EARLY CINEMA

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The Cinema of Attractions

Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde

TOM GUNNING

Writing in 1922, flushed with the excitement of seeing Abel Gance's *La Roue*, Fernand Léger tried to define something of the radical possibilities of the cinema. The potential of the new art did not lie in 'imitating the movements of nature' or in 'the mistaken path' of its resemblance to theatre. Its unique power was a 'matter of *making images seen*'.[1] It is precisely this harnessing of visibility, this act of showing and exhibition, which I feel cinema before 1906 displays most intensely. Its inspiration for the avant-garde of the early decades of this century needs to be re-explored.

Writings by the early modernists (Futurists, Dadaists and Surrealists) on the cinema follow a pattern similar to Léger: enthusiasm for this new medium and its possibilities; and disappointment at the way it has already developed, its enslavement to traditional art forms, particularly theatre and literature. This fascination with the *potential* of a medium (and the accompanying fantasy of rescuing the cinema from its enslavement to alien and passé forms) can be understood from a number of viewpoints. I want to use it to illuminate a topic I have also approached before, the strangely heterogeneous relation that film before 1906 (or so) bears to the films that follow, and the way a taking account of this heterogeneity signals a new conception of film history and film form. My work in this area has been pursued in collaboration with André Gaudreault.[2]

The history of early cinema, like the history of cinema generally, has been written and theorized under the hegemony of narrative films. Early film-makers like Smith, Méliès and Porter have been studied primarily from the viewpoint of their contribution to film as a storytelling medium, particularly the evolution of narrative editing. Although such approaches are not totally misguided, they are one-sided and potentially distort both the work of these film-makers and the actual forces shaping cinema before 1906. A few observations will indicate the way that early cinema was not dominated by the narrative impulse that later asserted its sway over the medium. First there is the extremely important role that actuality film plays in early film production. Investigation of the films copyrighted in the US shows that actuality films outnumbered fictional films until 1906.[3] The Lumière tradition of 'placing the world within one's reach' through travel films and topicals did not disappear with the exit of the Cinématographe from film production. But even within non-actuality filming – what has sometimes been referred to as the 'Méliès tradition' – the role narrative plays is quite different from in traditional narrative film. Méliès himself declared in discussing his working method:

> As for the scenario, the 'fable,' or 'tale,' I only consider it at the end. I can state that the scenario constructed in this manner has *no importance*, since I use it merely as a pretext for the 'stage effects,' the 'tricks,' or for a nicely arranged tableau.[4]

Whatever differences one might find between Lumière and Méliès, they should not represent the opposition between narrative and non-narrative film-making, at least as it is understood today. Rather, one can unite them in a conception that sees cinema less as a way of telling stories than as a way of presenting a series of views to an audience, fascinating because of their illusory power (whether the realistic illusion of motion offered to the first audiences by Lumière, or the magical illusion concocted by Méliès), and exoticism. In other words, I believe that the relation to the spectator set up by the films of both Lumière and Méliès (and many other film-makers before 1906) had a common basis, and one that differs from the primary spectator relations set up by narrative film after 1906. I will call this earlier conception of cinema, 'the cinema of attractions'. I believe that this conception dominates cinema until about 1906–7. Although different from the fascination in storytelling exploited by the cinema from the time of Griffith, it is not necessarily opposed to it. In fact the cinema of attractions does not disappear with the dominance of narrative, but rather goes underground, both into certain avant-garde practices and as a component of narrative films, more evident in some genres (e.g. the musical) than in others.

What precisely is the cinema of attractions? First, it is a cinema that bases itself on the quality that Léger celebrated: its ability to *show* something. Contrasted to the voyeuristic aspect of narrative cinema analysed by Christian Metz,[5] this is an exhibitionist cinema. An aspect of early cinema which I have written about in other articles is emblematic of this different relationship the cinema of attractions constructs with its spectator: the recurring look at the camera by actors. This action, which is later perceived as spoiling the realistic illusion of the cinema, is here undertaken with brio, establishing contact with the audience. From comedians smirking at the camera, to the constant bowing and gesturing of the conjurors in magic films, this is a cinema that displays its visibility, willing to rupture a self-enclosed fictional world for a chance to solicit the attention of the spectator.

