How did narrative film emerge? A consideration of the role of the music hall's and variety theatre's dramatic sketch

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How do histories of early motion pictures account for the origins and expansion of narrative film? Film histories will inevitably consider the sources of adaptation from extant popular narrative sources, notably from the novel and stage. It is tempting to draw a connecting line between the stage and screen – as if dramatic movies had evolved directly and exclusively from the so-called 'legitimate' stage[1], the playhouses of Europe and America and their acting companies.

Indeed, there is some truth – if only a decidedly limited one – to this assumption. The practices of nineteenth century stage are embedded and visible in many early films, and these reminders of the theatre are frequently observable because early filmmakers, with prior experience in the theatre and newly confronting the problems of filmmaking, employed their former craft techniques. Visualising and creating *mise-en-scène* and pantomimic gestural stage-acting were imitated or co-opted by these first makers, and the very fact of story-telling provides a further link to the origins of narrative film.

There is also no doubt that motion pictures quickly drew on depicting the anecdotal – the first attempts at narrative film but equally a practice carried over from the theatre. From the moment of the Lumière's *L'Arroseur arrosé* (*The Sprayer Sprayed*, 1895)[2], the camera proved itself capable of capturing and entertaining its viewers with a brief narrative that began with an inciting action (a gardener tricked into looking at the nozzle of his blocked hose and being blasted with a spray), middle action (the gardener realises how he has been tricked), and ending (the gardener catches the mischievous boy and drenches him with his hose).

A further step was to look to the theatre narrative subject matter, but

here we run up against the brevity of the early anecdotal films which at first were no more than a reel (65 ft.) in length and later expanded to two reels. However, brevity was not altogether perceived as an obstacle to attempting to bring the stage to the screen. By 1903 Edwin Porter had taken incidents from Scott Marble's stage melodrama *The Great Train Robbery* (1896) necessarily abridging a four-act drama with a performance time of approximately two-and-a half hours into a mere twelve minutes. Again in 1903, engaging the actors and filming the stage sets of a theatrical 'Tom company' touring a stage version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* through rural New Jersey, Porter condensed that four-act stage play into a sixteen-minute film. Similarly, in 1907, Siegmund Lubin reduced Henry Arthur Jones and Henry Herman's internationally popular four-act melodrama *The Silver King* (1882) into a brief ten-minute film[3].

These films, which featured the high points of established long-lived theatrical pieces, drew audiences. Each was a popular success, not a failure, but each unintentionally marked the distinction between motion pictures and the live theatre and exposed an inescapable and unfortunate problem with such abridgments: unless the viewers of these films were familiar with the stage original and were capable of reconstructing the narratives from memory, even with the assistance of explicatory intertitles, the films so compressed the narrative that the overall content, as well as nuances of character and gesture were largely lost on cinema audiences. The better part of a decade would elapse before an entire stage drama would pass from the theatre to the screen. Enrico Guazzoni's *Quo Vadis* (1913) and D.W. Griffith's *Judith of Bethulia* and Giovanni Pastrone's *Cabiria* (both 1914) mark the moment when stage-derived and longer narrative films would challenge the prevailing one and two-reel films hitherto on-view.

However, the established 'legitimate' theatres of Europe and America were not the only sources nor the instigators of dramatic films. This essay will suggest that dramatic films – the earlier ones especially – also owe their rise and development to another more immediate source: the brief dramatic sketch endemic to the variety stages of Europe, Britain, and America, all of them purposefully and often

legally separated from the legitimate stage[4]. Although identified by the adjective 'dramatic', the dramas afforded by the dramatic sketch were substantially distinct and removed from the four and five-act comedies, melodramas, comic operas and tragedies (the standard playhouse repertoires). The emergence of the dramatic sketch in this restricted environment – the music hall, the vaudeville house, and the variety theatre – is directly linked to the stringent licensing controls which national governments and local authorities exercised over their existences and over the nature of performances, controlling such features as those which specified what was permitted to be performed, the allowable duration of performance, who and how many actors spoke from the stage, and how narrative content of acts could be explained to audiences without resorting to speech. Here, in these establishments separated from theatres by law and operating under licenses which defined their remit, the very conditions and restrictions created by those laws fostered the earliest narrative films and maintained their influence from 1901 until 1920.

