

The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded

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A Cinema of Contemplation, A Cinema of Discernment: Spectatorship, Intertextuality and Attractions in the 1890s

Charles Musser

This present anthology confirms what has been obvious for some time: the turn of phrase "cinema of attractions" has captured the enthusiastic attention of the film studies community as well as a wide range of scholars working in visual culture. It has not only provided a powerful means of gaining insight into important aspects of early cinema but served as a gloss for those seeking a quick, up-to-date understanding of its cultural gestalt. In his many articles on the topic, Tom Gunning has counterposed the cinema of attractions to narrative, arguing that before 1903-04 or perhaps 1907-08, cinema has been primarily about these moments of visual eruption rather than sustained storytelling. In "Re-thinking Early Cinema: Cinema of Attractions and Narrativity,"¹ which is being reprinted in the dossier of this volume, I engaged this assessment of narrative in early cinema on several levels.

First, I argued that *cinematic* form was often more concerned with communicating a narrative than Gunning's descriptive paradigm would suggest. I emphasize *cinematic* as opposed to *filmic* form as a reminder that individual films were merely raw material for the exhibitor's programs and were inevitably transformed in the course of their cinematic presentation (the making of cinema). Exhibitors often reconfigured non-narrative moments or brief, one-shot films into more sustained narratives or embedded short comic gags into a larger, more sustained fictional milieu. Second, I offered a series of contestatory interpretations of such films as *THE GAY SHOE CLERK* (1903) and *LE VOYAGE DANS LA LUNE* (1902). Certainly Gunning and I can find common ground in that we both acknowledge that these attractions and narrative frequently coexisted, though I see them not only as intertwined but am fascinated by the ways in which cinematic form often enhanced as well as generated narrative (rather than interrupt it) even in this early period. In short, cinematic form did shape subject matter and create meaning in the 1890s and early 1900s. It did so in a different way, and certainly other things of equal (and often, of course, of greater) importance were also being pursued. But my understanding involves a more dialectical and open approach to these dynamics.

Third, my article was also about our basic understanding of early cinema (however one might choose to define the period of "early cinema"). I see this

history as an amazingly dynamic, rapidly changing phenomenon. How one characterizes the cinema of 1896 is not necessarily the same for cinema in 1898 (just two years later); and there is a sea change between the cinema of 1898 and 1903; then again American cinema in 1907 is very different from cinema in 1903. Over the first 15 to 20 years of film history, fundamental changes were taking place on many different levels – in terms of production and exhibition methods, technology, business, subject matter and representation. Because it is a dynamic system, I emphasized the changing relationship of attractions to narrative over this period while Gunning tends to treat it as a period of fundamental unity.²

Obviously, this present essay does not need to repeat my earlier intervention. Rather I want to tease out other dimensions of early cinema by focusing on that extended moment in the United States when projected motion pictures were considered a novelty, a period that roughly extended from the debut of the Vitascoper at Koster & Bial's Music Hall on April 23, 1896 to the release of *THE CORBETT-FITZSIMMONS FIGHT* (May 22, 1897) or *THE HORTIZ PASSION PLAY* (November 1897). Over the last decade I have continued to investigate this period, in an effort to better document and understand it.³ Although in some ways a development of my earlier work, the results have also constituted a sustained self-critique on this topic. Inevitably, this reassessment has at least implicitly engaged Gunning's work for it was precisely during this novelty period that I saw cinema's representational practices to be closely aligned with cinema of attractions.⁴

To Gunning's cinema of astonishment and the spectator as gawker, I would now counterpose a multifaceted system of representation and spectatorship that also includes 1) a cinema of contemplation; 2) a cinema of discernment in which spectators engage in intellectually active processes of comparison and judgment; and 3) finally a reaffirmation of the importance of narrative and more broadly the diachronic sequencing of shots or films. There are other dimensions of 1896-97 cinema that I am not addressing here – particularly aspects related to fiction and acted scenes. Nonetheless, this essay engages films and aspects of cinema that have generally been kept at the margins. Rather than seeing cinema of this novelty period as dominated by cinema of attractions, I would describe it as a diverse phenomenon that can be understood as a series of tensions between opposing representational tendencies. Cinema of attractions is one way to look at and describe some important aspects of early cinema. There are not only other perspectives, there are other aspects that need to be assessed and reassessed.

How should we understand a system of cinematic representation at a given moment in history? In "An Aesthetic of Astonishment," Gunning notes, "I have called the cinema that precedes the dominance of narrative (and this period lasts for nearly a decade, until 1903 or 1904) the cinema of attractions."⁵ This is

because, as Gunning argues, cinema of attractions is the dominant feature of cinema in this period.⁶ But this can quickly become a problematic even dangerous tautology when it encourages us to overlook other aspects of cinematic representation then being practiced. In fact, this essay wants to suggest that this assertion, though based to a degree on established assumptions (assumptions we all more or less accept), needs to be challenged and resisted. There is always a fundamental problem with associating or *equating* a period (however brief) with a particular kind of cinema.⁷ To label the cinema before 1907, 1903, 1901, or 1897 as "cinema of attractions" is to marginalize other features, which were at least as important (for instance, the role of the exhibitor as a crucial creative force before 1901 or 1903). Moreover, if cinema of attractions characterizes a period, almost by definition anything that does not conform to that paradigm is marginalized. One can claim that cinema of attractions describes the dominant form of cinema in a given period, and we may (or may not) wish to accept this statement as true. But by calling cinema of a given period by the name of a specific style, this conflation erects a barrier for engaging such assumptions. Film scholars can seek to characterize historical periods by examining their systems of representation and modes of production (not only film production but cinema production, which includes exhibition and spectatorship). Or they can identify a certain manifestation of cinema – expressionism, realism, slapstick comedy, and (perhaps) cinema of attractions – and explore how this style or form was manifested in one or more historical periods. But are we ready to place Cinerama under the Cinema of Attractions rubric? The reality here may be that Gunning has enmeshed or imbricated the two – style and period – in a way that for many has come to define a historical formation. This is the term's power but also its flaw.