Exhibitionism becomes literal in the series of erotic films which play an important role in early film production (the same Pathé catalogue would advertise the Passion Play along with 'scènes grivoises d'un caractère piquant', erotic films often including full nudity), also driven underground in later years. As Noël Burch has shown in his film *Correction Please: How We Got into Pictures* (1979), a film like *The Bride Retires* (France, 1902) reveals a fundamental conflict between this exhibitionistic tendency of early film and the creation of a fictional diegesis. A woman undresses for bed while her new husband peers at her from behind a screen. However, it is to the camera and the audience that the bride addresses her erotic striptease, winking at us as she faces us, smiling in erotic display.

As the quote from Méliès points out, the trick film, perhaps the

dominant non-actuality film genre before 1906, is itself a series of displays, of magical attractions, rather than a primitive sketch of narrative continuity. Many trick films are, in effect, plotless, a series of transformations strung together with little connection and certainly no characterization. But to approach even the plotted trick films, such as *Voyage dans la lune* (1902), simply as precursors of later narrative structures is to miss the point. The story simply provides a frame upon which to string a demonstration of the magical possibilities of the cinema.

Modes of exhibition in early cinema also reflect this lack of concern with creating a self-sufficient narrative world upon the screen. As Charles Musser has sown,[6] the early showmen exhibitors exerted a great deal of control over the shows they presented, actually re-editing the films they had purchased and supplying a series of offscreen supplements, such as sound effects and spoken commentary. Perhaps most extreme is the Hale's Tours, the largest chain of theatres exclusively showing films before 1906. Not only did the films consist of non-narrative sequences taken from moving vehicles (usually trains), but the theatre itself was arranged as a train car with a conductor who took tickets, and sound effects simulating the click-clack of wheels and hiss of air brakes.[7] Such viewing experiences relate more to the attractions of the fairground than to the traditions of the legitimate theatre. The relation between films and the emergence of the great amusement parks, such as Coney Island, at the turn of the century provides rich ground for rethinking the roots of early cinema.

Nor should we ever forget that in the earliest years of exhibition the cinema itself was an attraction. Early audiences went to exhibitions to see machines demonstrated (the newest technological wonder, following in the wake of such widely exhibited machines and marvels as X-rays or, earlier, the phonograph), rather than to view films. It was the Cinématographe, the Biograph or the Vitascope that were advertised on the variety bills in which they premièred, not *Le Déjeuner de bébé* or *The Black Diamond Express*. After the initial novelty period, this display of the possibilities of cinema continues, and not only in magic films. Many of the close-ups in early film differ from later uses of the technique precisely because they do not use enlargement for narrative punctuation, but as an attraction in its own right. The close-up cut into Porter's *The Gay Shoe Clerk* (1903) may anticipate later continuity techniques, but its principal motive is again pure exhibitionism, as the lady lifts her skirt hem, exposing her ankle for all to see. Biograph films such as *Photographing a Female Crook* (1904) and *Hooligan in Jail* (1903) consist of a single shot in which the camera is brought close to the main character, until they are in mid-shot. The enlargement is not a device expressive of narrative tension; it is in itself an attraction and the point of the film.[8]

To summarise, the cinema of attractions directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle – a unique event, whether fictional or documentary, that is of interest in itself. The attraction to be displayed may also be of a cinematic nature, such as the early close-ups just described, or trick films in which a cinematic manipulation (slow motion, reverse motion, substitution, multiple exposure) provides the film's novelty. Fictional situations tend to be restricted to gags, vaudeville

numbers or recreations of shocking or curious incidents (executions, current events). 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 film making. Theatrical display dominates over narrative absorption, emphasizing the direct stimulation of shock or surprise at the expense of unfolding a story or creating a diegetic universe. The cinema of attractions expends little energy creating characters with psychological motivations or individual personality. Making use of both fictional and non-fictional attractions, its energy moves outward towards an acknowledged spectator rather than inward towards the character-based situations essential to classical narrative.