The distinction between the spoken drama of the legitimate playhouse and the dramas within the music hall – the earliest of the variety theatres – arose from the British Theatres Act of 1843. Already, in Britain's expanding cities, there existed theatres attached to saloons where customers sat and consumed alcoholic drinks whilst watching turns featuring singers, comics, acrobats, jugglers, and – perhaps – some brief dramas, although the exact nature of these early playlets is unclear. The Theatres Act, which was brought before Parliament at the instigation of theatre proprietors who complained that these saloon-establishments encroached on their licenses to present dramas, was a means of addressing these complaints and shaping the dramatic fare permitted in these premises.

The Act drew an immediate distinction between theatres and music halls. Theatres were licensed – first by the Crown, subsequently by metropolitan governments – to stage plays of any sort and any length with spoken dialogue (subject to the censor's – the Lord Chamberlain's Reader of Plays' – approval) but were not permitted to sell, or for patrons to consume, alcoholic drink in their auditoria. Music halls,

on the other hand, which had come into existence for two reasons: to offer entertainment to a local population or known demographic and to sell beer, wine, and spirits to that demographic, were licensed by local authorities to sell alcoholic drink in their auditoria and permitted patrons to consume their alcoholic drink in the auditoria[5]. However, these establishments were not licensed to perform dramas exceeding eighteen minutes in length nor to perform playlets – now legally and formally classified as dramatic sketches – containing spoken dialogue. Casts could not exceed six actors. Pantomime acting therefore played a part in establishing meaning, but explication of the action and meaning might also be conveyed by a vocalist standing at one side of the stage and singing a narrative account of the action. It was also permissible that individual sketch actors uttered an occasional single line which spoke to their character's state of mind. The dramatic ambience and tensions of the sketch could be enhanced by accompanying music from the hall's pit orchestra.

To summarise: Here upon a stage was a brief dramatic action without spoken dialogue, expressed in pantomime, accompanied by music from the house orchestra, and largely narrated by someone who stood outside the action and in song interpreted what the audience viewed. Further, from the late 1870s onward, as gas illumination in theatres was replaced by electric lighting which could be dimmed, dramatic sketches as well as other variety turns were viewed from a darkened auditorium by audiences who looked upon a lighted stage. In consequence, the conditions attached to the dramatic sketch provided the accidental model for the motion picture one and two-reel dramas, even though cinema still lay decades in the future. Skill in sketch-writing entailed dramatising a complete narrative, devising characters who were recognisable and individually distinct while assuring that plot situations and subtle hints to characters' intellectual and emotional states were made unambiguously evident through visible physical action. Dialogue might be employed, but its virtue lay in sparseness. The sketch actor was obliged to show rather than explain, to do rather than speak. A sketch might be marginally longer than a two-reel narrative, but the requirements for each *métier,* sketch and

one and two-reel film, remained similar. This observation, however, doesn't mean that the sketch provided a template for the filmmakers to follow, merely that silent dramatic films, viewed in semi-darkness, accompanied by music, and explicated by intertitles, would be viewed under analogous conditions.

The popularity of the dramatic sketch led to its export to American vaudeville houses which, removed from the trade of selling alcohol refreshment, were focused on providing wholesome entertainments, much of it aimed at families rather than the individual drinker seeking amusement. There, in American vaudeville, sketches were of two kinds, those purposely written to observe the legal constraints specified by the Theatres Act and a second category which were cut-down full length plays deliberately abridged to dramas with performance times approximating 25 minutes and featuring the same actors who had previously performed the drama in licensed playhouses.

