

Speaking Softly and Carrying a Big Stick in Edwin S. Porter's *The Teddy Bears* (1907)

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Resumen

La mayoría de los trabajos analíticos sobre Edwin S. Porter se centran en torno a la importancia histórica de si es o no Porter el primero en lograr la edición paralela. Sin embargo, algunas de sus obras presentan una interpretación crítica de la realidad económica y política de los Estados Unidos. El caso más relevante es el de *The Teddy Bears* (1907) donde, a través de la combinación de una fábula popular y la imagen del presidente de Roosevelt, Porter crea una parodia política no solo de Roosevelt, sino de las aventuras de los Estados Unidos contra España, Cuba, Panamá y Puerto Rico durante el periodo 1898-1904. Como cámara para la compañía Edison, Porter vio la guerra en persona y podía tener algunas ideas que no fue capaz de comunicarlas en sus *actualités* o “documentales” de la guerra; sin embargo, la evidencia apunta a que él trató de hacerlo en su películas de ficción. De acuerdo con lo antes mencionado, el presente artículo relaciona la invasión de Cuba, Puerto Rico y Panamá por parte de los Estados Unidos con los eventos presentados en la pantalla por el “doble” del presidente Teddy Roosevelt y los tres osos a quienes matan, les roban y encadenan en esta obra corta de 1907. La correlación de eventos entre las intervenciones extranjeras de Theodore Roosevelt y los del cazador en *The Teddy Bears* (1907) son tan paralelas que es muy probable que fue intencionalmente planificado por Porter, dejando poco espacio para una mera coincidencia.

Palabras clave: Edwin S. Porter, Cuba, Teddy Roosevelt, primer cine, crítica social, imperialismo.

Abstract

Most analytical works on Edwin S. Porter centre around the historic significance of whether or not Porter was the first to achieve parallel editing. However, some of his work present a critical interpretation of the economic and political reality of the United States. Most significant is the case of Edwin S.

■ Artículos

Porter's *The Teddy Bears* (1907) where, through the combination of a popular fable and President's Roosevelt's image, Porter creates a political parody not only of Roosevelt but of the United States foreign adventures against Spain, Cuba, Panama, and Puerto Rico during the 1898-1904 period. As a cameraman for the Edison company, Porter saw the war first hand and might have gained some insights that he was not been able to communicate in his *actualités* or "documentaries" of the war, but it appears that he attempted to do so in his fiction films. This paper relates the big picture events of the United States invasion of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Panama with those portrayed on the silver screen by the Teddy Roosevelt's look-alike and the three bears which are killed, robbed and chained in this short 1907 film. The correlation of events between Theodore Roosevelt's foreign interventions and those of the hunter in *The Teddy Bears* (1907) are so parallel that it is very probable that it was planned and intentionally arranged by Porter, leaving little space for mere coincidence.

Keywords: Edwin S. Porter, Cuba, Teddy Roosevelt, Early cinema, social criticism, imperialism.

Most analytical works on Edwin S. Porter deal with his formalistic achievements toward the development of narrative cinema. Porter's editing process has been extensively discussed as a means to narrate a story attempted in his early fictional films, particularly *The Life of an American Cowboy* (1903), *The Life of an American Fireman* (1903) and *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) (Burch, 1979). Most of these studies centre around the historic significance of whether or not Porter was the first to achieve parallel editing. Even though some works continue to allude to such technique developed by Porter as early as 1903, Huff settled the discussion as overlapping continuity (Huff, 1947; Musser, 2006). However, some of Porter's work demonstrates a critical interpretation of the economic and political realities of the United States, as an emerging world power. This is especially true in his later films where he appears to have more control over his fictional work. Most significant is the case of Edwin S. Porter's *The Teddy Bears* (1907) where, through the combination of a popular fable and President's Roosevelt's image, Porter creates a political parody (Musser, 1991) not only of Roosevelt but of the United States foreign adventures against Spain, Cuba, Panamá, and Puerto Rico during the 1898-1904 period.

