

# REVERB

## Our Thanks

Although we did not see the material you ran about MPL Table Talk in a recent issue, we have had several requests for Table Talk with notations that they had read about our series in your magazine.

Thank you very much.

**Lynn Bigbee**  
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## Opinion vs. News

Stephen Chesley's statement that the film made by Insight Productions for the La-Marsh commission on violence in the media "blatantly advocates" censorship does not, I feel, belong in the Film News section in which it appeared (no. 26).

The statement, whatever its merits, is not a news item but an opinion, and as such, I feel, would be more appropriate in a review, an "Opinion" column, or in a feature article of opinion.

My own view is that **Reflections on Violence** presents a mass of mutually exclusive viewpoints on violence in the media in a relatively balanced alternation of sequences which leaves viewers free to respond however they like.

An example of this balance is seen in the ending. Although the final sequence in the film is devoted to psychiatrist Vivian Rakoff's rhetorical question concerning the effects of media violence on "one's perceptions and expectations of the world," the sequence just before it features Gordon Sinclair, who comments, "The idea that we should be a bunch of pablum-fed namby-pambies is nonsense to me." Rakoff's advantage as the last speaker in the film is compensated for, in this case, by Sinclair's more powerful camera presence, which he has perfected over years of broadcasting.

Some viewers say the film openly supports censorship. Others see the film as a bare-faced espousal of Gordon Sinclair's view that "Violence is damn well entertaining... and you're not going to stamp it out."

This range of reactions to the film affirms, in a way, one of my favourite aphorisms, which is that "We see the world not as it is but as we are."

**Jaan Pill**

## Inaccuracy and Omission

Writings on the history of film in this country have traditionally suffered from

the twin failings of inaccuracy and omission brought about partly through inadequate research and cross-checking and partly as a consequence of the notoriously fragmentary and scattered state of primary source materials on the subject. Unfortunately, once committed to print, a statement tends to assume an aura of veracity which can prove difficult to dispel. Hence errors and misconceptions as well as facts are passed along from writer to writer until it becomes difficult to distinguish between them.

I am disappointed to find that **Cinema Canada** has allowed itself to perpetuate this tradition. I refer in particular to the piece "The First Films In Canada", by Gary Evans, which appeared in the Historical Notes column, issue no. 26. It is a prime example of the sort of historical writing which does as much to confuse as to clarify an issue.

In an effort to undo the damage done, permit me to enumerate the errors immediately evident:

### Paragraph 1:

"1896 was the year of the first film show in Canada."

- To be exact, 1896 was the year of the first motion picture **projection** in Canada. Films had been on view in this country through the medium of the Kinetoscope (a peep-show machine) since 1894.

"Ottawa used the Edison Kinetoscope..."

- The machine in question - the Edison projector - was known as the Vitascope, the Kinetoscope being a viewing machine only.

### Paragraph 2:

"The first claim... was by Jack Green, magician, whose Ottawa show occurred in June, 1896, on an Edison Kinetoscope..."

- In fact, this particular show took place a month later. Green himself used to claim variously that it had occurred on June 15 or 16, but contemporary newspaper reports indicate that it took place on July 21.

- Green's actual role in this showing should be clarified. In 1896 the Ottawa Street Railway Co. extended its line out to West End Park at Britannia. In order to drum up business they arranged for a film presentation using the Edison Vitascope, which they leased from its Canadian concessionaires, the Holland brothers. As an added attraction the company engaged the itinerant magician, Belzac (John Green), for the first two weeks of the presentation, which ran until the end of August. His place in the program was subsequently filled by a variety of other performers. Although Green later did become an exhibitor - and his story is a colorful one - he was not himself responsible for the first Ottawa presentation of the Vitascope.

### Paragraph 3:

"... also that only one other machine was in operation at that time in New York."

- Assuming that this is a quote from Green's letter as it appeared in *Canadian Film Weekly Yearbook*, 1951, p. 25, it should read:

"... also that only one other machine was in operation at that time in New York at the Eden Musee, if my memory serves me right."