To step from the legitimate stage into vaudeville was not an admission of defeat or an acknowledged disgrace to the actors who performed in it. Rather, moving between the legitimate stage and vaudeville was an acknowledged tactic widely employed to keep touring companies solvent and together when business on the regular circuits proved difficult. Maurice Barrymore's company touring *The Heart of Maryland* (1895-1904) frequently appeared in vaudeville. D.W. Griffith, as a novice actor, toured first with J.E. Dodson in *Richelieu's Strategem,* (1900) a cut-down version of Edward Rose's *Under the Red Robe* and again in Kathryn Osterman's condensed comedy-melodrama *Miss Petticoats* (1903). Unable to find steady acting work, Griffith had earlier toured in his own sketch *In Washington's Time* (1901). Sarah Bernhardt, between appearances with her company in major American cities, performed a medley of extracts from her theatrical repertoire in vaudeville houses between 1906-16[6].

As early as the 1890s it became apparent that music hall proprietors, chafing at the restrictions of the stipulated eighteen-minute limit, were evading or ignoring this rule and drawing complaints from theatre owners who objected to Parliament that 'the halls' were selling alcohol *and* performing longer sketches, but it was not until 1909 that

a Parliamentary Commission met to decide what had become known as 'the sketch question'. By this date, many of the music halls had become legally and financially separated from the brewers and distillers who had previously invested in them and were now described as 'variety theatres'. With Parliament's consent, the time limit for the sketch was extended to 30 minutes[7].

How the dramatic sketch would now directly stimulate narrative film was hinted in a guide to aspirant dramatists. In 1915, in Brett Page's *Writing for Vaudeville*, the rationale for the vaudeville bill's structure was published to guide sketch writers. Page explained:

> There is no keener psychologist than a vaudeville manager. Not only does he present the best of everything that can be shown upon a stage, but he so arranges the heterogeneous elements that they combine to form a unified whole. […] We usually select a 'dumb act' for the first act on the bill. It may be a dancing act, some good animal act, or any act that makes a good impression and will not be spoiled by the late arrivals seeking their seats. […]
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> For number two position we select an interesting act of the sort recognized as a typical 'vaudeville act.' It may be almost anything at all, though it should be more entertaining than the first act. For this reason it often happens that a good man-and-woman singing act is placed here. This position on the bill is to 'settle' the audience and to prepare it for the show.
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> With number three position we count on waking up the audience. The show has been properly started and from now on it must build right up to the finish. So we offer a comedy dramatic sketch – a playlet that wakens the interest and holds the audience every minute with a cumulative effect that comes to its laughter-climax at the 'curtain', or any other kind of act that is not of the same order as the preceding turn, so that, having laid the foundations, we may have the audience wondering what is to come next.
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> For number four position we must have a 'corker' of an act – and a 'name'. It must be the sort of act that will rouse the audience to expect still better things, based on the fine performance of the past numbers. Maybe this act is the first big punch of the show; anyway, it must strike home and build up the interest for the act that follows. And here for number five position, a big act, and at the same time another big name, must be presented. Or it might be a big dancing act – one of those delightful novelties vaudeville likes so well. […] It is next to intermission and the audience must have something really worthwhile to talk over. And so we select one of the best acts on the bill to crown the first half of the show.
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> The first act after intermission, number six on the bill, […] must not

> be stronger than the acts that are to follow […] a strong vaudeville specialty, with comedy well to the fore. Perhaps a famous comedy dumb act is selected, with the intention of getting the audience back in its seats without too many conspicuous interruptions of what is going on on the stage. […] the second act after intermission – number seven – must be stronger than the first. It is usually a full-stage act […]. Very likely it is a big playlet, if another sketch has not been presented earlier on the bill. It may be a comedy playlet or even a serious dramatic playlet, if the star is a fine actor or actress and the name is well known. […] For here in number eight position – next to closing, on a nine-act bill – the comedy hit of the show is usually placed. It is one of the acts for which the audience has been waiting. Usually it is one of the famous 'single' man or 'single' women acts that vaudeville has made such favorites.
> And now we have come to the act that closes the show. We count on the fact that some of the audience will be going out[8].