Porter was a film journalist for the Edison company during the U.S. invasion of Cuba in 1898. Most, if not all, of the extant footage of Roosevelt's Rough Riders in Cuba was filmed by Porter, yet that footage is not as spectacular as one might expect of such significant historic battles. Actually, the footage

are actual re-enactments of battles taken place a few days earlier, including Roosevelt himself. Porter was able to spend a great deal of time with and along Roosevelt and his soldiers while in Cuba. How much and what he learned about the details and intricacies of the invasion is difficult to tell from what it is available to us at this time. Yet, we might extrapolate his views in the only fiction film that makes reference to Theodore Roosevelt.

The Teddy Bears (1907) is a variation of the fable of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears," written by Joseph Cundall and published in 1849, which in turn was based on Robert Southey's publication in 1837 of an old oral story (Duggan, 1999). *The Teddy Bears* (1907), the film,

[...] has its origin in an incident in Mississippi in 1902, where President Theodore Roosevelt had got to settle a boundary dispute. That done, he went hunting. But when a tired, lame bear was run down, Roosevelt refused to let it be shot. This story reached Washington, where the *Washington Post* published a cartoon by Charles Berryman, showing Teddy Roosevelt sparing the poor bear. (Sesonske, 1980)

This episode inspired a Brooklyn store owner to make and sell stuffed bears named "Teddy's Bear," with Roosevelt permission (Buchanan, 2002). Roosevelt's new image as a compassionate character contrasted a great deal with that gained during his leadership in the Spanish-American War only four years before. As a cameraman for the Edison company, Porter saw the war first

hand and might have gained some insights that he was not been able to communicate in his *actualités* or “documentaries” of the war, but it appears that he attempted to do so in his fiction films.

Porter had already demonstrated an inclination for touching on socio-economic and political issues in previous works. It appears that growing up in a mining town where distant capitalists cared less and less for the welfare of the miners, and the often strikes and repression from the hired thugs and the National Guard, infused him with a good dose of preoccupation about the abusive pairing of capitalists with political power (Musser, 1991). This sympathetic view towards the working classes can be seen in Porter's *The Exconvict* (1904) and *The Kleptomaniac* (1905) (Musser, 1991).

The Teddy Bears (1907) is a 14 minute long film that depicts anthropomorphous and humanised bears as the main characters, not the protagonists. It begins with the baby bear playing in front of their house as his mother tries to bring him in. Since she is not able to accomplish it, both parents try to grab baby bear into the house not without him putting a little comic fight back. They go in, and soon afterwards, Papa bear exits the house wearing a nice evening suit and calls the others indicating the bear family is getting ready to go out. Baby bear rushes to the place he left his doll and picks it up to return as quick with the others and promenade with the doll, adding an appeal for the bear family.

A young human lady knocks on the door, nobody answers, so she decides to break into the house and drink baby-bear's bowl of soup. She explores the house and finds baby-bear's bear dolls who are putting on a show on acrobatics. She is captivated by the dolls and tries to grab them, but is unsuccessful. The young lady finds the bedroom with three beds that make her yawn as soon as she sees them. She does not like the first two beds. Finally, she not only finds a nice bed to sleep in but also a bear doll that she likes.

The bear family returns home and realises something has happened for their bowls of soup are not the way they left them. Baby-bear cries because there is not soup left for him. He misbehaves so he is spanked, again increasing the appeal for the humanised bear family. When they are prepared to retire, to their surprise, baby-bear finds the girl in his bed with his doll. Everybody begins to chase the girl in the bedroom until she jumps from the window, stealing one of the dolls, and consequently diminishing her appeal.

