sizes.
141. 'Posters Cause Comment', *MPW* (31 July 1915): 856.
142. Ibid.
143. 'The Importance of Good Posters', *Motography* (20 September 1914): 447.
144. 'Aim to Make City Dry', *The Washington Post* (7 November 1915): 18.
145. 'Passing of Circus Display': 10.
146. Ibid.
147. 'The Importance of Good Posters', *Motography* (20 September 1914): 447.
148. 'Facts and Comments', *MPW* (1 May 1915): 699.
149. 'Facts and Comments', *MPW* (18 December 1915): 2151.
150. Ibid.
151. Petigor: 2858.

Abstract: The origin and development of the American moving picture poster, by Gary D. Rhodes

The advertising and promotion of motion pictures has always been closely tied to the use of posters. Through an examination of early catalogues and trade publications, this paper traces the history of the American movie poster from its roots in the circus poster tradition to the establishment of generally accepted industry standards around 1915. The paper discusses both generic and 'true-to-the-film' posters, 'home-made' designs created by exhibitors, and the work of such early film poster printers as Hennegan and Company.

Copyright of Film History is the property of Indiana University Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.