- The omission of Green's qualifier, "if my memory serves me right", tends to give an unnecessary force of conviction to what turns out to be an erroneous statement anyway. The projector which made its American debut simultaneously at the Eden Musee and Keith's Union Square Theater on June 29, 1896, was the Lumière Cinématographe, not the Vitascope.

### Paragraph 4:

"First four films - four colored boys eating watermelon, Black Diamond Express running 80 miles an hour, the New York Central Railway, a betting scene at Atlantic City, and La Loie Fuller doing the Butterfly Dance..."

- Again, if this a quote from *Canadian Film Weekly Yearbook*, "... a betting scene..." should read "... a bathing scene..."

- As for the films shown, contemporary accounts vary considerably, but none bears more than a superficial resemblance to the list cited by Green. This is none too surprising since the Green recollections cited date from almost half a century after the fact.

### Paragraphs 5 & 6:

- The Guay/Vermette exhibition of Lumière films and machinery is alluded to in several accounts of early Canadian exhibition, but none of the allusions bears either a concrete date or reference to any primary source. Ouimet's claim to have seen the Lumière equipment in Montreal early in 1896 seems unlikely. The Lumière Cinématographe made its U.S. public debut on June 29, 1896 and was shown at the Toronto Industrial Exhibition (later the C.N.E.) at the end of August. This latter showing was reviewed in the *Toronto Mail and Empire* on September 7, 1896: "... The invention is a French one, made by M.M. Lumiere (sic) of Lyons, and - with the exception, I believe, of New York - has never before been shown upon this continent - **certainly never before in Canada.**" (my emphasis)

### Paragraph 8:

"He would open Montreal's first successful cinema in 1900 and within a few years was one of North America's wealthiest exhibitors of film entertainment."



- Ouimet opened the first Ouimetoscope on January 1, 1906. This is a particularly inexcusable error in that it contradicts statements made in an earlier issue of **Cinema Canada**, and bears the added distinction of an editorial footnote referring to the contradicted material.
- There is much evidence concerning Ernest Ouimet, but none to suggest that he was particularly wealthy, much less one of North America's wealthiest exhibitors. If anything the evidence as it stands would seem to suggest the contrary.

**Paragraph 9:**

*"Perhaps after all, it is not important to establish historical firsts, for in terms of the film industry and film commerce, it was Edison's company which established itself firmly in the new North American market and attained a position of predominance, including a leading position in the infant newreel industry."*

- If anything, this article **does** demonstrate the importance of establishing historical firsts. The importance lies not so much in their distinction as "firsts" but in their accurate establishment, forming a firm base for the construction of a true historical account.
- Regarding Mr. Evans' contention re the Edison Co., I would strongly suggest that he re-read his American film history. While Canadian film history is inadequately documented, American film history is relatively well established, leaving little excuse for such naive oversimplification.

In closing I would like to draw attention to the advertising material reproduced along with the article. The failure to identify these items renders them thoroughly irrelevant to the article (they would bear little relevance to it even if identified) and negates their value as a part of the body of historical source material readily available to the public. This reduction of historical documents to the status of decoration would seem to indicate a rather superficial approach to film history. This too I find disappointing.

**Michie Mitchell**

**Evans replies:**

*My thanks to Peter Morris and Michie Mitchell for setting the historical record straight regarding the conflicting claims for the first film projection in Canada. I came across the two sources I quoted at the Centre de Documentation Cinématographique of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Montréal. Both were in the unfinished and unpublished manuscript of a book which Hye Bossin, editor of Canadian Film Weekly, was writing on the history of the film in Canada for the National Film Board in the early '50s.*

*Jack Green's 1944 account of the event was written in his own hand in a letter to Bossin. The letter which Mr. Mitchell quotes appeared seven years later in the Canadian Film Weekly Yearbook. It is apparent that some time between 1944 and 1951 Green modified his 1944 letter, but*

*with the exception of the typographical error "bathing" not "betting", I am not guilty of having misquoted the gentleman.*

*Bossin's version of the Ouimet account seems to have been proven now to be historically inaccurate and I join Mr. Morris and Mr. Mitchell in committing it to the dustbin of history. I am especially looking forward to reading Mr. Morris's and Mr. Co's History of Canadian Film.*