Style is regularly defined through difference and even opposition. What can be counterposed to the cinema of attractions within the period 1896-97? Is it only a weak, underdeveloped form of narrative? Narrative may constitute one opposition (or one aspect of one opposition), but there are others as well. What would happen if we take a more dialectical approach to reading form and history? What kinds of tensions (creative, aesthetic, rhetorical) are revealed by such an approach? Not all instances of early cinema generated shocks and displayed qualities that were the antithesis of traditional artistic values. There was also ways in which cinema reaffirmed and even fulfilled the artistic agenda that had been a feature of art and painting since the mid-eighteenth century.

A Cinema of Contemplation

To examine the many connections between early film and painting enables us to explore the ways that cinema often times embraced the principles of detached contemplation. These affinities were foregrounded in the museum exhibition *Moving Pictures: American Art and Early Film, 1880-1910*, in which curator Nancy Mathews identified a wide variety of visual rhymes involving specific films and specific art works, suggesting that some early films were conceived as paintings that move (thus the title of her exhibition – “Moving Pictures”).⁸ Many early motion picture posters, for instance, depict a film (in color) being projected onto a canvas enclosed by an elaborate gold picture frame. This can be seen in an early 1896 Vitascop poster, but such frames continued to be a part of cinema’s iconography into the early 1900s. One even appears in *UNCLE JOHNS AT THE MOVING PICTURE SHOW* (Porter/Edison, 1902). Moreover, this use of a picture frame can be linked to a Vitascop Company catalog statement from early 1896, which suggested that “a subject can be shown for ten or 15 minutes although four or five minutes is better.”⁹ This extended playing time was possible because the short films used on the Vitascop (often lasting only 20 seconds) were regularly shown as loops in 1896-97. This did more than denarrativize individual films: such sustained presentations also encouraged spectators to contemplate and explore the image. As this evidence suggests, one way that early audiences were meant to look at films was not unrelated to the way they were meant to look at paintings.

Numerous films would seem to allow for, even encourage a state of contemplative absorption. Edison’s film *PATERSON FALLS* (July 1896) was described as a “beautiful picture of the Paterson Falls on the Passaic River”¹⁰ and encouraged the kind of sublime reverie that Diderot felt was appropriate to nature and landscape painting. Michael Fried, has remarked that

Diderot seems to have held that an essential object of paintings belonging to those genres was to induce in the beholder a particular psycho-physical condition, equivalent in kind and intensity to a profound experience of nature, which for the sake of brevity might be characterized as one of existential reverie or *repos délicieux*. In that state of mind and body a wholly passive receptivity becomes a vehicle of an apprehension of the fundamental beneficence of the natural world; the subject’s awareness of the passage of time and, on occasion, of his very surroundings may be abolished; and he comes to experience a pure and intense sensation of the sweetness and as it were the self-sufficiency of his own existence.¹¹

Films such as *AMERICAN FALLS FROM ABOVE*, *AMERICAN SIDE* (Edison, December 1896), *FALLS OF MINNEHAWA* (Edison, June 1897) and *WATERFALL IN THE*

CATSKILLS (Edison, June 1897), with their “water effects against a dark background,”¹² likewise encouraged spectators to experience a mesmerizing absorption. *WATERFALL IN THE CATSKILLS* was taken at Haines Falls, “a picturesque and almost inaccessible mountain cataract in the Catskills.”¹³ This location was not selected by chance. According to one tourist guide, “This charming spot was visited years ago by Cole, Durand, Kensett, Casilear, and others, when ropes and ladders had to be used in descending and ascending the ledges at the cascades. The paths are now good, and none should fail to visit this favorite resort of the artists.”¹⁴ Such films evoked (when they did not actually quote) a long and rich genre of American painting and mobilized a new medium for a similar spectatorial response.¹⁵ They escaped, in Diderot’s terms, a mannered theatricality and provided a naive directness that is close to the sublime: “It is the thing, but the thing itself, without alteration. Art is no longer there.”¹⁶ And yet for Diderot this naïveté was, in the end, an essential quality of art. At least at certain moments, early cinema embraced and even realized the aspirations of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century art.

Certain films, particularly when exhibited using loops, challenge Gunning’s assertion:

[The aesthetic of early cinema] so contrasts with prevailing turn-of-the-century norms of artistic reception – the ideals of detached contemplation – that it nearly constitutes an anti-aesthetic. The cinema of attractions stands at the antipode to the experience Michael Fried, in his discussion of eighteenth-century painting, calls absorption. For Fried, the painting of Greuze and others created a new relation to the viewer through a self-contained hermetic world, which makes no acknowledgment of the beholder’s presence. Early cinema totally ignores this construction of the beholder. These early films explicitly acknowledge their spectator, seeming to reach outwards and confront. Contemplative absorption is impossible here. The viewer’s curiosity is aroused and fulfilled through a marked encounter, a direct stimulus, a succession of shocks.¹⁷

Even in the novelty period, many films were shown in ways that called for sustained, attentive contemplation from their audiences. This might include, for instance, a looped version of a colored serpentine dance. While this form of spectatorship was particularly relevant for early Edison films as projected on various machines (not only the Vitascop but the Phantoscope, Projectograph, Edison’s Projectoscope, Projecting Kinetoscope and Cineograph among others), the cinematic experience offered by the Lumière and Biograph companies, which did not (and could not) show their films as loops, was not always incompatible. Some of these early Biograph films possess a majestic grandeur while the Lumière films reveal a naïveté that is “true, but with a truth that is alluring, original and rare,”¹⁸ aligning them with certain painting genres and experiences. Of course, many Biograph films fully embody Gunning’s analysis: from

EMPIRE STATE EXPRESS (September 1896) – a view of an onrushing express train, to A MIGHTY TUMBLE (November 1901) – a 17-second view of a collapsing building.

