

◀ A HOLLYWOOD HISTORY ▶

# EPICS

SPECTACLES

AND BLOCKBUSTERS

SHELDON HALL AND STEVE NEALE

## EPICS, SPECTACLES, AND BLOCKBUSTERS

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**AND BLOCKBUSTERS**

**SHELDON HALL AND STEVE NEALE**



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# INTRODUCTION

This is a book about the history, characteristics, and modes of distribution and exhibition of large-scale, high-cost films in the United States, and the industrial policies, practices, and conditions that governed their production or importation from the 1890s to the present day. It is also concerned, though to a lesser extent, with less expensive, smaller-scale films that have been major commercial successes, particularly where they have helped to inaugurate major cycles or have pioneered new and influential modes of distribution and exhibition, which have in turn affected bigger and bigger-budgeted pictures. It thus encompasses boxing films, biblical films, war films, westerns, dramas, action-adventure films, historical epics, costume adventure films and romances, science-fiction films, disaster films, horror films, animated features, comic-book adaptations, and fantasy adventure films. Some of these films were aimed at families and children, some at male or female adults, some at teenagers, some at the middle or upper middle classes, and some at proletarian audiences or the general mass of the population. Some were exceptionally costly to produce; others were less so. Some made a profit; others did not. However, they could all be called *blockbusters*, the current term both for major box-office hits and for unusually expensive productions designed to earn unusually large amounts of money.

As detailed in chapter 7, this term was first regularly applied to films in the 1950s. It would thus be anomalous to use it to label films made prior that. But its double meaning encompasses the films with which the book is concerned in a way that earlier or alternative terms such as *feature*, *special*, *superspecial*, *roadshow*, *epic*, and *spectacle* would be unable to do on their own. These terms have an important part to play as well, though. As the book's chapter titles and subheadings suggest, they are each indicative of key aspects of U.S. film history and the practices and films that have marked it since the earliest decades.

### *Features, Specials, and Superspecials*

Chapter 1 deals with the 1890s and 1900s, chapter 2 with the early 1910s. Throughout this period, “feature” was an exhibition category, a film or a presentation of a film that was promoted as something out of the ordinary, as something worthy of special attention. At a time when films were rarely longer than a single reel (approximately ten to fifteen minutes), and at a time when most films in the United States were shown in programs, a feature was the equivalent of a headline act in a variety show and was thus dependent on factors other than its length, scale, or cost. Certain kinds of films were “exploitable” (promotable) as features because of their subject matter or because of their technological characteristics: biblical films, colored films, or films accompanied by prerecorded sound, for instance. (As detailed in chapter 1, Pathé’s *Passion Play* [1907] was a colored biblical import. It clearly fulfilled the criteria for a feature and was judged to be one of the most commercially successful films of the period.) But a lecturer or live musical accompaniment could function as a feature, as could the scheduling of a program of films on Sunday, at Easter, or at other key points in the year. Only with the introduction of multireel films in the 1910s did the term *feature* come to mean a film that was longer than a single or double reel. However, by the end of the 1910s longer films had become the norm. Programs of feature-length films were produced and released throughout the year; in chapters 2 and 3 we look at some of the ways in which these programs were organized and at some of the ways in which films and programs of films were distributed, booked, and promoted. Feature-length films were no longer special in themselves. Special features were those that were built around popular film stars or that were longer or more expensive than routine productions.

As explained in chapter 3, *special* and *superspecial* were production categories. Along with more inclusive terms such as *big picture*, they were both in common use in the United States by the early 1920s. Although by no means always interchangeable, and although subject to hyperbolic use in the industry’s publicity, both were used to indicate a particular type of production: a relatively lavish film, usually of longer than average duration, with higher-than-average production values and higher-than-average costs; a film that would bring prestige, profit, or both to those involved in its production and distribution. When distinguished one from the other, as happened increasingly in the 1920s, superspecials were generally characterized as even more lavish and expensive than specials. Both, though, were different from run-of-the-mill features and shorts, not only in terms of lavishness, cost, and length, but usually also in terms of promotion, distribution, exhibition, and presentation.