The "act that closes the show" was increasingly, from 1900, 'the chaser', a turn of approximately 30 minutes' duration in which approximately ten films were projected which signalled the end of the live acts and which, it was presumed, persuaded patrons to leave the auditorium. This turn, the 'Bioscope' or 'Vitascope', was a program of mixed films, some narrative, some actuality and current event footage, some depicting a miscellany of subjects[9]. Especially popular in the music halls and vaudeville theatres were extracts – favourite scenes of action – from dramas currently appearing in the legitimate playhouses. Duels from romantic melodramas and vicious knife fights from such popular plays as *The Two Orphans*[10] were favoured subjects.

It was in this vaudeville and music hall environment that many of the one-reel narrative films from the many burgeoning film studios were screened before audiences who, only moments before, had watched such dramatic sketches as John Lawson's *Humanity* (sometimes appearing on the hall's advertising bills as *"Humanity" in 18 Minutes*)[11], an internationally-toured intensely melodramatic sketch employing four actors which culminated in a violent and deadly fight, after which Lawson picked himself up from onstage wreckage and sang a melancholy song.

From approximately 1913, there was an observable change in what the European and American variety houses offered. Parliament's deci-

sion to permit sketches to run for 30 minutes was responded to with indifference by the owners of vaudeville and music hall circuits who realised that it was cheaper to buy[12] and screen a narrative film than it was to employ and support a sketch company with perhaps as many as six actors on the payroll. Sketch companies not only cost an undue amount of money but took up backstage space with their scenery, and required rehearsal and band-call hours. Films, on the other hand, were inexpensively reproduced to make multiple copies and easily and readily shared with other theatres on the same circuit. There was no contest.

Inevitably, writers and actors who had devised and appeared in sketches were now being induced to make films. Some of the most enjoyable surviving silent films are those made by former sketch companies. Outstanding in this category was the music hall sketch team comprised of the brothers Fred and Joe Evans, Nina Maxwell, and Phyllis Desmond who, between 1911-18 produced more than 200 comic narrative films. Beginning with the character 'Charlie Smiler', Fred Evans created the role of a comic misfit who, creating havoc, joined the Boy Scouts. Then, in 1912, Evans dropped Smiler to develop the more versatile, re-usable simple-minded character, 'Pimple'[13]. Pimple underwent many ludicrous screen adventures, some of them targeting and parodying popular stage plays and costly feature films, notably two Drury Lane 'autumn dramas' *The White Heather* (1896) and *The Whip* (1909) and the British and Colonial 'super production' film *The Battle of Waterloo* (1915). Pimple films are treasured today.

The journey of the dramatic sketch from the variety theatres and music halls of America and Europe to the screens of those same establishments and to pleasured acceptance by their patrons was necessarily slow, awkward, and indirect, but nonetheless was a journey with unambiguous results: motion picture dramas replaced the sketch. There is no visible or recorded moment when a filmmaker noted that his products might supersede the sketch but, rather, the quotidian economics of those theatres which discovered that the sketch worked as effectively, if not better and much cheaper, on film. And, concurrently, audiences for film were building elsewhere in nickelodeon theatres

and in other urban places of entertainment. The dramatic sketch has largely moved unnoticed into a forgotten past, but the kinship between the dramatic sketch and early narrative film merits acknowledgement and further study.

[1] I use the adjective 'legitimate' to distinguish those playhouses which have been licensed to present the dramatic entertainments spoken from the stage and which are distinct from musical halls and vaudeville theatres where spoken dialogue was forbidden. Originally defined by the Licensing Act of 1737 which restricted spoken performance to London's two Theatres Royal, the term has been loosened over time to include licensed playhouses offering dramas of all forms.

[2] Viewable on YouTube on numerous sites.

[3] Those projection times for the three films mentioned above are wholly in keeping with the limits imposed by the standard projector reels in use before 1914, each holding no more than 1000 feet of film which, depending upon projection speeds of 16fps or 18fps, could be viewed between fifteen and seventeen minutes. Cf. P. Cherchi-Usai, *Burning Passions, An Introduction to the Study of Silent Cinema,* London, British Film Institute, 1994, p. 95.