Living Pictures/Moving Pictures

If the connection between cinema and painting in the 1890s was frequently direct and often evoked, how did this relationship come to be established so powerfully? Although a full explanation would necessarily consider many factors, it seems telling that the gold frame within which Raff & Gammon projected the first motion pictures at Koster & Bial's Music Hall in April-June 1896 was the same frame that Oscar Hammerstein used to exhibit his Living Pictures at that same theater in 1894-95 (or at the least, a similar type of frame). Perhaps the biggest craze in vaudeville during the mid-1890s, tableaux vivants or "living pictures" prepared theatergoers, particularly those who frequented vaudeville, to look at projected moving pictures in a particular way. Living pictures generally involved the restaging of well-known paintings and statuary as performers assumed frozen poses within an oversized picture frame. Tableaux vivants had been intermittently popular throughout much of the nineteenth century, often as a form of amateur entertainment.¹⁹ They became an American fad during the spring of 1894, when Edouard von Kilanyi (1852-1895) staged his "living pictures" on March 21, 1894, as an addition to E.E. Rice's musical farce *1492* at the Garden Theater.²⁰ Kilanyi's initial set of living pictures staged more than a dozen art works, everything from the paintings *Le Passant* by Emile Antoine Bayard (1837-1891) and *Psyche at the Well* by German-born Friedrich Paul Thurmann (1834-1908, aka Paul Thurman), which became the basis for the White Rock (soda) fairy logo, to the sculpture *Hebe* (1796) by Antonio Canova (1757-1822). The living picture that was based on *Pharaoh's Daughter* (the painting better known as *Miriam and Moses*) by Paul Delaroche (1797-1856) showed Miriam "making her way through imitation bulrushes to a painted Moses."²¹ Audiences were expected to evaluate the posed pictures in relationship to a repertoire of familiar art works that they were seeking to mime.

Living pictures were introduced into New York vaudeville by Oscar Hammerstein on May 10th, 1894, when they were staged at Koster & Bial's Music Hall, once again to an enthusiastic reception:

The assurance of the pictures was enough to crowd the house. As the successive pictures were displayed the upper part of the house became more than pleased; it was excited. The tableaux were disclosed in a large gilt frame. Black curtains were draped in front of it, and were drawn aside at the proper time by pages. The pictures were for

the most part excellently posed and lighted and were shown with much artistic effect. The most of them were reproductions of paintings and a few were original arrangements.²²

Among the painting that Hammerstein reproduced were *The Helping Hand* (1881), perhaps the best known subject of French painter Emile Renouf (1845-1894); a "delightfully artistic reproduction" of *Queen of the Flowers* by the Italian painter Francesco Vinea (1845-1902); *The Three Nudes* by Italian-born, San Francisco-based Domenico Tojetti (1806-1892); and *Angelus* (1859), the painting by Jean-François Millet (1814-1875), which had been shown a few years earlier in the United States to popular acclaim.²³ Meanwhile on April 14th, less than a month before Hammerstein debuted his living pictures, Edison's motion pictures had their commercial debut in a kinoscope parlor on Broadway. Many of the subjects for these films were headline attractions from near-by Koster & Bial's Music Hall. Edison's newest novelty was using performers to make pictures while Hammerstein and Kilanyi were using pictures to construct performances. Koster & Bial's was a pivotal site for both entertainment enterprises. When the Vitascope was shown at the music hall, it brought the two together.

In general Kilanyi and Hammerstein fostered a broad knowledge of the visual arts, perhaps by assuming that audiences already possessed such fluency in an age when inexpensive reproductions of paintings were appearing in newspapers, magazines and books. Their choice of paintings was consistent with an urban, cosmopolitan internationalism that reigned at Koster & Bial's Music Hall and was also evident in the Edison's films of the peep-hole kinoscope era (1894-95). Both novelties – living pictures and Edison motion pictures – offered their respective spectators similar kinds of pleasure as each reproduced a cultural work (painting, sculpture or performance) in another media, encouraging comparison between "the original" and its reproduction. Besides quoting art works, Hammerstein's living pictures also often required a sustained, focused viewing experience from seated spectators.

Living pictures quickly moved outside New York and provided a significant framework for the early reception of motion pictures, when they were finally introduced into American vaudeville two years later. Keith's vaudeville theaters enthusiastically embraced living pictures as they would the cinema. Since early films generally involved a single camera set up, a single shot (occasionally consisting of sub-shots) or framing, the analogies between a motion picture and a painting as well as moving pictures and living pictures could be powerful ones. The fact that at least some early films were hand-tinted or "colored" only furthered such associations. As the *Boston Globe* remarked, "The Vitascope is decidedly the most interesting novelty that has been shown since the living pictures, and rivals them in interest"²⁴ – and, one might add, often in mode of representation. With the enthusiasm for living pictures beginning to wane by the time

projected motion pictures were being shown, vaudeville goers experienced a dissolving view of sorts, from living pictures to moving pictures. Not surprisingly, living pictures not only provided a paradigm for the reception of projected motion pictures, they sometimes quite literally provided the cinema with subject matter.²⁵

At the end of the nineteenth century, cinema was a form in which the fine arts, theater, and motion pictures could intersect in the most literal ways (as well as more oblique ones). When the Lumière Cinématographe showed films at Keith's Bijou in Philadelphia in early September 1896, a critic commented that *THE HORSES AT THEIR MORNING DRINK*, "resembles one of Rosa Bonheur's famous paintings brought to life."²⁶ Undoubtedly this film was *L'ABREUVOIR (THE HORSE TROUGH)*, which a Lumière cameraman shot in Lyon, France, during April 1896.²⁷ The painting was Rosa Bonheur's *The Horse Fair* (1853). Bonheur's *The Horse Fair* was mentioned again in an Edison catalog description of 979 U.S. *CAVALRY WATERING HORSES* (Edison, May 1898), which the writer felt "reminds one forcibly of Rosa Bonheur's celebrated 100,000 dollar painting, 'The Horse Fair.'"²⁸ Scenes of landscapes, city views, and any number of moving pictures showing domestic scenes were built on a variety of popular genres in painting. But they possessed more than the shared iconography. Their presentational gestalt involved important parallels. Consider the description for *FEEDING THE DOVES* (Edison, October 1896), which emulated an earlier Lumière film (a subject that was also remade by both Biograph and the International Film Company). This serene one-shot picture, in which the movement of the birds is the most dynamic element of the scene, was described as follows:

A typical farm scene showing a beautiful girl and her baby sister dealing out the morning meal to the chickens and doves. The doves and chickens form a beautiful spectacle as they flutter and flock around the givers - a beautiful picture, which would appeal to the sentiments of any audience.²⁹

Here again, a film calls for the spectator to view it with a degree of detached contemplation.