The term 'attractions' comes, of course, from the young Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein and his attempt to find a new model and mode of analysis for the theatre. In his search for the 'unit of impression' of theatrical art, the foundation of an analysis which would undermine realistic representational theatre, Eisenstein hit upon the term 'attraction'.[9] An attraction aggressively subjected the spectator to 'sensual or psychological impact'. According to Eisenstein, theatre should consist of a montage of such attractions, creating a relation to the spectator entirely different from his absorption in 'illusory depictions'.[10] I pick up this term partly to underscore the relation to the spectator that this later avant-garde practice shares with early cinema: that of exhibitionist confrontation rather than diegetic absorption. Of course the 'experimentally regulated and mathematically calculated' montage of attractions demanded by Eisenstein differs enormously from these early films (as any conscious and oppositional mode of practice will from a popular one).[11] However, it is important to realize the context from which Eisenstein selected the term. Then, as now, the 'attraction' was a term of the fairground, and for Eisenstein and his friend Yutkevich it primarily represented their favourite fairground attraction, the roller coaster, or as it was known then in Russia, the American Mountains.[12]

The source is significant. The enthusiasm of the early avant-garde for film was at least partly an enthusiasm for a mass culture that was emerging at the beginning of the century, offering a new sort of stimulus for an audience not acculturated to the traditional arts. It is important to take this enthusiasm for popular art as something more than a simple gesture to *épater les bourgeois*. The enormous development of the entertainment industry since the 1910s and its growing acceptance by middle-class culture (and the accommodation that made this acceptance possible) have made it difficult to understand the liberation popular entertainment offered at the beginning of the century. I believe that it was precisely the exhibitionist quality of turn-of-the-century popular art that made it attractive to the avant-garde – its freedom from the creation of a diegesis, its accent on direct stimulation.

Writing of the variety theatre, Marinetti not only praised its aesthetics of astonishment and stimulation, but particularly its creation of a new spectator who contrasts with the 'static', 'stupid voyeur' of traditional theatre. The spectator at the variety theatre feels directly addressed by the spectacle and joins in, singing along, heckling the comedians.[13] Dealing with early cinema within

the context of archive and academy, we risk missing its vital relation to vaudeville, its primary place of exhibition until around 1905. Film appeared as one attraction on the vaudeville programme, surrounded by a mass of unrelated acts in a non-narrative and even nearly illogical succession of performances. Even when presented in the nickelodeons that were emerging at the end of this period, these short films always appeared in a variety format, trick films sandwiched in with farces, actualities, 'illustrated songs', and, quite frequently, cheap vaudeville acts. It was precisely this non-narrative variety that placed this form of entertainment under attack by reform groups in the early 1910s. The Russell Sage Survey of popular entertainments found vaudeville 'depends upon an artificial rather than a natural human and developing interest, these acts having no necessary and as a rule, no actual connection'.[14] In other words, no narrative. A night at the variety theatre was like a ride on a streetcar or an active day in a crowded city, according to this middle-class reform group, stimulating an unhealthy nervousness. It was precisely such artificial stimulus that Marinetti and Eisenstein wished to borrow from the popular arts and inject into the theatre, organizing popular energy for radical purpose.

What happened to the cinema of attractions? The period from 1907 to about 1913 represents the true *narrativization* of the cinema, culminating in the appearance of feature films which radically revised the variety format. Film clearly took the legitimate theatre as its model, producing famous players in famous plays. The transformation of filmic discourse that D. W. Griffith typifies bound cinematic signifiers to the narration of stories and the creation of a self-enclosed diegetic universe. The look at the camera becomes taboo and the devices of cinema are transformed from playful 'tricks' – cinematic attractions (Méliès gesturing at us to watch the lady vanish) – to elements of dramatic expression, entries into the psychology of character and the world of fiction.

However, it would be too easy to see this as a Cain and Abel story, with narrative strangling the nascent possibilities of a young iconoclastic form of entertainment. Just as the variety format in some sense survived in the movie palaces of the 20s (with newsreel, cartoon, sing-along, orchestra performance and sometimes vaudeville acts subordinated to, but still coexisting with, the narrative *feature* of the evening), the system of attraction remains an essential part of popular film-making.

