

ALEXANDER BLACK AND THE ART OF THE PICTURE PLAY

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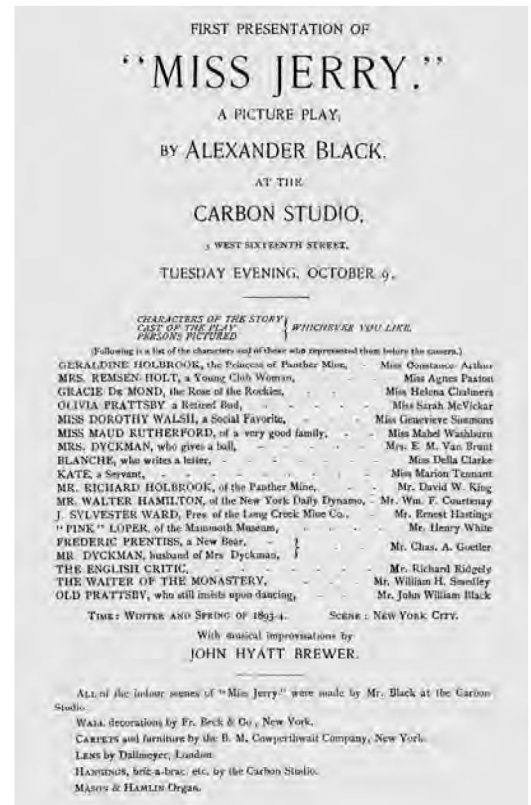
WHILE WORKING IN THE 1890s in New York as a journalist, the expert amateur photographer Alexander Black took a break from his career to create a series of what he called 'Picture Plays'. At the time, he occupied Walt Whitman's former desk as an editor for the *Brooklyn Times*.¹ He would later continue his work in journalism as editor of the lavishly illustrated Sunday edition of the *New York World*. Throughout his life, Black promoted the integration of photography and illustration with the written word. He was a writer on photography as well a photographer in his own right, and wrote several articles and one book engaging the technical and aesthetic questions that faced the amateur photographer of the day. As head of photography at the Brooklyn Institute for Arts and Sciences, he organised events, gave lectures and exhibited photographs.

The Picture Plays, also commonly referred to as 'Photoplays', consisted of successively projected photographs of professional actors and artists' models posed in *tableaux*. Black would read an accompanying narrative and create the illusion of movement by dissolving from one slide to the next at regular intervals of about twenty seconds. The first Picture Play, *Miss Jerry*, first opened at the Carbon Studio Theater, New York, on 9 October 1894 (Fig. 1). With subsequent performances of *Miss Jerry*, Black fine-tuned the Picture Play format to a programme of around 250 slides lasting about an hour and a half. While *Miss Jerry* would remain the most popular of his works, Black went on to produce three more major Picture Plays: *A Capital Courtship* (1896), *Miss America* (1897), and *The Girl and the Guardsman* (1899). Black exhibited these shows (Fig. 2), along with shorter programmes and variants, to upwards of a million people in urban and rural communities across America for ten years.²

As a journalist, Black knew the value of good publicity. He took great care over securing the right kind of critical attention and promoting his shows with his own writing. I will focus on the aesthetic aspects of Black's references to other media and the particular way he created the illusion of movement. While much of this material discusses the relation between Black's work and cinema, I do not intend to claim, as others have done, that the Picture Plays or similar magic lantern shows 'inspire' or 'prefigure' later cinematic techniques.³ My interest is more in how ideas about cinema and other media were used to shape and guide the Picture Plays throughout their decade of popularity. While Black has received no more than brief mentions in the past seventy-five years of historical writing on the cinema, it is surprising to find how extensively he and other journalists wrote about the Picture Plays' relation to the cinema in journals such as *Harper's Weekly*, *The Century*, *Scribner's* and *Variety*. Not only was Black discussed in the 1890s alongside Eadweard Muybridge and Thomas Edison, he was rediscovered in the American popular press of the 1910s and 1920s as 'the grandfather of the picture play'. Writers on cinema in this period found remarkable parallels to the silent feature film in Black's media experiments of the previous generation. They emphasised affinities in staging, composition, exhibition context and story construction, despite the fact that Black's Picture Plays replicated motion by radically different technological means.