### *Roadshowing*

As a practice, roadshowing—the touring of plays and shows—was rooted in the legitimate theater and other forms of live entertainment. The itinerant exhibition of films in the 1890s and 1900s was an extension of this practice, one that continued on a

small scale for many decades. But roadshowing on a large scale, in a manner reminiscent of the major repertory companies in the legitimate commercial theater, came to be used in the late 1900s and the 1910s as a means of distributing and exhibiting early feature-length films and specials. At a time when the film industry in the United States was dominated by the production, distribution, and exhibition of programs of shorter films, when the seating capacity of most of the venues used for exhibiting films was limited, and when most programs lasted little more than an hour and were changed at least two or three times a week, the roadshowing of longer features in large theatrical venues for weeks and months rather than days was a means not only of showcasing expensive prestige productions but also of building individualized publicity campaigns and attracting audiences willing and able to pay higher-than-average seat prices in numbers large enough to cover costs and generate profits.

As detailed in chapter 2, many of the earliest films shown in this way in the United States were imported from Europe. Some were distributed on a “states rights” basis, in which case the rights to show or tour the films were franchised to distributors or exhibitors in specific states. The states rights system had previously been used to distribute boxing films in the United States. (These were often longer than the norm and were legal in some states but not in others.) It continued to be used for the release of imports such as *Robespierre* (1917) and U.S. productions such as *Civilization* (1916) and *Tarzan of the Apes* (1918). But other imports were roadshown in select major cities nationwide. Among the earliest were *Quo Vadis?* (1913) and *Cabiria* (1914), Italian productions that broke new ground in terms of length, lavishness, cost, prestige, and box-office earnings. In the United States, D. W. Griffith and Cecil B. DeMille sought to emulate films like these. Griffith produced and directed *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916), DeMille, *Joan the Woman* (1916). All three were roadshown nationwide. As well as being the longest and most expensive U.S. film to date, *The Birth of a Nation* was a huge box-office success. It helped pave for the way for subsequent domestic roadshow productions of the kind listed above.

Although sometimes used to sell blocks of features to exhibitors, specials and superspecials generally received more individualized treatment than the norm, including roadshow distribution and exhibition. Following an extensive publicity campaign and premiere screenings in New York and/or Los Angeles, superspecials were often exhibited in major cities in the United States in large picture-palace cinemas or in even larger theatrical venues at “advanced” or higher-than-average seat prices. At a time when most films were presented in continuous performances, without breaks between showings, and a time when tickets were rarely sold or reserved in advance, seats for roadshows were bookable, the films themselves were shown at specified times (usually twice a day) with at least one intermission, and if “silent,” as was of course nearly always the case until the late 1920s, accompanied by a specially composed score played by an orchestra. Roadshow runs of this kind continued for weeks, months, or sometimes years before versions of the films were released to regular movie theaters

and shown in the usual manner at regular prices. Some of these films, such as *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921) and *Ben-Hur* (1925), earned record sums of money. Moreover, as noted in chapter 3, highly profitable productions such as *Salome* (1918) and *The Kid* (1921) were sometimes released in a less exclusive manner, with prints booked into a number of theaters at once in some major cities. *Salome* was roadshown as well. But the “concentrated booking plan” adopted for its release in New York City and Chicago was said to be extremely successful. Then as now, there was no necessary correlation between box-office success and any particular mode of distribution.

As we discuss in chapter 5, with the adoption of prerecorded, synchronized sound at the end of the 1920s, the meaning of roadshowing began to change. It was no longer necessary for a live company comprising managers, a stage crew, and orchestra to accompany each print of a film “on the road” as it traveled from one city to the next. But the term, though separated from its literal origins, remained in use to describe those elements of legitimate theater presentation retained in the exhibition of certain special and superspecial pictures, such as reserved seats, separate performances, in some instances an orchestral overture played before the start of the film, an intermission, and the availability of lavishly illustrated souvenir program booklets. Raised prices, higher than for regular first-run exhibition, were still charged for such films, and to encourage mass attendance party bookings were sought for the block sale of tickets. Extended engagements ran for as long as the box office would stand, or even longer in the case of bookings that had been made for a fixed period of time. Roadshowing a film in a large “pre-release” cinema, especially one on Broadway or in Los Angeles and other key cities, served to advertise it both to the general public and to other exhibitors prior to its general release at regular prices. Because of the greater investment in publicity and additional theater staff, roadshowing was inherently more risky than conventional presentation. The films exhibited on such a basis therefore had to be chosen carefully for their prestige value and their audience appeal in order to justify their special status.

