

**Early Cinema Today:  
The Art of  
Programming and  
Live Performance**

Edited by  
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## Dick Tomasovic

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### The *Crazy Cinématographe*, or the Art of the Impromptu Spectator

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It's a Sunday in early September. The sun, peeking through the clouds, has persuaded families that it would be a fine day for a stroll on the Schueberfouer, the great outdoor fair in the city of Luxemburg. With an amused or undecided air, you survey the stands of itinerant hawkers of cakes of soap, liqueurs and embroidered bonnets as you walk to the rhythm, regular enough not to annoy you, of the long, disorderly lines of people. The knife seller seems to call out to you, but his voice is drowned out by the blaring music and the mirthful and at the same time hysterical screams of the girls held prisoner in a fairground attraction whose cabins and arms are whirling about a few dozen metres over your head. The crowd becomes thicker in the narrow alleyways of the fair and at times you have difficulty making your way without being tripped up by the wheels of a baby carriage crossing your path. The smell of food, sweet or savoury but most often greasy, constantly tempts or nauseates you, and you begin to feel a little tired from the overload of sounds and sights produced by the countless rides and attractions (the bright, stroboscopic lights of the merry-go-round, the popular songs, the hyperbolic jingles and the slogans shouted out by the stall keepers), of which you are the quite willing victim. Suddenly, a young man in the crowd grabs your attention and hands you a little piece of paper, on which is written the big word *Cinématographe*, and you follow him to a tent a few metres farther on that you hadn't noticed before. The young man abandons you, but facing you on a narrow platform, battling the decibels flying from the shooting range located across the way, two barkers, gleefully bickering, describe in Homeric terms the films being shown inside the tent. They urge you on: the show is about to start and – what, you haven't got your ticket? – you rush to the ticket counter, take a few more steps, proffer your ticket in exchange for a fan and penetrate the semi-darkness of the warm lair of the *Crazy Cinématographe*. To your right, a raised projector appears ready

Facing page:

Upper: Front-show announcing a *Crazy Erotique* late night performance.

Lower: TO DEMONSTRATE HOW SPIDERS FLY (Great Britain 1909), performed within the *Cabinet of Crazy Animals* programme, *Schueberfouer* 2008.

to roar. In front of you the screen, and a little in-between space where the two barkers are noisily at work, inviting the spectators to take a seat on one of the wooden benches. "Come in, come in", and in you come. "Squeeze in a little more, squeeze in a little more", and you squeeze in a little more in the midst of these strangers who, like you, already seem to be enchanted by the mere incongruity of being in such a place. You're thinking of Victor Hugo, of his idea of feeling alone together, of the fact that he died just before the invention of the cinematograph, when you become aware of the pianist nestled behind his keyboard and his joyful improvisation at the piano next to the screen. "Attention! attention!", and you pay attention. "Are you ready?" Yes, you're ready, and like the others you answer that you're ready, without quite knowing whether you are or what you're ready for. The projector starts up, the screen lights up and the lecturers welcome the first images of a hundred-year-old black-and-white film with delirious enthusiasm and for a brief, tender moment, but without any doubt, you sense that your neighbours, young and old, breathe a sigh of joy and amazement, almost as if they were discovering moving images for the first time, which is clearly not at all the case. You then think of Jules Romains' poems on fairground attractions and, particularly, his poem about the crowds at the cinematograph:

A bright circle abruptly illuminates the far wall. The whole room seems to sigh, 'Ah!' And through the surprise simulated by this cry, they welcome the resurrection they were certain would come. The group dream now begins.<sup>1</sup>

Twenty minutes later, after quite a bit of musical whimsy from the pianist, wisecracks from the lecturers and gags on screen from the slapstick films, and after having applauded, thanked and paid your respects, you leave through an exit located behind the projector. Gradually, you return to daylight, to the cool air and the deafening noise of the fairground, which you had succeeded in putting on hold during the film screening. You rejoin the flowing crowd. You're back in the city.