Since then, writing on the Picture Plays has been scarce. In recent years the availability of the material combined with the current emphasis on multimedia research have primed the Picture Plays and their connections across media for a closer look by media historians. Thanks to recent archiving efforts, the material that survives from Black's performances is now easier to access and search than it has been in decades. Paula Entin at Princeton University Library's Department of Rare Books and Special Collections has been working to identify and catalogue the 145 glass slides in the collection, and Mark McMurray at St Lawrence University Special Collections has done the same with a collection of Black's papers and publicity material.

Happily, these developments in the archives come at a time when changes in the way modern media history is being written are rendering the Picture Plays less and less anomalous. Signalled by a number of new research projects and organisations dealing with relations between different media, these changes suggest an increased attention to moments, however brief, when media practices converge. Black's pictorial narratives offer a unique case study in this context because of the way he synthesised multiple media traditions in his productions. These traditions are and were clearly recognisable, but so is the novelty of Black's synthesis of them. Black turned to the cinematography of Thomas Edison and the motion studies of Eadweard Muybridge as a way of conceptualising the novelty of his productions. He did this not only to suggest an affinity between his productions and motion pictures, but also to point out what he saw as their aesthetic limitations. Black's Picture Plays are as

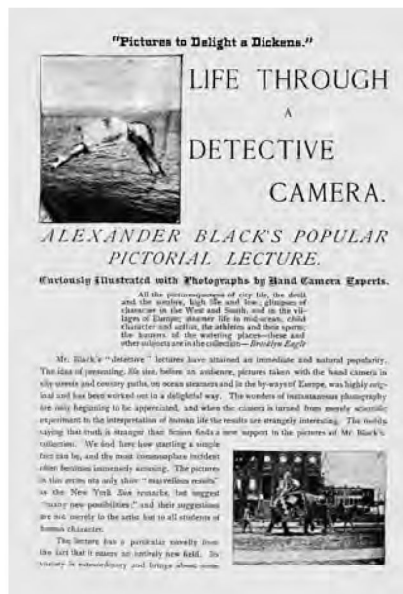
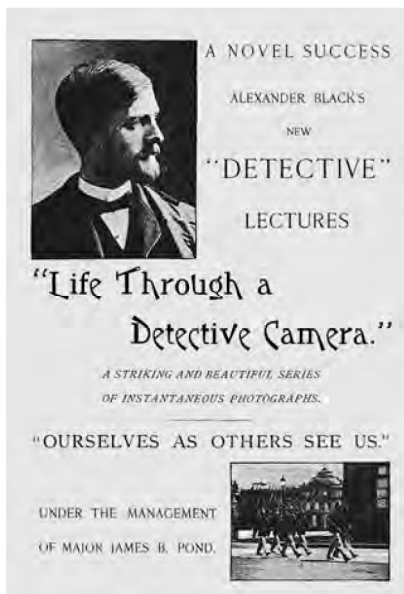


1. Programme for first performance of *Miss Jerry* (handbill in the Billy Rose Theater Collection of the New York Public Library)
 2. Handbill advertising Black's four Picture Play presentations (St Lawrence University Library)



NOTES

- Alexander Black, *Time and Chance; Adventures with People and Print* (New York, Toronto: Farrar & Rinehart, 1937).
- The last year of travelling exhibition in Black's ledger, held at the New York Public Library, is 1904.
- See for example Burnes Saint Patrick Hollyman, 'Alexander Black's Picture Plays, 1893-1894', in John L. Fell (ed.), *Film Before Griffith* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).



4. Sequence of five consecutive slides from a scene in *A Capital Courtship* (Princeton University Library)

3. Two handbills for Black's lantern lecture *Life Through a Detective Camera* (St Lawrence University Library)

essential to understanding the history of cinema's relation to other pictorial media as Muybridge's motion studies are to technologically oriented media histories. The Picture Plays consciously engaged aesthetic questions surrounding the reception of the inventions of these well-known figures. This is most clearly evident in the way Black created the illusion of motion of bodies on the screen. Although using instantaneous photography, he constructed his pictorial narratives to erase what many people at the time saw as a jarring aesthetic impropriety in the images of instantaneous photography and mechanically represented motion.