With the cinema-going boom of the Second World War and following the precedents established by the exhibition of *Gone with the Wind* (1939), many of the theatrical trappings of roadshow presentation, such as reserved seats and separate performances, were largely dispensed with. But as we show in chapter 6, the pre-release showings of big pictures at higher than usual prices continued to be referred to as *roadshows*, a term that connoted prestige and importance as much as a specific mode of presentation. The legitimate-stage aura of roadshowing was revived in the 1950s and 1960s by the industry’s response to declining cinema attendance. The introduction of wide-screen and stereo sound formats, and the raising of production budgets to display them, invited similarly spectacular theatrical exhibition. As discussed in chapter 8, increasing numbers of films were released on a roadshow basis, much as they had been in the silent era, in the hope that the combination of special projection and sound processes, a presold subject, and high-class, high-priced presentation would earn them the status of blockbusters. Only when roadshowing proved ineffective at

attracting the majority youth audience, as explained in chapter 9, was it replaced by alternative distribution and exhibition methods, some of which had also been pioneered in earlier decades.

### *Epics, Spectacles, and Spectacle*

Many special and superspecial productions were described as *epics* or *spectacles* (i.e., spectacular films). These terms were used rather loosely. The former was as indicative of size and expense as it was of particular kinds of historical setting, of protagonists who are caught up in large-scale events as it was of those who sway the course of history or the fate of nations. The latter tended simply—and tautologically—to indicate the presence of spectacular settings, actions, and scenes. Used in this way, epic and/or spectacle were as applicable to films such as *Way Down East* (1920) and *The Big Parade* (1925) as they were to *The Birth of a Nation*, *The Covered Wagon* (1923), and *Ben-Hur*. Spectacular historical romances such as *Gone with the Wind*, spectacular travelogues such as *Cinerama Holiday* (1955), epic comedies such as *The Great Race* (1965), epic disaster films such as *Earthquake* (1974), and spectacular science-fiction, comic-book, and action-adventure films such as *Star Wars* (1977), *Superman* (1978), and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) are thus as central to later chapters in this book as *Samson and Delilah* (1949), *Spartacus* (1960), *How the West Was Won* (1963), and *Gladiator* (2000).

As an aesthetic phenomenon, spectacle has proven easier to exemplify than to define. As Aylish Wood and Geoff King have both pointed out, it has been persistently associated in the cinema with space, with settings, and with narrative interruption rather than with narrative agents, actions, and events.<sup>1</sup> However, as they each go on to argue, spectacular elements in the settings of a film can and frequently do become agents of spectacular narrative action: the eruption of Mount Vesuvius at the end of the various versions of *The Last Days of Pompeii* would be an example; others include the tornados in *Twister* (1996), the stormy seas in *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972) and *The Perfect Storm* (2000), the asteroid in *Armageddon* (1998), and the ice and snow in *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004). And while narrative momentum can be slowed down by sequences of spectacle, key narrative actions—the chariot race in the 1920s and 1950s versions of *Ben-Hur*; the acts of alien destruction in *Independence Day* (1996) and *War of the Worlds* (2005); the battles in *The Birth of a Nation*, *The Big Parade*, *El Cid* (1961), and *Pearl Harbor* (2001); the hostile encounters between heroes and villains in *Superman*, *Batman* (1989), and *Spider-Man* (2002)—can be prolonged and their consequential status underlined by spectacular treatment. In these ways, spectacle can enhance what Vivian Sobchack has described as the “eventfulness” not only of large-scale or epic films, but also of the stories they tell.<sup>2</sup>

In chapter 11, drawing on work done by Higgins, Neale, and Brewster and Jacobs, we propose the term “Cinema of Spectacular Situations” to identify the characteristics of contemporary action, science fiction, epic, and comic-book blockbusters and, in particular, the extent to which the concept of the dramatic—or melodramatic—situation

might be one way of conceiving the links between narrative, spectacle, and setting.<sup>3</sup> Brewster and Jacobs suggest that spectacular effects depend upon “the audience’s perception of the disproportion between the reality represented and the means used to represent it—it is the very impossibility of having a train crash on stage that makes even a tacky simulation of it in the theatre impressive.”<sup>4</sup> A train crash is a narrative event. But for Brewster and Jacobs the narrative status of spectacle is less of an issue than the effects produced by specific representational devices and technologies in specific representational contexts at specific times. In this respect, in the cinema, editing, framing, staging, and technological means and devices of all kinds (from special effects to wide-screen processes to computer-generated imagery) are particularly crucial. We discuss their presence and their role in the organization of films such as *Cabiria*, *The Three Musketeers* (1921), *The Big Parade*, *Old Ironsides* (1926), *The Broadway Melody* (1929), *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1935), *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *This Is Cinerama* (1952), *Ben-Hur* (1959), *55 Days at Peking* (1963), *Earthquake*, *Jaws* (1975), *Star Wars*, *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), and *The Matrix* (1999) at various points in this book. The choice of examples has been determined by the novel, influential, or unique and particular ways in which the means and devices they draw upon have been deployed.