*To correct Mr. Mitchell's misreading of my statement about the position of predominance which the Edison Company attained, I refer him to Raymond Fielding's The American Newsreel 1911-1967. Fielding states that Edison, Biograph and Vitagraph were the major producers of news films in this early period. "Such evidence that survives - copyright records, newspaper accounts, reminiscences, and the like - indicates that Edison was far and away the most prolific producer of news films during the pre-1900 period." (page 16) It was these companies (and Edison's in particular) to which I was referring when I mentioned the infant newsreel industry in North America and not Pathé Frères. Newsreel, Vitagraph's Monthly of Current Events or the Gaumont Animated Weekly which dominated the market a decade later.*

*Finally, I would like to call attention to the excellent film library of the Centre de Documentation Cinématographique, located at 350 McGill Street, Montreal. While much of their primary source material remains uncatalogued, I uncovered a significant amount of material related to the documentary film movement, John Grierson and the early years of the National Film Board. Besides the 13,500 volumes on film and film-related subjects, the library has some 450 periodicals, including a number of complete collections of early film magazines. This treasure of information is under the direction of M. Pierre Allard.*

**Gary Evans**

*Historical research is an arduous and delicate thing, and new truths are always possible. Both Mr. Mitchell and Mr. Morris (who contributes to Historical Notes in this issue) chose to respond to Mr. Evans' article. They, however, do not agree upon the spelling of John Green's name; is it "Belsaz" the Magician or "Belzac" the Magician? We trust that one will write us a letter next month to clarify the question and that we can brighten up a long, hot summer with the continuing debate over the first film to be seen in Canada. - Ed.*

**Of Programme and Colour**

In order to leave no possible doubt in the minds of **Cinema Canada** readers I would like to clarify a couple of points pertaining to the March issue (no. 26).

Although I am listed (page 3) as a contributor (Historical Notes) it should not be assumed that I have an editorial function in relation to this column. I do not. To be more explicit, I had not seen the contribution of Mr. Gary Evans and was totally ignorant of its contents.

My second point concerns the item for which I was responsible (page 41) which did not appear in its original form. Six months ago, when I was first asked to contribute to **Cinema Canada**, I was given a style sheet which specified English spelling. As submitted my contribution conformed to this standard. The change to American spelling was done without my knowledge, much less my consent. I have since been given to understand that this is to be standard from now on.

I am, to say the least, surprised that **Cinema Canada**, for all its pious pronouncements on Canadian content, should choose to adopt American spelling and this at a time when more and more Canadians are manifesting their rising consciousness of the cultural and economic domination exercised over them by the United States.

Dare I, as a 'new' Canadian, add that this initiative seems to me to be particularly unfortunate considering that the editors of **Cinema Canada** are 'new' Canadians.

The question of Canadian content brings me to the cryptic box on page 9. Now really! If you have an answer to the accusations leveled by this sister publication which must remain nameless - and I'm sure you have - just print it, tell us all who it's aimed at, and get it over. Or forget it!

An uneasy conscience? As the bard put it, "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown." Yes indeed. And well it might.

**D. John Turner**

*D. John Turner has always been listed among the contributors to Cinema Canada and never among the editorial staff. It is clear that contributors have no responsibility for articles except those which carry their byline. Out of courtesy, he was informed that Mr. Evans' article was to be run since he, Mr. Turner, had contributed nothing to Historical Notes for two months.*

*In all, the editors changed the spelling of two words in his article: programme and colour became, respectively, program and color. Despite our specific request to contributors to use English spelling, over 80% insist on using American spelling and the time spent changing copy and the risk of increased typographical error made us abandon the use of English spelling. There are more important battles to be fought... Mr. Turner was, however, sent the galleys of his article and was aware of the changes before the article was printed.*

*"New Canadians," yes; and aside from the Indians and Eskimos, we're all new Canadians, aren't we?*

*Yes, some do seem to have an uneasy conscience. We have responded to our sister publication and the response is available to all who want it. In our opinion, the debate didn't merit space in the pages of Cinema Canada.- Ed.*