The methods for telling stories with pictures in the nineteenth century have often been discussed in terms of their fluidity of translation through a variety of different forms. Martin Meisel's influential book *Realizations*, for example, traces a common aesthetic sensibility through the various pictorial arts available in the nineteenth century.⁴ Black's Picture Plays are revealing in the way they reoriented a number of these traditions from a previous generation in relation to a media environment which was rapidly changing with the development of motion picture technologies. Elements of amateur photography, the lantern lecture, theatrical staging, the *tableau vivant* and the illustrated novel, all with firm roots in the pictorial tradition that Meisel describes, found their way into the Picture Plays in a peculiar configuration. They helped Black to realise an aesthetically conservative response to the developments in motion photography before the decorative painterly style in photography and cinema took up this task in another way.⁵ He returned to a pictorial sensibility from earlier in the nineteenth century by incorporating established pictorial forms and, more systematically, by softening the illusion of movement.

The fictional Picture Plays were modelled on Black's non-fiction lantern lectures. At the Brooklyn Institute he presented a series of lantern shows which he called 'The Detective Lectures', using slides made from amateur photographs taken by him and other members of his group. The most complete of these, *Life Through a Detective Camera*, was first presented in 1891 with the tagline 'Pictures to Delight a Dickens' (Fig. 3). They were performed on the stages of small theatres, with Black impersonating the voices of rudimentary characters. To create early suggestions of space and time in his non-fiction lectures, he began to use transition effects between slides in combination with realist composition. The slides employed sharp focus, strong lighting and considerable depth of field, and avoided the distortion of space in their camera placement and lens choices. The Picture Plays bear the marks of this objective use of photography. Black repeatedly referred to the Picture Plays as 'the art of the *tableau vivant* plus the science of photography'.⁶

With regard to the posing and picturing of fictional situations, Black took several cues from theatrical and *tableau vivant* staging conventions, while also asserting his departure from these conventions. In particular, the range of artists's models, professional actors and amateurs in the Picture Plays reflected this hybrid formation. Blanche Bayliss, who played the title character of Miss Jerry, was used to holding poses as the well-known model of the illustrator A.B. Wenzell. Her romantic interest

4. Martin Meisel, *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).
5. For a discussion of the aesthetics of the Picture Plays in relation to pictorialist photography, see Alexander Black, 'The New Photography', *Century Magazine* Vol. 64 No. 6 (1902). Black's essay is paired with an essay by the photographer Alfred Stieglitz on the same subject.
6. Alexander Black, 'Photography in Fiction: "Miss Jerry", the First Picture Play', *Scribner's Magazine* Vol. 18 No.3 (1895).

in the story was played by William Courtenay, a stage actor and later a Hollywood film actor in the 1910s. They were photographed in a series of poses, avoiding direct address to the audience, occasionally with their backs to the camera. These poses were modified *tableaux*. Rather than freezing moments of intensified dramatic situations, the pictures formed a series, which integrated dramatic situations within a continuous flow of dramatic action (Fig. 4). The slides were framed with arches replicating the proscenium arch of the theatre, in the manner of many pictorial arts in the nineteenth century. Further gesturing toward the theatre, Black separated each act with a photograph of a curtain coloured red, and closed each performance with a 'curtain call' slide of the cast holding hands ready to take a bow (Fig. 5).



5. 'Curtain call' slide featuring the cast of *Miss Jerry*, reproduced on the final page of the novel of the same title (author's collection)

The third intermedial connection with the Picture Plays was the illustrated novel. The Picture Plays were produced and performed during the early years of the so-called 'golden age' of novel illustration and were frequently described as a kind of novel illustration. The stories lent themselves so well to the existing demand for novelty in illustrated fiction that Black published each one in book form long before he finished touring with the lantern show versions. *Miss Jerry*, *A Capital Courtship*, and *The Girl and the Guardsman* were published as novellas (Fig. 6), each with 20–30 photographic illustrations selected and cropped from the original 250 slides.⁷ In response to their popularity Black wrote a fourth novel in 1899 entitled *Captain Kodak*,⁸ a story of three boys who form a camera club illustrated with slides from Black's early 'Detective Lectures' combined with new slides of child actors in narrative situations. The illustrations function as documentation to support the plot as well as narrative illustration of the episodic story. This book deserves to be analysed as Black's most sustained application of his Picture Play format to the illustrated novel.