The deployment of these technologies is one of the means by which large-scale productions exhibit what Ted Hovet has called “representational prowess.”<sup>5</sup> Representational prowess can encompass the aural dimensions of a film or a film’s presentation as well as its visual ones. Hence the many references to musicals, musical scores, musical accompaniment, and the uses made of sound and music throughout this book. The earliest uses and technologies of sound, along with those of color, large screen, large gauge, and wide screen, are discussed in chapter 4. It is here that we look at Kinemacolor, Prizmacolor, and Technicolor; Magnascope, Grandeur, and Realife; and the Kinetophone, Photophone, and Vitaphone. In chapters 7 and 10 we discuss later generations of visual and sound technology. However, in addition to these systems’ technological characteristics and the effects they were used to produce, we also pay attention to the ways in which they figured as features in their own right or as hallmarks of special productions, the extent to which they involved or necessitated particular modes of distribution or exhibition, the costs involved in their production or exhibition, the extent to which they were commercially successful, and, in the case of sound, the extent to which they effected a permanent transformation of the industry and its films, both big and small.

### *Blockbusters and the Box Office*

Details of revenues and production (or negative) costs cited throughout this book have been assembled from a wide range of sources that it would have been tedious to footnote individually. One of our most important sources is the show business trade paper *Variety*. Since 1946, *Variety* has published a regularly updated chart of “All-Time

Film Rental Champs,” as well as annual lists of each calendar year’s hits, ranked by their revenue performance. Since the late 1990s most published figures have been for box-office earnings (the exhibitor’s gross, or the amount of money paid by customers for the purchase of tickets), but in earlier decades charts in *Variety* and other trade journals were based on distribution income (the distributor’s gross, or rentals). Rentals were seen as a more reliable index of the ultimate profitability, or otherwise, of films for their producers and distributors. Although the distribution gross often worked out at around half the exhibition gross, for individual films, especially the more expensive ones sold at higher terms, rentals could rise to much higher proportions. They were also more verifiable: during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, many films of lesser commercial importance, and almost all films in their later stages of release, were sold to exhibitors on a flat-fee basis, so ticket sales and takings for these engagements were not usually reported by theaters. Therefore, except where noted (such as in the discussion of individual theater engagements) we have generally followed *Variety*’s example and quoted the distribution rather than the box-office gross.

For similar reasons of accountability, *Variety* has typically used figures for domestic (U.S. and Canadian) rather than worldwide revenue. This became its standard policy in 1940, when the advent of war in Europe persuaded the American film industry (temporarily, as it turned out) that it should be wholly reliant on the home market for profitability. Where specific rentals data are reported in *Variety* before this (which tended to be only sporadically) they were often for worldwide rather than for domestic performance. This was also the case with other trade sources, such as Quigley’s annual *Motion Picture Almanac*, which published its own all-time hits lists from the early 1930s onward. The subsequent confusion of domestic and worldwide figures, and of rental and box-office figures, has plagued many published accounts of Hollywood history (sometimes including those in *Variety* itself), and we have attempted to be diligent in clarifying the differences between them.

There are other caveats to be borne in mind when citing published data for both revenue and expenditure. Figures released to the press by producers, distributors, and exhibitors were often either exaggerated to suggest greater success or largesse than was actually the case, or (in the case of planned budgets and actual negative costs) reduced to disguise undue extravagance, waste, or poor business management. Even revenues could be underreported to hide the actual scale of earnings from profit participants. In many instances, rentals performance was calculated by trade-press reporters on the basis of a sample of key-city earnings, rather than (or as well as) from “official” information declared by film companies themselves. As a result, figures in different publications, or in different issues of the same publication, are often widely at variance, and an element of hazard is involved in taking any one as definitive. It is hard to establish the degree of success or failure for post-1980s films in particular because of the nature and extent of ancillary and foreign earnings. The “annual grosses gloss” articles published in the March–April editions of *Film Comment* give some indication as to which films were or are perceived as box-office failures.