\* \* \*

While the *Crazy Cinématographe* project is remarkable in many respects (for its archaeological concerns alongside its contemporary re-reading of the early film show; the quality of its lecturers and screening conditions; the talent of its pianists; the motivation of the people behind it; the charm of the big tent; and, of course, the variety of its film programs) its principal quality is undoubtedly the unique, complex, entertaining and inquiring spectatorial experience it offers. Indeed *Crazy Cinématographe* spectators are at one and the same time gawkers, idlers, onlookers, courtroom spectators, discoverers and witnesses: hypothetical spectators who are neither the focused and silent spectator of the movie theatre nor the simple spectator of early fairground shows, nor the curious spectator of the film lecture, nor the spectator used to domestic screens. In truth, these spectators' singularity lies in traversing, during the *Crazy Cinématographe* show, the range of manifestations and temporalities of their condition as *impromptu* spectators.

Because of the diversity of personalities involved and their experiences, and because of the irreducibility of subjectivities, describing the spectatorial condition with any precision is an impossible task. At the same time, it is worthwhile to attempt to explain the different kinds of spectatorial position brought into play to varying degrees by an experience such as that described here, in that such an attempt would use the early film strip to explore the indispensability of a history of visual culture. These spectatorial positions are numerous, overlapping and interconnected. Here I will mention three major such positions, which are complementary and inextricably linked.

First of all, the obvious status of *Crazy Cinématographe* spectators should be remarked upon: these are not cinema spectators. Or rather, they are partial, modified or metamorphosed cinema spectators. The reasons for this are many and quite apparent: they did not choose the film they are going to see, they may even not have chosen the screening time (the attraction rose up in their path); they found none of the comfort of the movie theatre or their usual bearings (a wooden bench versus a plush seat, the aggressive presence of the projector versus the soundproof projection booth, live sound versus post-synchronised soundtrack, etc.); they are often directly addressed by the film show (beginning with the harangue of the lecturer), a little like a cabaret spectator, whereas they are accustomed to forgetting about the mechanics of the screening; and, finally, the films are quite different, both in their language and in their poetics, from the films these spectators normally see in a movie theatre.

Thus depending on their knowledge of film history and the extent to which they are avid film goers, these impromptu spectators will experience varying degrees of surprise at this fairground attraction. In any event, they are quickly required to adapt to screening circumstances that are new to them, even if they are aware that they are the origin of the film screenings they attend more or less regularly. For many of these spectators, the *Crazy Cinématographe* thus offers a new and profoundly exhibitionist kind of entertainment, one that belongs to film's earliest modern paradigms of attraction and monstration. Since the work of Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault,<sup>2</sup> all this has become well known to film theorists and historians, but it never fails to surprise the general public. Not that these qualities (direct address, moving pictures that challenge the viewer, the autonomy of the film's *tableaux*, etc.) are unfamiliar to them (quite the contrary: the 'new media' – television, video, the Internet – indulge in them freely and contemporary cinema by no means abstains from them), but simply because they have not experienced them in this form and in this particular delivery system.<sup>3</sup> It is precisely in its mode of address that the *Crazy Cinématographe* throws the spectator's position into upheaval, both through the films on its programme (the specific grammar of film-as-attraction in the early cinema period) and the projection circumstances (touts, lecturers, pianist, the projectionist's presence in the room, etc.).