From Astonishment to Contemplation

The cinema of contemplation was not only a powerful counterpoint to the cinema of attractions, they frequently interrelated in complex ways. *THE WAVE*, as it was called when shown on the Vitascopie's opening night at Koster & Bial's Music Hall, is a case in point. In contrast to the majestic if tranquil moving pictures of water falls, this film and others like it were shot so that they would

confront the spectator. A line drawing that ran in the *New York Herald* of May 5, 1896 shows the film being projected onto a canvas that was enclosed by the elaborate (gold) picture frame. Actually *ROUGH SEA AT DOVER* (1895) taken by Birt Acres, *THE WAVE* was the most popular film screened on the Vitascopie's first program, April 23, 1896. One reviewer described its presentation as follows:

Then came the waves, showing a scene at Dover pier after a stiff blow. This was by far the best view shown, and had to be repeated many times. [...] One could look far out to sea and pick out a particular wave swelling and undulating and growing bigger and bigger until it struck the end of the pier. Its edge then would be fringed with foam, and finally, in a cloud of spray, the wave would dash upon the beach. One could imagine the people running away.³⁰

It is often remarked that people in the front row seats had a strong visceral reaction to this film. Feeling assaulted by the cinematic wave, they instinctively feared that they would get wet, and involuntarily flinched as they started to leave their seats. Stephen Bottomore has written a prize-winning essay on this reaction from early film audiences, which he calls the train effect.³¹ Although this is a quintessential embodiment of the cinema of attractions paradigm, we need to ask: What happened as *THE WAVE* was shown over and over again, as a loop? It would seem that this visceral reaction must have abated. The spectator would gain a sense of mastery of this new medium, settle back into his or her seat and enter a more detached and contemplative state. This is certainly signaled by the statement "One could imagine the people running away," which suggests a degree of distanced observation. The spectator became free to explore the recurrent imagery and savor the tumbling waters.

ROUGH SEA AT DOVER and similar films suggest that the cinema of attractions and the cinema of contemplation sometimes have much more in common than we might think. In this instance at least, cinema of attractions depends to a considerable degree on spectatorial absorption and the beholder metaphorically entering the picture. Cinema is remarkable in the rapidity with which this can happen. If this were not the case, the theatergoer would not viscerally react to the crashing wave. Is this film as antagonistic to principles of eighteenth-century painting as Gunning argues? For Diderot, the key to a successful painting involved the representation of actions rather than attitudes: "An attitude is one thing, an action another. Attitudes are false and petty, actions are all beautiful and true."³² Theatricality for Diderot was the "false ideal of grace" and "the Academic principle of deliberately arranged contrast between figures in a painting."³³ Not only *ROUGH SEA AT DOVER* but many street scenes are the very opposite of this theatricality. Although we can often point to local views where children (and some adults) play to the camera, the goal of the cinematographer

was often the reverse. Consider this description of HERALD SQUARE (Edison, May 1896):

A scene covering Herald Square in New York, showing the noonday activity of Broadway at that point as clearly as if one were spectator of the original seems incredible, nevertheless is presented life-like. The cable cars seem to move in opposite directions and look real enough to suggest a trip up and down that great thoroughfare, while at the same time the elevated trains are rushing overhead, pedestrians are seen moving along the sidewalks or crossing to opposite sides of the street, everything moving, or as it is seen in real life.³⁴

Cinema in many respects fulfilled the long-standing effort in art to depict action; in part this depiction of action was done, as Diderot would suggest, to grab the attention of the beholder.

Clearly cinema of attractions describes an important phenomenon about which Gunning has provided tremendous insight into many of its manifestations. But to some degree these attractions are exceptional moments rather than typical ones. Or if they are typical and so central to our understanding of early cinema, it is only through being consistently exceptional. At any given moment in the history of early cinema, contrary examples abound – if we look for them. In this respect cinema thrived on diversity not only in its subject matter but in the ways that spectators looked at and responded to moving images on the screen. Variety was an overarching principal of vaudeville (and the newspaper); it should not surprise us that variety was also an overarching principle of early motion picture practice. A non-stop succession of shocks was virtually impossible but certainly it would have been bad showmanship. Perhaps we might find an occasional Biograph program that systematically alternated between title slides and attractions but even here the title slides provided crucial pauses. For an accomplished exhibitor these non-conforming scenes or moments would be more, perhaps much more, than mere pauses between shocks or attractions.

Some of the inherent contradictions associated with attractions become clearer if we consider THE BLACK DIAMOND EXPRESS (Edison, December 1896): it shows a rapidly approaching train seemingly destined to burst out of the picture frame before passing from view. Gunning examines a number of ways in which this film was shown to maximize its operation within a cinema of attractions paradigm. However, in 1896-97 other factors often curtailed “an emphasis on the thrill itself – the immediate reaction of the viewer.”³⁵ Again, one was the prevalence of looping: as the train approaches and disappears only to reappear and repeat its journey, the sense of astonishment inevitably faded. Spectators quickly learn to integrate such cinematic effects into their response system. Even as “this confirms Gunning’s theory of the spectator’s willingness to participate in modernity,”³⁶ it enabled other mental processes to come to the fore.

This was part of a larger problem, however: once a spectator had experienced the train effect, its thrill rapidly abated, forcing producers and exhibitors to mobilize other methods of maintaining interest. With cinema in 1896-97 considered a technological novelty, exhibitors scrambled to be the first to show films in cities and towns across the country – to be the first to have this visceral impact on audiences. Yet increasingly even within this time frame, many people were seeing moving pictures on the screen for a second or third time. In big cities, some patrons clearly became fans, returning again and again. So imbedded within the fact of novelty was that of its opposite – familiarity. Perhaps there was the pleasure of knowing what to expect and experiencing the reaction of others, but these innocents became fewer and fewer, and watching fellow spectators lose their cinematic virginity was itself a pleasure that must have faded with repeated exposure. An exhibitor’s use of sound effects or the addition of color might have restored wonder. Or an exhibitor’s spiel might have put the film in a new context: If some lectures sought to keep the sense of wonder alive, others undoubtedly provided information about the train (the speed records for the Black Diamond Express, where the film was taken and how). This informational or educational function could rekindle interest but not perhaps astonishment. It moved away from both astonishment and contemplation to what Neil Harris has called an “operational aesthetic”³⁷ and finally beyond to the world of practical affairs and the notion of an informed citizenry.