Up to this point, seventy (70%) percent of the film has run through mainly raising the appeal for this innocent and charming bear family that is not doing any harm to anybody while portraying the young lady's behaviour as incorrect and reproachable. The next three minutes (20%) of the film begins with the chase of the girl who has stolen the toy. As the action ascends, the bears run through the woods, occasionally falling onto the snow, only to re-enforce the image of innocence. The last minute of the film,

however, an entirely new element is brought into action. As she runs, the girl finds a hunter, who clearly resembles Theodore Roosevelt, and even wears a similar hat (his icon) and who protects her from the bears. Papa bear confidently approaches, but without any warning, the hunter kills him. Few seconds later, Mama bear is also killed, yet baby bear begs for mercy. He is spared, though is taken prisoner, and taken in chains to his own house. The young lady who is reluctantly brought into the bear house by the hunter, is soon very happy for she is allowed to loot all the dolls. As they happily leave pulling the baby bear in chain, the film ends.

The plot can be easily related to the historical events that Theodore Roosevelt help to shape as the “colonel of the Rough Riders”. In early 1898, Roosevelt was running the Navy Department and was actively calling for a war against Spain (Roosevelt, 1898).¹ When the war started, he resigned his post and formed a band of volunteer cowboy riders. These rough riders were part of the cavalry division commanded by General Joseph Wheeler. As part of the invading force, they rapidly gained a reputation of fearless soldiers, particularly in the double assault of the Kettle Hill and San Juan Hill. Roosevelt himself was the man in charge in the battle

front along his riders. Partly because of the way he was portrayed in the newspapers, he gained an immense reputation as a nationalistic, macho, leader.

The precedent for the war and subsequent invasion was the large capital investment of U.S. companies in Cuba and Puerto Rico, and the reluctance of the Spanish Crown to favour every need of those firms. By 1898 the investments were large enough to be an issue of some importance for the McKinley administration (Nevis & Commanger, 1972). The Spanish Crown, on the other hand, was not always cooperative with the U.S. corporations in their efforts to produce and export more from its territories in insular America, because that was against its own interests. As the Spanish economic power continued to erode, the U.S. presence in the Caribbean grew stronger. At the same time, Spain was facing an independence revolution that was lead by Cuban poet, journalist and philosopher José Martí (Alborch-Bataller, 1995). It has been very well demonstrated that because U.S. corporations perceived that a new independent Cuban government might not be sympathetic to the U.S. interest in Cuba, two leading U.S. newspapers started an anti-Spanish campaign, in large fabricated by Joseph Pulitzer’s New York World

¹ Under Secretary of the Navy, T. Roosevelt believed the explosion in the USS Maine was not an accident and naval officers believed it was planned by the Spaniards. New York Journal, 17 February, 1898. <http://www.learner.org/courses/amerhistory/interactives/sources/E6/e1/images/4726_H.jpg > [Accessed 14 January, 2014]

and Randolph Hearst's New York Journal.² Shortly afterwards, the United States invaded the island in May, 1898. The catalyst for the invasion was the sinking of the USS Maine at the Bay of Havana, even though up until this day there is no proof foreign agents could have entered the ship to set fire to the powder without being detected and not being killed in the explosion (Crawford, Hayes, & Sessions, 1998). With the alleged intention of stopping the civil war and fighting on the side of the revolutionaries, the U.S. army, under Theodore Roosevelt, co-opted the revolutionaries and took control of Cuba (Cantón-Navarro & Jacobin, 1998). After a few months, Spain had lost the war as well as Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Philippines. In 1901 the Platt amendment gave independence to Cuba as well as the right to the U.S. to intervene in this island's affair in order to maintain "adequate" government (Perkins, 1955).

After this War, the United States' economic power continued to grow. The need to open a water passage to communicate the East Coast with the West Coast was an economic imperative for the U.S. and the most viable place to do it was in the Colombian province of Panama. The reputable French company of de Lesseps had already tried to

open a canal without success 15 years earlier. Now, the U.S. was trying to negotiate a treaty with the Colombian government that would allow for the construction of a bigger canal. Impatient at the failure of the Colombian Senate to ratify the Hay-Herran Treaty, which would pave the way for the construction of the canal, Roosevelt took speedy advantage of an uprising on the Isthmus to land armed forces there, hastily to recognise the government which was set up, and no less hastily to negotiate with it a contract which furthered his great ambition (Perkins, 1955). In a quick show of force by the United States navy and army, the Colombian government had no choice but to accept the independence of Panama.