The chase film shows how, towards the end of this period (basically from 1903 to 1906), a synthesis of attractions and narrative was already underway. The chase had been the original truly narrative genre of the cinema, providing a model for causality and linearity as well as a basic editing continuity. A film like Biograph's *Personal* (1904, the model for the chase film in many ways) shows the creation of a narrative linearity, as the French nobleman runs for his life from the fiancées his personal column ad has unleashed. However, at the same time, as the group of young women pursue their prey towards the camera in each shot, they encounter some slight obstacle (a fence, a steep slope, a stream) that slows them down for the spectator, providing a mini-spectacle pause in the unfolding of narrative. The Edison Company seemed particularly aware of this, since they offered their plagiarized version of this Biograph film

(*How a French Nobleman Got a Wife Through the New York Herald 'Personal' Columns*) in two forms, as a complete film or as separate shots, so that any one image of the ladies chasing the man could be bought without the inciting incident or narrative closure.[15]

As Laura Mulvey has shown in a very different context, the dialectic between spectacle and narrative has fuelled much of the classical cinema.[16] Donald Crafton in his study of slapstick comedy, 'The pie and the chase', has shown the way slapstick did a balancing act between the pure spectacle of gag and the development of narrative.[17] Likewise, the traditional spectacle film proved true to its name by highlighting moments of pure visual stimulation along with narrative. The 1924 version of *Ben Hur* was in fact shown at a Boston theatre with a timetable announcing the moment of its prime attractions:

8.35 *The Star of Bethlehem*
8.40 *Jerusalem Restored*
8.59 *Fall of the House of Hur*
10.29 *The Last Supper*
10.50 *Reunion*[18]

The Hollywood advertising policy of enumerating the features of a film, each emblazoned with the command, 'See!' shows this primal power of the attraction running beneath the armature of narrative regulation.

We seem far from the avant-garde premises with which this discussion of early cinema began. But it is important for the radical heterogeneity which I find in early cinema not to be conceived as a truly oppositional programme, one irreconcilable with the growth of narrative cinema. This view is too sentimental and too ahistorical. A film like *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) does point in both directions, towards a direct assault on the spectator (the spectacularly enlarged outlaw unloading his pistol in our faces), and towards a linear narrative continuity. This is early film's ambiguous heritage. Clearly in some sense recent spectacle cinema has reaffirmed its roots in stimulus and carnival rides, in what might be called the Spielberg-Lucas-Coppola cinema of effects.

But effects are tamed attractions. Marinetti and Eisenstein understood that they were tapping into a source of energy that would need focusing and intensification to fulfil its revolutionary possibilities. Both Eisenstein and Marinetti planned to exaggerate the impact on the spectators, Marinetti proposing to literally glue them to their seats (ruined garments paid for after the performance) and Eisenstein setting firecrackers off beneath them. Every change in film history implies a change in its address to the spectator, and each period constructs its spectator in a new way. Now in a period of American avant-garde cinema in which the tradition of contemplative subjectivity has perhaps run its (often glorious) course, it is possible that this earlier carnival of the cinema, and the methods of popular entertainment, still provide an unexhausted resource – a Coney Island of the avant-garde, whose never dominant but always sensed current can be traced from Méliès through Keaton, through *Un Chien andalou* (1928), and Jack Smith.