Where older titles are concerned, however, in recent years many collections of files, private or corporate correspondence, and other documents maintained by studios and individuals have been donated to libraries and archives, which have in turn made them available for inspection by scholars. Many of them contain financial data and other confidential material that, because they were not intended for publication or wide dissemination, are inherently more reliable than most press reports. Although these sources, too, are subject to variation (for example, ledgers pertaining to different companies may not be directly comparable due to different accounting practices and assessment dates) and always require careful interpretation, they provide an invaluable resource and a useful corrective to published accounts. Wherever possible we have drawn on such sources, either at first hand or as reproduced in other scholarly work.

Primary sources consulted include the George Kleine Papers at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC; the Kirk Douglas, Walter Wanger, and United Artists Collections at the Wisconsin State Historical Society, University of Wisconsin–Madison; the Sam Peckinpah, George Stevens, Howard Strickling, and Paramount Production Files Collections at the Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles (AMPAS); the Twentieth Century-Fox Collection at the University of California at Los Angeles; and the Warner Bros. Archives at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles. Unless otherwise noted, cost and earnings figures for particular studios' films derive from the following sources:

MGM (1924–62): the Eddie Mannix Ledger, Howard Strickling Collection (AMPAS); excerpts reproduced in Glancy (1992).

Paramount: files for individual films in the Paramount Production Files Collection (AMPAS).

RKO (1928–50): the C. J. Tevlin Ledger, excerpts reproduced in Jewell (1994).

Twentieth Century-Fox: files for individual films in the Twentieth Century-Fox Collection (UCLA); excerpts reproduced in Solomon (1988).

United Artists: files for individual films in the United Artists Collection (Madison, Wisconsin).

Warner Bros. (1921–67): the William Schaefer Ledger in the Doheny Library and files for individual films in the Warner Bros. Archives (both USC); excerpts reproduced in Glancy (1995).

Unless noted otherwise, all dates in brackets following the first mention of a film title are for its first year of exhibition in the United States, regardless of its production or copyright date or earlier release in other countries.

## EARLY FILMS AND EARLY FEATURES, 1894–1911

The earliest films in the United States were less than a minute long. Members of the public could view them on a peepshow machine in an arcade or a parlor or, a year or so later, as part of a program of films projected onto a screen in a vaudeville theater, an amusement park, or an opera house.<sup>1</sup> The peepshow films “were all simple recordings of some type of preexisting popular attraction: displays of boxing, wrestling, and physical culture; comic vignettes drawn from newspaper comic strips; specialty dances and other abbreviated vaudeville routines; Wild West exhibitions; historical reenactments; and highlights from theatrical comedy hits.”<sup>2</sup> The projected films often also included “actualities,” “scenics,” and “travelogues”—outdoor views and scenes of everyday life, many of them made, initially, abroad.

The films were produced by organizations and individuals who manufactured cameras, peepshow machines, or projectors, who bought these machines or paid a fee for the right to use them, or who risked transgressing copyright laws by making versions or copies of their own. Some of the earliest producers of films and manufacturers of machines were based in Europe. They included Robert Paul, who was based in Britain, and the Lumière Company in France. The major U.S. producers and manufacturers were the Edison Manufacturing Company, the Vitagraph Company, Sigmund Lubin’s Cineograph Company, William Selig’s Polyscope Company, and the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company (AM&B).

Films were initially distributed to exhibitors in a number of different ways. Films for Edison’s Kinetoscope, the first of the peepshow machines, were ordered by mail from a catalog. The films were sold rather than rented. Initial prices were high: in 1895 they ranged from fifteen to twenty dollars per film.<sup>3</sup> However, prices soon fell as sales of Kinetoscopes increased. Edison used a similar method to distribute its films for projection. Prices were based on the length of the films. According to Michael Quinn, the standard price for an Edison film in 1898 was fifteen cents per foot; according to

Tino Balio, the selling and pricing of films in this way became a standard means of distributing films for the remainder of the 1890s and the early 1900s.<sup>4</sup>

Through its agents, Raff & Gammon, Edison initially sold the rights to own and operate its Kinetoscopes and projectors on a territorial basis.<sup>5</sup> It thus became the first film company in the United States to use the states rights system, a method used to distribute and profit from goods and services by selling the rights to further sell or to subcontract them within specific regions and states. Edison later sold its machines and its films on the open interstate market. AM&B owned its peepshow machines and owned and operated its projectors, both of which it supplied with the films it made with its cameras. Along with Lumière and Vitagraph, AM&B was also one of the earliest companies to provide an integrated distribution and projection service to exhibitors.