Edwin S. Porter is able to bring out a parody of the military invasions from the bears fable by attributing contrasting emotional tones to each of the two types of characters (the bears and the humans). The bears are the good element and the humans the evil one. This is in opposite contrast to the prevalent cultural view of those times. The hunter in the film who by his appearance clearly represent Theodore Roosevelt, depicted as the opposite of his popular image, is a cruel person. Porter was clear in his intention of negating Roosevelt's image as a "hero" and portraying his

² W.R. Hearst newspapers, and particularly the New York Journal, had daily front page illustrations and exaggerated stories about the how the Spanish government was abusing U.S. Citizens and Cubans. The February 17, 1898, front page suggests the Spaniards are the culprit of the sinking of the USS Maine in Havana. <http://www.learner.org/courses/amerhistory/interactives/sources/E6/e1/images/4726_H.jpg> [Accessed 14 January, 2014]

as a cruel and omnipotent creature. This obviously implies that the filmmaker was trying to make a statement about the U.S. “big stick” foreign policy developed by Roosevelt.³ Therefore, we could add that, on the other hand, the three bears who enter in conflict with the hunter are the innocent “underdogs” who could represent the three countries that were invaded by Roosevelt’s army: Cuba, Panamá, and Puerto Rico. And finally, the girl who enters the foreign house and who would benefit the most from the resolution of the conflict represents United States’ big business. She not only enters and enjoys the house but also takes what she finds to her liking. She is very fortunate to find the armed hunter who controls by force the three bears and the unruly elements in their house.

It is Cuba that after the Platt amendment became the first “dead” or resolved issue of President Roosevelt policies, just as the gunman shoots and disposes of the papa-bear. Panamá, after the Bunau-Varilla treaty of 1903 (Molineu, 1990) became the second resolved issue, parodied in the film by the killing of the mama-bear. And finally, Puerto Rico even today is still an unresolved issue that keeps this small country under a semi-colonial rule of the United States, as we so prophetically saw in this film when the baby bear is spared but it was taken in chains. Not only that,

but also the gunman and the young girl go back to the bear house and take all the toys she can find. This resembles the realities of U.S. business interests such as United Fruit Company (Kepner & Soothill, 1967). Procter & Gamble benefiting from President Roosevelt policies by being allowed to consolidate their operations in the mentioned territories and taking the resources as they pleased, in early twentieth century (Santamarina, 2000).

The correlation of events between Theodore Roosevelt’s foreign interventions and those of the hunter in *The Teddy Bears* (1907) are so parallel that it is very probable that it was planned and intentionally arranged by Porter, leaving little space for mere coincidence. Even though Porter might have had a sensitive eye for social and political issues, his experience with Roosevelt and the Rough Riders in Cuba might have raised his interest in the affairs of the now president Roosevelt. The invasion of Cuba and the taken of Puerto Rico and the Philippines, and the later invasion and treaty with Panamá was immensely beneficial for the United States. Yet, it was not the same for those countries invaded and taken under U.S. “administration”. The compassionate Teddy of the cartoons is contrasted with the Teddy, the military leader and the President of the new emerging world power. In this case, Porter

³ Refers to Roosevelt’s foreign policy of “Speak softly and carry a big stick,” means that it is necessary to negotiate peacefully but at the same time threaten with military power. He first use the phrase in a letter to Henry W. Sprague the 26 of January, 1900. “Speak Softly,” Library of Congress. <<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/trm139.html>> [Accessed 28 January, 2014].

demonstrates a critical mind and a creative talent in *The Teddy Bears* (1907), a well elaborated parody containing many references to international political events and the figure of Theodore Roosevelt. Thus, it seems that Porter was clearly using a cinematic discourse to convey a criticism of political relevance during the early days of cinema. All these correlations suggest that some of Edwin S. Porter's contributions to cinema are still to be discovered and understood, and that his work merits additional analysis.

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