Notes

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1. Fernand Léger, 'A critical essay on the plastic qualities of Abel Gance's film *The Wheel*', in Edward Fry (ed.), *Functions of Painting*, trans. Alexandra Anderson (New York: Viking Press, 1973), p. 21.
2. See my articles 'The non-continuous style of early film', in Roger Holman (ed.), *Cinema 1900–1906* (Brussels: FIAF, 1982), and 'An unseen energy swallows space: the space in early film and its relation to American avant garde film' in John L. Fell (ed.), *Film Before Griffith* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 355–66, and our collaborative paper delivered by A. Gaudreault at the conference at Cerisy on Film History (August 1985) 'Le cinéma des premiers temps: un défi à l'histoire du cinéma?'. I would also like to note the importance of my discussions with Adam Simon and our hope to investigate further the history and archaeology of the film spectator.
3. Robert C. Allen, *Vaudeville and Film: 1895–1915, A Study in Media Interaction* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), pp. 159, 212–13.
4. Méliès, 'Importance du scénario', in Georges Sadoul, *Georges Méliès* (Paris: Seghers, 1961), p. 118 (my translation).
5. Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster and Alfred Guzzetti (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), particularly pp. 58–80, 91–7.
6. Musser, 'American Vitagraph 1897–1901', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 22 no. 3, Spring 1983, p. 10.
7. Raymond Fielding, 'Hale's tours: Ultrarealism in the pre-1910 motion picture', in Fell, *Film Before Griffith*, pp. 116–30.
8. I wish to thank Ben Brewster for his comments after the original delivery of this paper which pointed out the importance of including this aspect of the cinema of attractions here.
9. Eisenstein, 'How I became a film director', in *Notes of a Film Director* (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, n.d.), p. 16.
10. 'The montage of attractions', in S. M. Eisenstein, *Writings 1922–1934*, edited by Richard Taylor (London: BFI, 1988), p. 35.
11. Ibid.
12. Yon Barna, *Eisenstein* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), p. 59.
13. 'The variety theater 1913' in Umbro Apollonio (ed.), *Futurist Manifestos* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), p. 127.
14. Michael Davis, *The Exploitation of Pleasure* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, Dept. of Child Hygiene, Pamphlet, 1911).
15. David Levy, 'Edison sales policy and the continuous action film 1904–1906', in Fell, *Film Before Griffith*, pp. 207–22.
16. 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', in Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Macmillan, 1989).
17. Paper delivered at the FIAF Conference on Slapstick, May 1985, New York City.
18. Nicholas Vardac, *From Stage to Screen: Theatrical Method from Garrick to Griffith* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1968), p. 232.

Let There Be Lumière

DAI VAUGHAN

To look critically and sympathetically at the beginnings of cinema – at those programmes of one-minute scenes first publicly exhibited in Paris in December 1895, and in London the following February – is like pondering what happened to the universe in the first few microseconds after the big bang.

We need not doubt that, so far as the genesis of film art is concerned, these shows mounted by the Lumière brothers represent the nearest we will find to a singularity. Before then, notwithstanding such precedents as the photographic analysis of animal movement by Marey and Muybridge, the public projection of animated drawings in Reynaud's Théâtre Optique or anticipations of film narrative methods in comic strip and lantern slide sequence, cinema did not exist. A story so frequently repeated as to have assumed the status of folklore tells how members of the first audiences dodged aside as a train steamed towards them into a station. We cannot seriously imagine that these educated people in Paris and London expected the train to emerge from the screen and run them down. It must have been a reaction similar to that which prevents us from stepping with unconcern on to a static escalator, no matter how firmly we may assure ourselves that all it requires is a simple stride on to an immobile flat surface. What this legend means is that the particular combination of visual signals present in that film had had no previous existence *other* than as signifying a real train pulling into a real station.

Yet already, in this primitive world, we find structures tantalisingly prophetic of some we know today. Compare the *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*, few of whom return our gaze with even a glance from the screen, with the members disembarking from a river-boat for the *Congress of Photographic Societies at Neuville-sur-Saône*, who greet the camera with much waving and doffing of headgear. Do we not see here that distinction, much a part of our television experience, between those who wield the power of communication and those who do not; between those granted subjectivity and those held in objectivity by the media?

Perhaps we should examine more closely the recorded responses of the earliest viewers. A curious example is offered in Stanley Reed's commentary to the BFI's sound version of the first British Lumière programme. This ended with *A Boat Leaving Harbour*; and we are told that visitors came forward after the performance to poke at the screen with their walking sticks, convinced that it must be made of glass and conceal a tank of water. While we may allow this to pass as a measure of the wonderment caused by the first cinematographic

projections, it becomes on consideration rather puzzling. How could people have supposed that the screen concealed a tank when it would also, by the same supposition, have had to conceal a garden, a railway station, a factory and various other edifices? Yet I believe that this story, like the one about the train, is telling us something important.