These technical borrowings and explicit references to other media are readily apparent to anyone familiar with the visual entertainments of this period. While these references evoked conceptions of familiar entertainments from his audience, Black also explicitly foregrounded the novelty of their combination. The Picture Plays were to be understood as new media productions. A hand-coloured slide of an act curtain refers to the theatre, but asserts its difference from the theatre by being a projected image. While the Picture Plays appealed to audiences with a desire to distinguish themselves from those who preferred more popular media attractions of the period, a similar curiosity was encouraged in both types of amusement. In Black's publicity brochures, the Picture Play was called a 'play on a white sheet', an 'illustrated author's reading', and a 'story in pictures'. An emphasis on the novelty of this synthesis can be seen in a testimonial included in the programme for *Miss Jerry*:

Mr. Black's Picture Play marks a distinct epoch in the development and use of the stereopticon. It retains a favorite means of entertainment, but it applies it

in a totally new field. ... Here is an absolute novelty in a favorite amusement — a good story, with continuous illustrations; dramatic situations illustrated from real life; a sort of interrupted kinetoscope; a drama before an open camera.⁹

This assertion of an amusement qualitatively different from its components formed an essential part of the promotion and reception of the Picture Plays, but claims to novelty are not remarkable in and of themselves at this period. What is significant in this case is that Black staked his status as inventor on the Picture Plays' relation to what he saw as the aesthetic possibilities and limitations of cinematography.

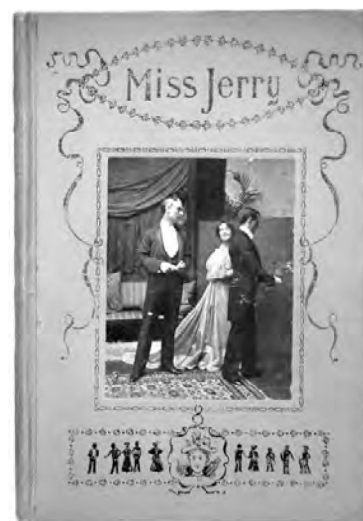
Black's invention is very much related to the birth of 'cinema', in the sense of André Gaudreault's recent discussion of the term as 'a social, cultural, and artistic apparatus' as opposed to the technological definition of cinematography. In Gaudreault's formulation it is imprecise to understand 'early cinema' as a distinct medium in the years when it was chiefly understood as a kind of technical aid to other practices such as lantern shows, magic shows and instantaneous photography.¹⁰ Black's productions inverted this model, in their search for an identity as a medium, a 'social, cultural, and artistic apparatus', based on an imagined possibility for the cinematograph without actually using a cinematograph. To put this another way, Black experimented with the creation of what we now understand as 'cinema' by other means. But although the technological and intermedial roots outlined above give a brief sense of the variety of means Black used to create the Picture Plays, when he described his processes in any depth he continually returned to motion picture technology as a point of reference.

In numerous instances in his writing, Black mentioned his encounter with Eadweard Muybridge's motion photography in 1889, and stated that he had kept up to date with the latest developments in Edison's laboratory. In 1896 he wrote:

Pending the perfection of the Vitascope, the cinematograph, and kindred devices, the ordinary camera, in partnership with the rapidly dissolving stereopticon, gives freest expression to the processes of the Picture Play ... for a greater clearness and steadiness in pictorial result.¹¹

This connection was rarely lost on reviewers. One 1895 review in the *Boston Herald* was even titled 'Sort of Big Kinetoscope'.¹² In Black's own ideas about his experiments as well as in their reception, these conceptual links to the cinema resurfaced continually. I will highlight one visual aspect of this connection, not just to make a point about emulation of cinema, but to show specifically how the Picture Plays presented an aesthetically conservative critique of the new possibilities of representing movement that were being opened up by developments in instantaneous photography and cinematography. While a more complete visual analysis of Black's critique of the photography of bodies in motion will eventually need to include a discussion of his choices in screen direction, staging, visual effects and text-image relations, I will focus here on the way he created the illusion of motion.