So far I have argued that cinema in 1896-97 was as much a cinema of contemplation as a cinema of astonishment, but also that these two were not necessarily stable or mutually exclusive. Interestingly the two spectatorial positions I have associated with PASSAIC FALLS and THE WAVE conform in interesting ways to two positions of art spectatorship that Michael Fried argues were being advocated by Diderot: positions he says may at first appear to be in some way mutually exclusive but are closely related. The first constructs the beholder as absent (“the fiction that no one is standing before the canvas”³⁸), while in the second the beholder metaphorically enters the world of the painting (“the fiction of physically entering a painting”³⁹), which is to say that the beholder crosses over from his/her space into the world of the painting (or the film). Other early films that seemed designed for the viewer to enter the world of the film would include phantom rides where the spectator is drawn into a space by the camera placed in a vehicle moving through or into space. The train effect is also based on this second presumption – the viewer enters the world only to be chased back out.

In Gunning’s use of Diderot and Fried, he generally associates early cinema with a third spectatorial position – that in which the filmed subject plays to and acknowledges the beholder. This “theatricality” typically involves a presentationalism that was certainly common in early cinema, particularly with short

comedies, early trick films, scenes of vaudeville performances, and facial expression films. J. Stuart Blackton sketches a portrait of Edison and then bows toward the audience in *INVENTOR EDISON SKETCHED BY WORLD ARTIST* (Edison, August 1896). The comedy is sketched so broadly in *LOVE IN A SLEIGH* (Edison, July 1896) that it is hard to disregard its staginess. Although Diderot presented this theatricality in a negative light (which Gunning then flips), the spectator maintains a kind of distance that we might associate with (among other things) slapstick comedy. It is with films like *THE BLACK DIAMOND EXPRESS* that Gunning shifts this theatricality from the profligate to the process of exhibition itself: "it is the direct address of the audience in which an attraction is offered to the spectator by a cinema showman, that defines this approach to filmmaking."⁴⁰ Clearly such gestures can happen on a number of levels either alternately or simultaneously.⁴¹ Or not. The view of an on-rushing express train could be dolled up by an exhibitor, or the exhibitor could withdraw and let the spectator enter into the image as if it were a painting. This suggests, at the very least, that even in the novelty era, cinema encompassed and mobilized a range of spectatorial positions. Linking cinema in the novelty era to a specific mode of spectatorship seems problematic.⁴²

A Cinema of Discernment

Cinema of attractions, writes Gunning, is a cinema of astonishment that supplants "pleasure through an exciting spectacle – a unique event, whether fictional or documentary, that is of interest in itself."⁴³ A cinema of contemplation likewise involves scenes, each of which is "of interest in itself." Yet we should not minimize the extent to which these scenes were also *not* self-contained and self-sufficient. We must attend to other levels of cinema and spectatorship that happened along both synchronic and diachronic trajectories (to gesture towards Saussure). Early film spectators performed significant intellectual activity involving comparison, evaluation and judgment – as opposed to (or simultaneously with) either the enraptured spectator passively contemplating a beautiful picture or the "gawker [...] held for the moment by curiosity and amazement."⁴⁴ Spectators were not just given over to visceral states of astonishment or contemplation: they were critically active.

Here, as had been the case with living pictures and paintings, correspondences and intertextualities play an important role. Newspapers certainly offered guidance on how spectators might view films in relationship to "original scenes."⁴⁵ When the Vitascope at Keith's Theater in Boston presented *Cissy FITZGERALD* (Edison, May 1896), the *Boston Herald* suggested that "Those who

were captivated with *Cissy Fitzgerald's* kick and wink during her engagement at a city theater the past season will have an opportunity of passing judgment on the Vitascope's reproduction of same; it is said to be capital."⁴⁶ The perfect spectator for this film was apparently the individual who could make the comparison between Fitzgerald on film and in the flesh – and come to some kind of critical judgment as a result. When looking at *THE BLACK DIAMOND EXPRESS* or some other train film, a spectator might ask if it adequately conveyed its power and speed. Comparisons were at the heart of late nineteenth-century theatrical spectatorship in which regular vaudeville goers compared one tramp comedy act to another or one animal show (whether dog, monkey, cat, pony, or elephant) to another. Newspaper critics routinely compared an actor either to a different actor in the same role or the same actor in a different role. Likewise, knowledgeable spectators might have readily compared *THE BLACK DIAMOND EXPRESS* to the film that it was made to challenge: *THE EMPIRE STATE EXPRESS*. The Biograph film had been taken earlier in the year and was likely to have been shown either in a rival theater – or on an earlier program at the same theater. How did these two competing train services stack up (they were competing against each other on the New York City-Buffalo route)? And how might the Biograph and Edison films stack up – which was clearer, with less flicker? (Here Biograph generally offered a better quality image, though Edison provided broader diffusion.) Which service gave a better show (film service but perhaps also train service)?

Any time a viewer saw a film program, s/he was likely to ask how successful it was in relationship to rival exhibitions. Returning to the theater to see films for a second time did not necessarily mean the theatergoer was seeking some vestige of astonishment. S/he was now becoming an authority, a sophisticate. How was the Lumière Cinématographe better (or worse) than the Edison Vitascope and how was it different? The discerning spectator might also compare a film such as *SURF AT LONG RANCH* (Edison, October 1896) to the previously available *ROUGH SEA AT DOVER*. The former was said to be "an excellent subject for water effects, the glittering spray being distinctly reproduced."⁴⁷ Were its water effects superior to the earlier Acres's film? Then too, sophisticated viewers might have compared these films to efforts in other media. When watching *ROUGH SEA AT DOVER*, perhaps they recalled paintings such as *Waves Breaking on a Lee Shore* (Joseph Mallord William Turner, 1836) or photographs such as *Caswell Beach-Breaking Waves* (John Dillwyn Llewelyn, 1853).⁴⁸ This would shed a more positive light on the tendency for production companies to produce pictures with very similar subject matter. In this respect, a film was not merely of interest "in itself." It was an image that spectators were meant to enjoy in relationship to other films, other images (newspaper illustrations, comic postcards, paintings, photographs), other artifacts (songs, plays, news reports) and to the

scene it actually represented (city streets, performers doing their specialty, well-known sites of nature).