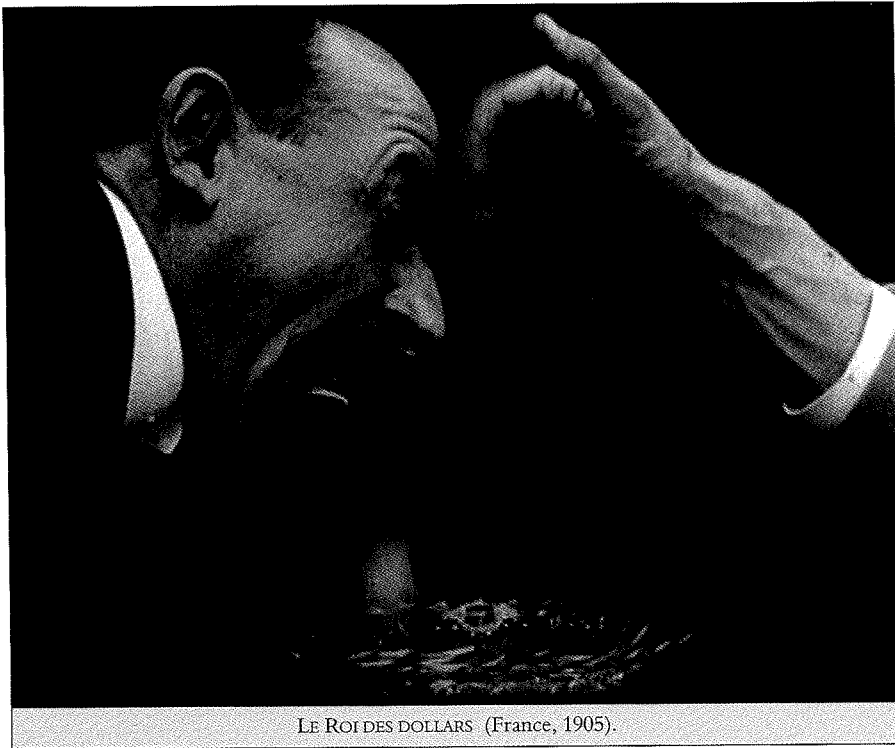
This upheaval is particularly apparent in the behaviour of *Crazy Cinématographe* spectators, who have just twenty minutes or so to grasp the cinematograph's



SAIDA A ENLEVÉ MANNEKEN-PIS (France, 1913).

principles: when the screening begins they are silent, immobile and passive, according to their custom, when what is required of them is to be active and noisy and possibly to move about and be disorderly. Can they answer the lecturers' questions, injunctions and jokes? Can they remain standing? Can they leave the room during the screening? Can they comment on the screening to their neighbour? Can they or should they applaud between films, and if so, should they applaud the lecturer and pianist or the film? The interdisciplinary encounter between recorded show and live show does not occur without giving rise to a number of questions about the spectators' behaviour. They have to agree to modify their reception paradigms around the film show and their psychic predisposition to let themselves be absorbed by it.

The novelty effect of the *Crazy Cinématographe*, moreover, creates a perceptual anachronism, one that pushes the spectator, curiously enough, to become interested in questions of technology and equipment, perhaps even more so than in the content of the screening. Naturally, people will forcefully remember the films' dancing pig, the rubber man's contortionist routine, Auguste the monkey sitting down to a fine dinner, the Kiriki family's human pyramid and the way Alfred Machin's leopard raced through the streets of Brussels, but they will remember even more the shape of the tent, the size of the screen, the way the lecturer struck the screen with his cane and the sound of the projector: in short, a whole series of elements relating more to the film show than to the films' content. The projectionists have described, moreover, the interest that spectators showed in the tool of their trade, normally so well hidden and



LE ROI DES DOLLARS (France, 1905).

forgotten. We might recall that Tom Gunning has demonstrated that an emerging medium goes through a period of opacity during which its materiality is visible to such an extent that it can literally screen out its content.<sup>4</sup> As Isabelle Raynauld explains,<sup>5</sup> as viewers' skill levels increase, the opacity of the medium recedes and is replaced by transparency, making the content more visible. Curiously, *Crazy Cinématographe* spectators appear to recreate this experience dating from the emergence of early cinema. This does not mean, of course, that they are transformed into early spectators (there is no question here of recovering a kind of virginity or of reliving cinema's infancy, to use a worn-out cliché), but rather that they navigate between different moments of cultural history, superimposing the gaze of those who discovered cinema for the first time on their usual gaze. In short, the *Crazy Cinématographe* does not just show spectacular images; it creates the spectacular. It succeeds quite effectively in coming to life as an attraction.