When Black mentioned a kind of imperfection in motion picture technology, his concern was less with an imagined goal of the institution of 'the cinema' than with a more specific aesthetic critique. In an interview he admitted, 'I have tried moving pictures,



6. Cover of Black's 1895 novelisation of *Miss Jerry* (author's collection)

7. Alexander Black, *Miss Jerry* (New York: Scribner, 1895); *A Capital Courtship* (New York: Scribner, 1897); and *The Girl and the Guardsman* (New York: Scribner, 1900).

8. Alexander Black, *Captain Kodak: A Camera Story* (Boston: Lothrop Publishing, 1899).

9. Programme held in the Billy Rose Theater Collection, New York Public Library.

10. André Gaudreault, 'The Diversity of Cinematographic Connections in the

Intermedial Context of the Turn of the 20th Century', in Simon Pople and Vanessa Toulmin (eds), *Visual Delights: Essays on the Popular and Projected Image in the 19th Century* (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 2000).

11. Alexander Black, 'The Camera and the Comedy', *Scribner's Magazine* Vol. 20 (1896).

12. 'Sort of Big Kinetoscope', *Boston Herald*. Undated clipping (1894?) held by St Lawrence University Library Special Collections.

but they are too trying for the eyes, and I find dissolving views the best."¹³ Black occasionally experimented with combination shows involving the cinematograph and the stereopticon, which as Charles Musser has noted was a common practice among the members of the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences.¹⁴ These combination shows seem to have been more prevalent, however, in his non-fiction lectures. His preference for dissolving lantern slides in the Picture Plays came out of his more general concerns with the ability of instantaneous photography to freeze motion. In an exemplary essay, he explained how these dissolving views avoid the effects seen in 'those distressing glimpses of the horse in motion, which are true to the instant and false to the larger fact'.¹⁵ In his 1894 book *Photography Indoors and Out*, he discussed the aesthetic aspects of Muybridge's advancement in the representation of motion, arguing that 'artists do not yet agree to represent locomotion as it appears at any one movement, – holding that a picture should combine the impression of more than one movement.'¹⁶

With reference to Edison and Muybridge, Black was voicing a concern common among those invested in nineteenth-century aesthetic ideas about pictorial representation. He was reacting against the visual discontinuity of instantaneous photography and mechanically reproduced motion that was essential to early cinema's popularity and would later become essential to modernist filmmakers. Black and his audiences preferred the way the lantern represented motion. One of the problems often raised with the use of the term 'pre-cinema' is that it implies that these other forms are somehow incomplete. In Black we have an example of a media producer and exhibitor who selected and combined a variety of practices and technologies, and who made decisions based on an acute understanding of the visual properties of each. An implication of incompleteness here would undermine the attempt to understand these decisions historically. Looking at the illusion of movement in the Picture Plays, we must account for the reasons behind the marked erasure of the 'distressing glimpses' of frozen or mechanised images. An 1894 article in *Harper's Weekly* contained the most pithy formulation of Black's particular method of representing movement: 'It was not wished to produce the *illusion of actual action*, as the Kinetoscope of Mr. Edison has since presented it, but [the illusion] of *actual glimpses of action*.'¹⁷

It is important to see this distinction as an active choice rather than as a technical compromise. There is no question that the slides in dissolving series present a kind of illusion of motion, and, with over 200 slides to a story, we also see a project qualitatively different from other Life Model narratives produced by lantern companies such as Bamforth in Britain and Scott & Van Alton in the US. While the Picture Plays share similarities with traditional Life Model slide sets, the difference between 250 and 15 slides per story creates a radically different sense of the unfolding of time between slides. The *Boston Herald* critic noted, 'Even when there is a conversation which requires the same scene for several minutes the views are constantly changing to show different expressions and postures.'¹⁸ The distinction here is between a sustained illusion of motion and a series of changes between illustrative moments. The large number of slides also prompted Black to include some scenes shot outside of the studio. This was an advantage he enthusiastically supported in his article on the possibility of producing Picture Plays at home, but it is rarely seen in the Life Model slide sets of other producers.¹⁹