Intertextuality also involves an inevitable looking backwards. The viewer re-membered last year's performance by Cissy Fitzgerald – one that would never come again. Here we see another contrary feature of modernity – nostalgia, retrospection and melancholy.⁴⁹ While cinema of attractions provides a way to conceptualize cinema's links to modernity via novelty, one can also be struck by the ways in which cinema also resisted this: the way in which its earliest practitioners offered sustained views rather than the "wealth and colorfulness of overhastened impressions."⁵⁰ New BLACKSMITH SCENE (Edison, January 1895) appeared on a Vitascope program in Boston under the title THE VILLAGE BLACKSMITH SHOP. According to the *Boston Herald*, "The Village Blacksmith Shop" will recall to many young men and women who have resided in the city for long periods familiar scenes of their early childhood; it is a work of art.⁵¹ What is worth noting is the extent to which these early films were often seen not as something radically new – something astonishing – but as a distillation of something familiar, a realization of something that had long been sought.

A Cinema of Narratives

With these new categories in mind (cinema of contemplation, cinema of discernment), we can briefly return to the issue of narrative in the cinema of 1896-97. To the extent that narrative and attractions involve actions, they have something in common. One strategy that exhibitors pursued as films lost their initial appeal as pure attractions was to incorporate them into multi-shot narratives. When THE BLACK DIAMOND EXPRESS was incorporated into a travel lecture, the train was no longer hurdling toward the spectator but emerging from one space in a cinematic world and departing into another. Instead of entering the space, the spectator became an invisible beholder. One question we should ask: does this integration of an attraction into a narrative curtail the emphasis on the thrill or does it revive it? Does the narrative subordinate the attraction or provide merely a setting for its presentation? Are not the narratives of some early films (LIFE OF AN AMERICAN FIREMAN, 1902-03) literally constructed out of attractions? Lyman Howe integrated shots (scenes/films) of charging, horse-drawn fire engines into mini-narratives of heroic fire rescues as early as 1896. In fact, an interpretation of the Vitascope's opening night program at Koster & Bial's Music Hall suggests that narrative has been an element – even a compelling one – since cinema's very beginnings, at least in the United States. The notion that cinema went through some linear development from attractions to narra-

tive (and that single-shot films were first shown as attractions and then later incorporated into narratives) needs to be rigorously questioned.

The order of the films for the Vitascope's opening night program was 1) UMBRELLA DANCE, 2) THE WAVE aka ROUGH SEA AT DOVER, 3) WALTON & SLAVIN, 4) BAND DRILL, 5) THE MONROE DOCTRINE, and 6) a Serpentine or Skirt Dance.⁵² The program thus started off by showing two young female dancers (the Leigh Sisters), asserting a continuity between stage and screen. According to one critic, "It seemed as though they were actually on the stage, so natural was the dance, with its many and graceful motions."⁵³ And yet they were not on the stage and the absence of their presence, this displaced view (the spectator's position in relation to the dancers on the screen was not the same as the camera's position in relation to the dancers) was liberatory. The dancers did not dance for the theatergoers as they would have with a "normal" live performance. The spectator watched them dance for the camera. This triangularization opened up a wide range of responses as the looped film was shown again and again.

The proscenium arch established by this first film was then broken by THE WAVE. It is crucial that spectators know that this wave is British – at least if the narrative that I discern in this sequence of images is to be intelligible. (Reviews consistently indicate this to be the case.) This cut from dancers to wave is a crucial moment in early cinema: it is nothing less, I would suggest, than the first example of early cinema's distinctive form of spectatorial identification. Given who participated in this exhibition (Edwin Porter claimed to be assisting with the projection, James White was there and one suspects that the Lathams, William K.L. Dickson and others would have attended as well), its effect may have been broadly felt and noted. The British wave metaphorically washed away the stage and the Leigh Sisters even as it assaulted Koster & Bial's patrons, causing initial consternation and excitement (a shock that gradually receded as the film continued to loop through the projector). The spectators found themselves in the same position as the dancers from the previous shot. They became bound together and this shared identity was nothing less than a nationalistic one. Dancers and spectators, women and men (the audience was overwhelming male), were brought together as they were collectively attacked by this *British* wave. (As an aside, I would point out that this method of identification can be found in THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY [1903], where the bandit shoots at the audience and then later shoots and kills a passenger inside the narrative. Another variant of this can be found in DREAM OF A RAREBIT FRIEND [1906], where we see the drunken partygoer and also simultaneously see the world swirling about as he experiences it. If one disputes the direct genealogy of this trope from the first Vitascope Program to DREAM OF A RAREBIT FRIEND, it only makes these repeated manifestations that much more compelling. But I digress.)

If the wave's assault initially pushed the spectators out of the picture, *WARTRON & SLAVIN* provides them with a new surrogate. On behalf of the newly constructed community of Americans (patrons and performers), Uncle Sam responds. That is, this wave was followed by a familiar subject: the burlesque boxing bout between "the long and the short of it," featuring lanky Charles Walton and the short, stout John Slavin. According to some sources, Walton also appears in *THE MONROE DOCTRINE* (Edison, April 1896): he played Uncle Sam while Slavin's replacement, John Mayon, was John Bull. In any case, Walton and Slavin visually evoked Uncle Sam and John Bull engaging in a fistfight encounter. It is worth noting that in this looped film, "the little fellow" was knocked down several times.⁵⁴ Uncle Sam was beating up John Bull for his presumptuous wave. That is, the relationship between the second and third film are one of cause and effect. The fourth film, *BAND DRILL*, shows a marching band in uniform: suggesting a mobilization of the American military; it "elicited loud cries of 'Bravo!'"⁵⁵ from the audience. Uncle Sam and John Bull of *WARTRON & SLAVIN* are only symbolic figures of the nation. This next scene (film 4) is less symbolic in that it shows a group of soldiers – marching as if to war, as if in response to the British assault. *BAND DRILL* thus prepared the way for *THE MONROE DOCTRINE*, which "twins" *ROUGH SEA AT DOVER* even as it reworked the fistfight exchange in *WARTRON & SLAVIN*. The British bombard the shoreline of another American nation – with guns instead of cinematic waves. Uncle Sam (Walton) forces John Bull (Mayon) to stop. According to one report, "This delighted the audience, and applause and cheers rang through the house, while someone cried, 'Hurrah for Edison.'"⁵⁶ With this imaginary but much-wished-for American victory, there was a return to the status quo as patrons once again viewed a dance film that was similar in style and subject matter to the opening selection. The program ended as it began, with a film of a woman that indulged male voyeuristic pleasures but also remobilized the possibility of identification. Might this dancer not evoke Columbia or Liberty (as in the statue of Liberty in New York harbor)? A masculinist-nationalist (English-American) confrontation thus forces these pleasures aside until an American triumph is achieved (on the screen), and audiences are able to return to their sensual pleasures.