As Michael Quinn points out, there were no standard exhibition sites for films in this period, so Lumière, Vitagraph, AM&B, and others “were effectively itinerant exhibitors, screening films at local vaudeville houses, town halls, churches or other such venues.”<sup>6</sup> When vaudeville became established as a regular exhibition site for films in the early 1900s, this “self-contained-unit system” died out as most film companies now made their profits from selling films. Even then, though, companies such as Vitagraph and Kinodrome continued to provide an integrated distribution and exhibition service, supplying vaudeville houses with a new act comprising a projector, a projectionist, and a new set of films each week.<sup>7</sup> And even then, and for some time thereafter, rural communities continued to be served by itinerant exhibitors who bought their films from manufacturers and traveled from venue to venue equipped with a set of films, a projector, and a screen.<sup>8</sup>

Itinerant exhibition took two principal forms. One involved traveling to and from permanent venues, the other erecting temporary exhibition sites, usually under canvas, then moving on to another location. Traveling exhibitors were “the principal purveyors of films in towns and small cities where there were no vaudeville houses. Many films were shown in churches and opera houses (often for only one evening but, if the town was big enough, for two or three days).”<sup>9</sup> In addition to numerous “single-unit” companies, “multiple units” were toured by established showmen and even established film companies. Vitagraph toured a number of such units in 1904–5.

Itinerant exhibitors and companies like Lumière and Vitagraph were thus the first to roadshow films in the United States. In a large and predominantly rural country, the touring of shows and entertainments of all kinds—circuses and minstrel shows, variety shows and plays, tent shows, medicine shows, magic lantern shows and Chautauqua presentations—was a regular practice. The advent of a national railroad system, the growth in the size of the population and in the number of cities, towns and settlements, and the consequent growth in national and local markets for entertainments of all kinds helped spur the roadshowing practice. In some fields, in vaudeville, in burlesque, and in what was called the legitimate theater, these developments had already given rise to local, regional, and national exhibition circuits,

to the centralized packaging, booking, and touring of companies, productions, and shows, to the establishment of highly capitalized agencies and businesses, and hence to the development of what Calvin Pryluck has called the “industrialization of entertainment” in the United States.<sup>10</sup> While companies like Lumière, Edison, and AM&B were highly capitalized, most of this capital was invested in the production and distribution of machines for making and showing films. Until the establishment of regular venues for film exhibition and of local and national distribution facilities, what might best be termed *rural* or *small-scale* roadshowing remained an essential means of showing and distributing films. In some rural areas it was to remain so until the 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>11</sup>

### *Boxing Films and Passion Plays*

It would be anomalous to describe any of the films made in the 1890s as epics or spectacles. As Tom Gunning has pointed out, spectacle was a fundamental attraction in nearly all films made at this time.<sup>12</sup> While some may have contained more markedly spectacular moments than others, they do not appear to have been distinguished one from another on the basis of their quotient of spectacle alone. None was of a type or a scale sufficient to prompt the use of a term like *epic*; most of the films made in the 1890s were no more than a few minutes long. However, there were one or two films whose subject matter and length marked them out as special, novel, or unusual productions requiring special, novel, or unusual modes of distribution and exhibition.

One of the earliest peepshow productions was a boxing film. As Dan Streible points out, boxing films were relatively prominent in the 1890s and early 1900s. There were three major types: sparring films, recordings of prizefights, and fight reenactments.<sup>13</sup> The earliest recording of a prizefight was *The Leonard-Cushing Fight* (1894), which was specially arranged by its producers, Woodville Latham and Enoch J. Rector, and specially limited to six one-minute rounds for the purposes of filming. The length of the rounds was determined by the capacities of Edison’s Kinetograph camera and Edison’s Kinetoscope peepshow machine, the number of the rounds by the average number of peepshow machines in a parlor. Customers keen to see the whole fight could view each one-minute round in turn on a set of six different machines. In 1895, the Lambda Company made a continuous eight-minute film of a fight between Young Griffo (Albert Griffiths) and Charles Barnette for their newly invented projector. And in 1897, the Veriscope Company, an Edison subsidiary, filmed a fight between Robert Fitzsimmons and James Corbett that was first shown at the 2,100-seat Academy of Music in New York. The “program lasted for approximately a hundred minutes and was one of the first full-length performances devoted exclusively to motion pictures.”<sup>14</sup> It was subsequently exhibited in Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, and other major cities, and it was one of the first films to be distributed by means of the states rights system when it was shown more widely later that year. When it played at the