In the Picture Play slide sets, each slide is carefully registered and the camera position is fixed so that the elements of the decor remain in the same position throughout the scene. The actors appear to move through a series of poses within this stationary *mise en scène*. As I noted above, these poses differ from stage *tableaux* because it is just as important for them to show glimpses of action as it is for them to display dramatically significant moments. Black avoided not only the climactic stasis of the dramatic *tableau*, but also any

suggestion of an instantaneous moment in his poses. 'Avoid effects of action that will not bear the duration of twenty seconds,' he advised those who would produce amateur Picture Plays. 'Prefer moments just before or just after action.'²⁰ A handshake might be shown in an approaching shot or a relaxed posture after the handshake, but the two characters would never be frozen mid-grasp. The effect of this is a series of photographs with a strange relation to time. Each slide, technically speaking, is instantaneously photographed, but it is photographed and presented in such a way as to depict the elapsed time between the two adjacent slides in the series. Poses of less decisive action can better depict this kind of protracted duration. They create images that, to rephrase Black's own words, may be false to the instant, but are true to the larger fact.

When Black spoke of this 'larger fact' in this context, he was making an aesthetic claim. Operating in a period spanning the invention of motion picture technology to the beginning of the nickelodeon era, Black used his tools from photographic and magic lantern technologies to pointedly return to a tradition of representing bodies in motion handed down from nineteenth-century painting and related pictorial arts. Black directly used and cited a variety of these pictorial arts, and then further tried to undo certain effects of motion photography by way of traditional ideas shared among these different arts. He used pictorial effects in introductory slides and *segues*, but even his realistically photographed scenes, when shown together, suggested another way of manifesting this pictorial sensibility. Black softened the distressing glimpses of the horse in motion and the kinds of mischievous grimace noticed in the Lumière's still photographs with an illusion of motion that bore a mark of propriety from earlier in the nineteenth century. This is not to say that Black was a simple traditionalist refusing to acknowledge the possibilities of the changes happening in his media environment. He was a modern showman, very aware of new media and actively promoting the novelty of his own productions. He was a producer of experimental 'new media' in the full sense of the term, and it is precisely this fact combined with his specific aesthetic orientation that makes him such a revealing case in modern media history – to us today, as well as to those involved in the production of feature films a generation after *Miss Jerry*.

It was only when, in the 1910s, the terms 'Picture Play' and 'Photoplay' had become names for the feature film that Black was recognised as an important historical figure. Using the surprisingly descriptive term 'slow movie', beginning around 1915, writers understood Black's first screening of *Miss Jerry* within the same artistic horizon as the films made a generation later. Adolf Zukor made a film about Black to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Miss Jerry* and what Zukor saw as its affinity to the modern film.²¹ Black's Picture Plays were considered less as a primitive step than, as Harriet Underhill termed them, 'a false start' in the development of the Photoplay.²² False starts, dead ends and repetitions, when identified as such, are often more revealing than direct developments. If Alexander Black's novel synthesis of pictorial practices allowed spectators in 1896 to imagine possible futures for the Kinetoscope, it also allowed spectators in 1917 to imagine an early incarnation of the omnivorous feature film. In relation to a period in film history when many directors were drawing heavily from nineteenth-century pictorialist styles – from theatre, but also from painting, photography and illustration – an analysis of Black's 'false start' can open a line of inquiry into the media environment of the following generation just as it does for the years of cinematography before cinema.

Kaveh ASKARI is a researcher at the University of Chicago, working on a PhD on aspects of media history. This article is based on a paper given at the 'Multimedia Histories' conference in Exeter in July 2003.

13. 'An Interview with Alexander Black', *Kalamazoo Telegraph* 9 January 1901.

14. See Charles Musser and Carol Nelson, *High-Class Moving Pictures: Lyman H. Howe and the Forgotten Era of Traveling Exhibition, 1880–1920* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

15. Black, 'The Camera and the Comedy' (my italics).

16. Alexander Black, *Photography Indoors and Out: A Book for Amateurs*, 4th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1897).

17. 'Making the First Picture Play', *Harper's Weekly* 38 (1894).

18. 'Sort of Big Kinetoscope'.

19. Alexander Black, 'How to Give a Picture Play', *Ladies Home Journal* Vol. 15 No. 11 (1898).

20. Black, 'How to Give a Picture Play'.

21. Movietone News, *Alexander Black, Grandfather of the Picture Play* (Canton, New York, 1919). St Lawrence University Library Special Collections.

22. Harriet Underhill, 'Unreeling the Past of the Motion Picture', *New York Tribune* 9 November 1919.