[4] Film scholars, most notably Charles Musser in his *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company,* Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991, cites Edison films which are filmed vaudeville dramatic sketches, without connecting these to the vaudeville stage. Similarly, Donald Crafton, presenting his *Winsor and Gertie, A Playlet in Three Scenes* during le Giornate del Cinema Muto in 2018, dramatized the process of animating Winsor Macay's cartooning stage act without fully explaining its vaudeville origins. My account of Billy Bitzer's and Biograph's treatment of sketch material is found in "*Fights of Nations" and national fights,* in R. Abel, G. Bertellini, Rob King (eds), *Early Cinema and the "National"*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2008, pp. 132-138.

[5] Access to the music hall's dramatic sketch and to other variety acts introduced a novel form of admission currency: 'wet money', i.e., metal tokens, minted at the instigation of the proprietor and stamped with the price of an alcoholic drink, usually 3D, which could be purchased within the concert saloon and exchanged across the bar. Thus, the patron was expected to consume one of more alcoholic drinks as s/he watched the evening's entertainments. 'Wet money' tokens became an unacknowledged but accepted currency in working class districts of British cities and may have been exchanged for objects or commodities other than drinks.

[6] In 1915, my mother's treat for her twelfth birthday was an excursion with parents and school friends to Kansas City's Orpheum vaudeville theatre to see Sarah Bernhardt and her company perform a dramatic sketch based upon extracts from her stage repertoire.

[7] The so-called 'sketch question' and the licensing of theatres were debated from July to September of 1909 with few decisions reached with much conviction. Ambiguity remained. *Report from the Joint Select Committee of the House of Lords and the House of Commons on the Stage Plays (Censorship); together with the Proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence, and Appendices,* London, H.M. Stationery Office, 1909.

[8] B. Page, *Writing for Vaudeville,* Springfield (MA), The Home Correspondence School, 1915, pp. 4-6.

[9] The University of Iowa's library holds the weekly reports of managers responsible for vaudeville theatres owned and managed by the Keith-Albee Circuit. These reports list the acts currently on the bill and the films which arrived on two 1000 ft. reels. They also report takings and the degrees of audience satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

[10] Widely toured by Kate Claxton and by imitators of her productions. The play was twice abridged by Francis Boggs in 1907 and again in 1911. Boggs similarly reduced for screening in vaudeville houses these full-length dramas: *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1908), *Mazeppa* (1910), *The Still Alarm* (1911), and *The Danites* (1912). He also produced numerous narrative films screened on the projectors of vaudeville theatres and nickelodeons.

[11] John Lawson's sketch *Humanity* (1896) is described in my *Eighteen Minutes*, a chapter in A. Burton & L. Porter (eds), *The Showman, the Spectacle, and the Two-Minute Silence: Performing British Cinema before 1930*, London, British Film Institute & Flicks Books, 2001, pp. 21-27. In 1912, Lawson replaced his stage act with a two-reel film of this sketch produced in London by the Magnet Film Company.

[12] Unlike more recent times when films could be hired or leased from a producer or distributor, early film was sold directly to the exhibitor by the linear foot with the further option that, for a further cost, the film could appear on coloured stock (toning), or hand-coloured (stencil colouring). British music halls and variety houses were known to purchase 'féeriques' (fairy plays) from the French studios Pathé and Gaumont obviating the need for the theatre to provide a holiday 'Christmas' pantomime.

[13] Some of the Pimple and Charlie Smiler films are held in archives, but no fewer than five are immediately viewable on the BFI YouTube channel <https://www.youtube.com/@britishfilminstitute>: *Lt. Pimple and the Stolen Submarine* (1914), *Pimple's Uncle* (1915), *Pimple Has One* (1915), *Pimple's Part* (1916), and *Pimple in "The Whip"* (1917).