If this film show functions, despite the way in which the spectator's normal ways of seeing are upturned, it is precisely because a second way of seeing takes their place, driven by a desire for distraction, surprise, astonishment, amazement and sensory overload; in other words, for attraction. This way of seeing is, of course, that of the fairground gawker. While we are all familiar with the importance of the concept of the *flâneur* to an understanding of urban modernity and its prominent place in the work of writers from Charles Baudelaire to

Walter Benjamin to Susan Sontag, to better understand the originality of the gaze engendered by attraction it may be worthwhile to recall the distinction made by the literary critic Victor Fournel in 1855 between the *flâneur* and the gawker (*badaud*):

The simple *flâneur* observes and reflects; or at least he can. He is always in full possession of his individuality. The individuality of the gawker, on the other hand, disappears and is absorbed by the outside world, which delights him to the point of delirium and ecstasy. Under the influence of spectacle, the gawker becomes an impersonal being; no longer a man, he is the public, the crowd. Nature apart, the true gawker, a keen and naïve soul taken to daydreaming, passion and agreeable enthusiasm, an artist by instinct and temperament with little experience of life, in other words having none of the scornful scepticism and unhealthy pride which, according to the moralists, are the two great scourges of our time, is worthy of the admiration of everyone whose heart is true and sincere.<sup>6</sup>

Ultimately, the gawkers on the *Schueberfouer* in 2010 were not so far removed from the mid-nineteenth-century Parisian described by Fournel. By the end of a process of de-individualisation, they were able to indulge in delight and suspend their scepticism, the corollary of their daily lives, habits and experiences, rediscovering a kind of guilelessness proper to amazement. Nevertheless, the *flâneur* in them, the participating and reflective observer, was never completely absent.

Indeed *Crazy Cinématographe* spectators were also ineluctably spectator-visitors. For the tent was something one visited (entering by a door, exiting by another, watching the show and its actors as if it were an installation), and few visitors would not have known that it had been organised by the Cinémathèque of the city of Luxemburg. The educational aims of the people behind it, the film descriptions posted in the entrance hall and the quite clearly reconstructed nature of the screening (the lecturers were contemporary, making jokes about the present-day Belgian political crisis, for example, during Alfred Machin's film SAÏDA A ENLEVÉ MANNEKEN-PIS, but their costumes were old-fashioned and their attitudes that of another age) situate the *Crazy Cinématographe* as a museum endeavour. Dominique Païni, writing about the mobile and solitary position of the spectator of installations and films in a museum or art gallery, employs the term *flâneur*.<sup>7</sup> In the present case the *flâneur*, made momentarily captive by the film show, joins the cinema spectator. The performance, comic and museum aspects of *Crazy Cinématographe* blend into one another, inviting the spectator to adopt various ways of looking.

One might add a few additional kinds of spectatorial position of varying importance to the three described here: the courtroom spectator or witness who attends a fleeting process of recreating a historical entertainment practice; the actively present spectator of performance and live entertainment; and the all-encompassing and distanced position of the practised viewer of domestic screens (given the narrow dimensions of the *Crazy Cinématographe*, its screen may not have been much bigger than the viewer's home theatre system). Of course, every spectator draws on their own ways of looking, determined by



their own experiences, and it would be futile to try to list them exhaustively here. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the quite unique experience of the *Crazy Cinématographe* brings spectators into play in a quite peculiar manner, one involving both their archaeology and their reinvention.

Translated from French by Timothy Barnard

## Notes

1. Jules Romains, "The Crowd at the Cinematograph" (1911), trans. Richard Abel, in Abel (ed.), *French Film Theory and Criticism, A History/Anthology*, vol. 1, 1907–1929 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 53.
2. Cf. Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction(s): Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde" in Thomas Elsaesser (ed.), *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative* (London: BFI, 1990); and André Gaudreault and Tom Gunning, "Early Cinema as a Challenge to Film History", trans. Joyce Goggin and Wanda Strauven, in Strauven (ed.), *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 365–380.
3. For a number of discussions of the cinema of attractions concept, see Wanda Strauven (ed.), *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006).
4. Tom Gunning, "Re-Newing Old Technologies: Astonishment, Second Nature, and the Uncanny in Technology from the Previous Turn-of-the Century", in David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins (eds), *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 39–60.
5. Isabelle Raynauld, "Le cinématographe comme nouvelle technologie: opacité et transparence", *CiNéMAS* 14.1 (2003): 117–128.
6. Victor Fournel, *Ce qu'on voit dans les rues de Paris* (Paris: Dentu Libraire-éditeur, 1867 [1855]), 270.
7. Dominique Paini, *Le temps exposé: Le cinéma de la salle au musée* (Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma, 2002), 54.