A Boat Leaving Harbour does, even today, stand out among the early Lumière subjects. (Indeed, an ulterior motive behind this article is my desire to pay tribute to a film I have loved since first encountering it some thirty years ago.) The action is simple. A rowing boat, with two men at the oars and one at the tiller, is entering boldly from the right foreground; and it proceeds, for fifty-odd seconds, towards the left background. On the tip of the jetty, which juts awkwardly into frame on the right, stand a child or two in frilly white and two women in black. Light shimmers on the water, though the sky seems leaden. The swell is not heavy; but as the boat passes beyond the jetty, leaving the protection of the harbour mouth, it is slewed around and caught broadside-on by the waves. The men are in difficulties; and one woman turns her attention from the children to look at them. There it ends. Yet every time I have seen this film I have been overwhelmed by a sense of the *potentiality* of the medium: as if it had just been invented and lay waiting still to be explored.

I do not think it is just the Tennysonian resonances – crossing the bar, and so forth – which invest this episode with nostalgia for cinema's lost beginnings: a nostalgia which one would expect to be prompted equally, if at all, by the other items in the programme. One thing which will be obvious even from this brief description is that the subject could not possibly have been simulated in an indoor tank. So why *were* those early visitors poking at the screen with their sticks? A superficially similar reaction, this time to Edison's 'kinetoscope', is quoted in the first volume of Georges Sadoul's *Histoire générale du cinéma*. The kinetoscope was an individual viewing-box which ran continuous bands of film, the subjects being photographed by daylight in a blackened studio which could be revolved to face the sun; and in 1894 Henri de Parville wrote of it in *Les Annales politiques et littéraires*: 'Tous les acteurs sont en mouvement. Leurs moindres actes sont si naturellement reproduits qu'on se demande s'il y a illusion.' What he presumably meant by 'illusion' was some system by which the images of live actors might have been brought by mirrors under the eyepiece of the machine. But it is clear that the relevance of this lies not in similarity but in contrast; for there was no way that the image of a French harbour could have been reflected by mirrors into the auditorium of the Regent Street Polytechnic. The gentlemen with the walking sticks were not trying to discover how the trick worked. Their concern was not that they might have been victims of an illusion, but that they had experienced something which transcended the cosy world of illusionism altogether.

We need look no further than Sadoul's standard *Histoire générale* for evidence of the fact that what most impressed the early audiences was what would now be considered the incidentals of scenes: smoke from a forge, steam from a locomotive, brick-dust from a demolished wall. Georges Méliès, a guest at the first Paris performance (who was soon to become a pioneer of trick

filming), made particular mention of the rustling of leaves in the background of *Le Déjeuner de bébé* – a detail which, as Sadoul observes, would scarcely be remarked today. It is worth asking why this should be so – and why, by implication, we consider Lumière cinema and Edison not: for surely, it might be argued, what mattered was the photographic rendering of movement, regardless of what moved. Sadoul entitles his chapter on Lumière 'La nature même prise sur le fait'; and Stanley Reed points out that audiences had hitherto been familiar only with the painted backdrops of the theatre. But to put it this way round is to understate the most revealing aspect: that people were startled not so much by the phenomenon of the moving photograph, which its inventors had struggled long to achieve, as by its ability to portray spontaneities of which the theatre was not capable. The movements of photographed people were accepted without demur because they were perceived as performance, as simply a new mode of self-projection; but that the inanimate should participate in self-projection was astonishing.

Most of the people in the Lumière show are either performing for the camera – whether knocking down walls or feeding babies – or engaged in such neutral activities as leaving the factory or alighting from a train. What is different about *A Boat Leaving Harbour* is that, when the boat is threatened by the waves, the men must apply their efforts to controlling it; and, by responding to the challenge of the spontaneous moment, they become integrated into its spontaneity. The unpredictable has not only emerged from the background to occupy the greater portion of the frame; it has also taken sway over the principals. Man, no longer the mountebank self-presenter, has become equal with the leaves and the brick-dust – and as miraculous.