Hardly a miscellaneous collection of films, this opening night program was an elaborate achievement indicating that Raff & Gammon had consciously chosen to fight the expected influx of international machines (English as well as French) by appealing to American patriotism with American subject matter – even though they (like Maguire & Baucus) had marketed the kinetoscope on the basis of a cosmopolitan internationalism.⁵⁷ This opening night program offered a narrative of sorts that was not just an excuse for the display of visual images. Its meaning was expressed in a remarkably creative manner. It carried multiple messages and an ideology. How can we evaluate the importance of this

narrative in relation to its other components. Undoubtedly some theatergoers might have simply (or partially) viewed this program as a miscellaneous collection of views, or dismissed the narrative as of no consequence. To the extent that this was true, intertextuality, spectacular comparison and judgment would have emerged. As Walton repeatedly pummeled Slavin, the theatergoer/spectator might well have thought back to 1492, the musical farce from which the scene was extracted and filmed. Yet for someone interested in this moment of American cinema – and the rise of an American nationalistic ideology on the screen that helped to move the United States to war with Spain two years later – this narrative is telling. On the level of the shot, this program was often moving towards something less than or different from cinema of attractions (though the initial unfurling of *THE WAVE* doubtlessly conformed to this paradigm); but on the level of the program it offered something more. Although we can only speculate as to the ways that actual vaudeville patrons negotiated these potentially conflicting cues (the narrative progression of the films, the denarrativization as well as the de-astonishment of the image through looping), there are no easy answers.

This opening program seems to me to be remarkable and immensely significant. In general, scholars have assumed that very early motion pictures programs, such as the Vitascope program discussed above, were a miscellaneous collection of films that were selected to show off cinema's technological proficiency and to hint at its potential. Gunning's concept of cinema of attractions helped to put this (and much more) in a positive light. What this new reading suggests, beyond the ability of motion picture practitioners to build narratives from day one of commercially successful cinema in the United States, is a sensitivity to the diachronic. The sequencing of images – the diachronic – was everywhere in turn-of-the-century culture that was becoming more and more visual. Whether successive living pictures, lantern slides, comic strip images, waxworks scenes or films, the diachronic succession of images cannot be equated with narrative, though narrative is often its most pervasive manifestation. Early programs and somewhat later films, such as *THE SEVEN AGES* (Edison, 1905) or *THE WHOLE DAM FAMILY AND THE DAM DOG* (Edison, 1905), may be non-narrative in their editorial structures but they have a logical diachronic structure. In *Film Art* David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson offer an array of non-narrative ways of structuring images: rhetorical, associational, categorical, abstract. Most if not all of these were in use during the 1890s. This concern with diachronic organization was, I would suggest, powerful even as it was complemented by intertextual concerns.

A closer look at various exhibition strategies suggest ways that cinema in the novelty period could be less, more or different than cinema of attractions – and

for that matter later Hollywood cinema.⁵⁸ Early films often elicited much more than astonishment – they mobilized the sophisticated viewing habits of spectators who already possessed a fluency in the realms of visual, literary and theatrical culture. Early cinema was not just the shock of the new, it was the reworking of the familiar – not only a reworking of old subjects in a new register but of established methods of seeing and reception. If early cinema before 1903 was often a cinema of attractions, it could also be a cinema of contemplation and discernment and certainly also a cinema of shot sequencing (including but not only narrative). It was all of these, sometimes within a single program – as Raff & Gammon so clearly demonstrated with the Vitascopé's opening night at Kosler & Bial's Music Hall.

Notes

1. *Yale Journal of Criticism* 7.2 (1994): 203-32. This was part of a cluster of papers delivered at the conference "The Movies Begin: History/Film/Culture" on 7-9 May 1993 at the Whitney Humanities Center, Yale University. It honored the 100th anniversary of the first public presentation of modern day motion pictures. Other relevant papers published in this cluster include Yuri Tsvivan, "The Rorschach Test of Cultures: On Some Parallels between Early Film Reception in Russia and the United States" (177-88) and Tom Gunning, "The Whole Town's Gawking: Early Cinema and the Visual Experience of Modernity" (189-201).
2. More implicitly, my article was about the writing of film history of this period. Gunning has certainly penned two rigorous, outstanding book-length historical treatments of the cinema, but they have not been on the pre-Griffith period (what I once used to call "early cinema"). If Tom and I often find ourselves on opposite sides of this friendly (if serious) debate about the nature of early cinema, it may be in part because Tom has written a brilliant array of discrete, self-contained articles on the topic, while my writings in this area has been dominated by much longer sustained narratives about the nature and substance of historical change. Our respective formats indeed reflect our perceptions of this period. I would urge Gunning to pursue the same kind of detailed look at pre-Griffith cinema as he gave to the first years of D.W. Griffith's work at Biograph (*D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph*). My conviction is that this would bring his position much closer to my own. It would require, however, an acknowledgment that Edwin S. Porter (for example) already had a narrator system in place, just one that was quite different from Griffith (as well as not as elaborate). Moreover, as this essay would emphasize, the origins of American narrative film began in a significant way with the beginnings of American cinema.
3. Charles Musser, *Edison Motion Pictures, 1890-1900: An Annotated Filmography* (Prinli, Italy: Giornate del Cinema Muto and Smithsonian Institution, 1997); Nancy Mathews with Charles Musser, et al. *Moving Pictures: American Art and Film, 1880-1910* (Manchester: Hudson Hill Press and Williams College Museum of Art, 2005). Most