But such an invasion of the spontaneous into the human arts, being unprecedented, must have assumed the character of a threat not only to the 'performers' but to the whole idea of controlled, willed, obedient communication. And conversely, since the idea of communication had in the past been inseparable from the assumption of willed control, this invasion must have seemed a veritable doubling-back of the world into its own imagery, a denial of the order of a coded system: an escape of the represented from the representational act. Thus what the early audiences suspected was not the presence of a water-tank but the presence, in some metaphysical sense, of the sea itself: a sea liberated from the laboriousness of painted highlights and the drudgeries of metaphor. And their prodding of the screen was comparable with our own compulsion to reach out and 'touch' a hologram.

If this helps to explain why, in 1896, a representation of the sea should have caused greater bemusement than those of a factory or railway station, it does not explain why *A Boat Leaving Harbour* should have retained its fascination for almost a hundred years. To understand this, we must turn the other way: not towards a notional first moment but towards the future already latent in Lumière. The earliest programme contained an episode, *L'Arroseur arrosé*, which is generally considered to mark the initiation of screen narrative. A man is watering a garden; a boy puts his foot on the hose and stops the jet; the gardener

peers into the nozzle; and the boy removes his foot so that the gardener is squirted in the face. But is this a fiction film or simply a filmed fiction?

One answer would be that the fiction film comes into being only when the articulations of camera movement and editing form an inalienable component of the narration. Another, slightly more sophisticated, would be that the distinction is meaningless at this primitive level of organisation, and that *L'Arroseur arrosé* may be said to be filmed fiction and fiction film at once. But let us consider the question from the point of view of what seemed at the time the essential triumph of Lumière: the harnessing of spontaneity. It is clear how this applies to the men rowing the boat; but it is far from clear how it applies in the *Arroseur* episode.

At first it may seem that there are two simple alternatives: either this was an event observed in passing, perhaps with a concealed camera; or it was a scene staged by the film-maker with the complicity of both parties. Furthermore, the gaucheness of the performances suffices to resolve any doubt in favour of the latter, thus perhaps leading us – our definition swallowing its tail – to say that what we see is an *attempt* at a fiction film which, in so far as it is *perceived* only as an attempt, reverts to the spontaneous. But it is not so easy. Suppose, for example, that the camera had been set up only to record the garden-watering, and that the boy had played his trick unprompted; or that the boy and the cameraman had been in collusion to trick the gardener; or the boy and the gardener in collusion to surprise the cameraman. . . . Spontaneity begins to seem, in human affairs, a matter less of behaviour than of motivations – and of transactions in which the part of the mountebank *behind* the camera cannot long be excluded from question. 'Spontaneity', that is to say, comes down to what is not predictable by – and not under the control of – the film-maker. As for the gaucherie, it is arguable that flawless performances would have given us not true fiction but mendacious actuality.

Fiction film arises at precisely the point where people tire of these riddles. As audiences settle for appearances, according the film's images the status of dream or fantasy whose links with a prior world are assumed to have been severed if they ever existed, film falls into place as a signifying system whose articulations may grow ever more complex. True, the movement of leaves remains unpredictable; but we know that, with the endless possibility of retakes open to the film-maker, what was unplanned is nevertheless what has been chosen. Even in documentary, which seeks to respect the provenance of its images, they are bent inexorably to foreign purpose. The 'big bang' leaves only a murmur of background radiation, detectable whenever someone decides that a film will gain in realism by being shot on 'real' locations or where the verisimilitude of a Western is enhanced, momentarily, by the unscripted whinny of a horse.

A Boat Leaving Harbour begins without purpose and ends without conclusion, its actors drawn into the contingency of events. Successive viewings serve only to stress its pathetic brevity as a fragment of human experience. It survives as a reminder of that moment when the question of spontaneity was posed and not yet found to be insoluble: when cinema seemed free, not only of its proper connotations, but of the threat of its absorption into meanings beyond it. Here is the secret of its beauty. The promise of this film remains untarnished because it is a promise which can never be kept; its every fulfilment is also its betrayal.

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