- recently I have been pursuing a book project on THE JOHN C. RICE-MAY IRWIN KISS (April 1896).
4. Musser, "Rethinking Early Cinema" 216, 228.
 5. Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment," *Viewing Positions*, ed. Linda Williams (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1994) 121.
 6. Gunning, "The Whole Town is Gawking" 191.
 7. For example, we might think of Soviet cinema of the 1920s as a cinema of montage, but any systematic review of this cinema shows so many exceptions that it is wrong to see montage as the dominant feature of Soviet Silent Film. It is perhaps the dominant feature of an important strand of Soviet Cinema (the one we find most interesting and accomplished). However, it would be wrong to see montage as the dominant quality of all Soviet film from this period.
 8. Nancy Mathews, "Art and Film: Interactions," *Moving Pictures: American Art and Film 146-48*.
 9. Raff & Gammon, *The Vitascopé* (1896): 8.
 10. F.Z. Maguire & Co., *Catalogue* [March 1898]: 30. These and other catalog descriptions in this essay can all be found in Musser, *Edison Motion Pictures*.
 11. Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1980) 130-31.
 12. Maguire 44.
 13. Maguire 44.
 14. *Van Loan's Catskill Mountain Guide with Bird's-Eye View Maps and Choice Illustrations* [New York: Rogers & Sherwood, 1890] 22-24.
 15. Katherine Manthorne, "Experiencing Nature in Early Film: Dialogues with Church's Niagara and Homer's Seascapes," *Moving Pictures: American Art and Film 55-60*.
 16. Diderot, *Pensées détachées*, quoted in Fried 100.
 17. Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment" 123-24.
 18. Diderot, *Pensées détachées*, quoted in Fried 101.
 19. Robert C. Allen, "A Decided Sensation": Cinema, Vaudeville and Burlesque," *On the Edge of Your Seat: Popular Theater and Film in Early Twentieth-Century American Art*, ed. Patricia McDonnell (New Haven: Yale UP, 2002) 75-76.
 20. "Living Pictures a Great Success," *New York Herald* 22 March 1894: 16. For more on the introduction of Living Pictures in New York City in 1894 see Musser, "A Cornucopia of Images: Comparison and Judgment across Theater, Film and the Visual Arts during the Late Nineteenth Century," *Moving Pictures: American Art and Film 7-8*.
 21. *New York Herald* 22 March 1894: 16.
 22. "A New Set of Living Pictures," *New York Daily Tribune* 11 May 1894: 7.
 23. See for instance, "Gallery and Studio," *Brooklyn Eagle* 26 January 1890: 10.
 24. "Keith's New Theater," *Boston Globe* 26 May 1896: 5.
 25. The American Vitascopé & Biograph Company produced more than a dozen motion pictures that were also living pictures in 1899 and 1900. See Musser, "A Cornucopia of Images."
 26. "Vaudeville-The Bijou," *Philadelphia Record* 6 Sept. 1896: 10.
 27. Michelle Aubert and Jean-Claude Seguin, *La Production cinématographique des Frères Lumière* (Paris: Mémoires de cinéma, 1996) 251.

28. Edison Manufacturing Company, *War Extra: Edison Films* 20 May 1898: 3.
29. *The Phonoscope* Dec. 1896: 16.
30. *New York Mail and Express* 24 April 1896: 12.
31. Stephen Bottomore, "The Panicking Audience?: Early Cinema and the 'Train Effect,'" *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 19.2 (1999): 177-216.
32. Diderot, *Pensées détachées*, quoted in Fried 101.
33. Fried 101-102. One can link Diderot's conception of theatricality to the presentational acting style of many early films as well as the syncretic representational evident in comedies and dramas, particularly before 1908-09.
34. *Buffalo Courier* 7 June 1896: 10.
35. *Buffalo Courier* 7 June 1896: 122.
36. Wanda Strauven to Charles Musser, 10 May 2006.
37. Neil Harris, *Humburg: The Art of P. T. Barnum* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973) 72-89.
38. Fried 108.
39. Fried 118.
40. Tom Gunning, "Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," *Early Cinema: Space Frame Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (London: British Film Institute, 1990) 58-59.
41. One crucial problem here is that early cinema goes about constructing the beholder on three or four levels: the proflmic, the filmic, the level of exhibition, and spectatorship.
42. Part of the issue here is the benchmark for sustained absorption. Is it the standard of the present-day feature film? Or that of a painting? By evoking Diderot and Fried, Gunning gestures toward a comparison with painting, which Mathews has shown to be both appropriate and compelling.
43. Gunning, "Cinema of Attractions" 58-59.
44. Gunning, "The Whole Town is Gawking" 190.
45. Gunning, "The Whole Town is Gawking" 195.
46. "Keith's New Theater," *Boston Herald* 24 May 1896: 10.
47. Maguire & Baucus, *Edison Films* 20 Jan. 1897: 5.
48. A reproduction of *Caswell Beach-Breaking Waves* (John Dillwyn Llewelyn, 1853) can be found in Phillip Prodger, *Muybridge and the Instantaneous Photography Movement* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995) 79.
49. Many of these issues are explored from the perspective of art history in Michael Ann Holly, "Mourning and Method," *Art Bulletin* 84.4 (Dec. 2002): 660-69.
50. Gunning, "The Whole Town is Gawking" 195.
51. "Keith's New Theater," *Boston Herald* 24 May 1896: 10.
52. For newspaper accounts of this screening see Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema* (New York: Scribner's, 1990) 116. I misidentified BAND DRILL as FINALE OF 1ST ACT OF HOYT'S "MIXX WHITE FLAG" in *Before the Nickelodeon: The Early Cinema of Edwin S. Porter* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1991) 62.
53. "Wonderful is the Vitascope," *New York Herald* 24 April 1896: 11, in Musser, *Edison Motion Pictures* 200-01.
54. *New York Daily News* 24 April 1896, clipping, Raff & Gammon Collection, Harvard Business School, Baker Library, Boston.
55. "Wonderful is the Vitascope."
56. "Wonderful is the Vitascope."

57. Reports of the cinématographe reached Raff & Gammon from England. London screenings destroyed their hope for a significant foreign sale of Vitascope rights. Also British systems as well as the Lumière cinématographe were in use by this period. It thus respect Great Britain was an appropriate if somewhat misplaced object of Raff & Gammon's barbs. I examine this rivalry in "Nationalism and the Beginnings of Cinema: The Lumière Cinématographe in the United States, 1896-1897," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 19.2 (June 1999): 149-76.
58. Thanks to Jane Gaines for suggesting the first part of this formulation.