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Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat

(1895–1897)



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Silent Films and Screaming Audiences

Context

Film history does and does not start with the Lumière brothers' invention of the *Cinématographe*. Auguste and Louis Lumière did not give birth to pictures in motion, since optical effects of movement in the form of shadow plays and magic-lantern shows were already well loved entertainments before the nineteenth century. Nor did they invent the movies, because the public could already, even if only on an individual basis, watch films by peering through Thomas Alva Edison's coin-operated peep box, the Kinetoscope. Rather, the Lumières were the first to project a strip of film on a screen large enough to be seen by an entire audience, and therefore instituted film viewing as a collective experience. The screening on December 28, 1895, at the Salon Indien of the Grand Café in Paris, will remain forever recorded in our history books, because from then onward audiences were willing to pay regularly for this new form of entertainment.¹

On that day, the way in which the world was seen both changed and did not change. There had never been a technology that could so accurately produce an illusion of reality. Although these moving pictures were in black and white, what they simulated was not only life as it could be seen beyond the walls of the Grand Café, but also the sensation of movement as it could be felt in the hubbub of the nineteenth-century metropolis. On the other hand, those who lined up that day on the Boulevard des Capucines were already seeing the world protocinematically. This is because they were accustomed to big-city living, which had become as fast and intoxicating as the speed

¹The first-ever film screening to an audience—namely, invited scientists at the Société d'Encouragement pour l'Industrie Nationale—took place on March 22, 1895.

of the onrushing impressions about to burst onto the screen. The cinema, with its restless succession of living pictures, was the very embodiment of a modern existence in flux. The Lumières' invention of a technological apparatus that combined camera, printer, and projector, and their most famous film, *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat*, must therefore be understood in the larger context of modernity, which had brought unprecedented changes to everyday life.

The Cinema Was on Its Way Long before 1895

Everything associated with the modern age—industrialization, mobility, and consumerism—and everything this entailed, from overpopulated urban centers, machinery working around the clock, the deafening noise of trains, to shopping as a new form of addiction, were all factors in shaping a sensibility that had become, according to Friedrich Nietzsche in 1888, “immensely more irritable” (47). During the early years of the railways, nervous energies overcame the traveler as the train swallowed up the miles at an inhuman pace, just as the anxious air traveler in our own age seems to expect with every unusual vibration that disaster is waiting (Schivelbusch 160–61). The fear of technology out of control, of accidents and collisions, were just as tangibly felt at street level. Writing about the burgeoning nineteenth-century metropolis, the cultural theorist Walter Benjamin found that “moving through traffic involves the individual in a series of shocks and collisions” to the extent that “at dangerous crossings, nervous impulses flow through him in rapid succession” (132). Even pushing through the jostling crowds, the urban stroller felt at some risk, be this a potential pickpocket’s hand too close for comfort, ramming the elbow of a stranger, or, as Émile Zola’s novel *The Ladies’ Paradise* (1883) describes it, being swept away by a current of shoppers, which the new department stores pulled in as if “sucking in the population from the four corners of Paris” (241; ch. 9). When Nietzsche gives his diagnosis of modernity, it is befitting therefore that he also gives a flavor of the new pace of life by emulating its tempo and rhythm in the fragmentary nature of his style:

the abundance of disparate impressions greater than ever: cosmopolitanism in foods, literatures, newspapers, forms, tastes, even landscapes. The tempo of this influx *prestissimo*; the

impressions erase each other; one instinctively resists taking in anything, taking anything deeply, to “digest” anything; a weakening of the power to digest results from this. A kind of adaptation of this flood of impressions takes place: men unlearn spontaneous action, they merely react to stimuli from outside. *Profound weakness of spontaneity*: the historian, critic, analyst, the interpreter, the observer, the collector, the reader—all of them *reactive* talents—all science! (47; italics in the original)

If over the course of the twentieth century we have become accustomed to the sheer barrage of stimuli with which modern life assaults us, and have learned to live with its anonymity and chaos, for the nineteenth-century populace it marked an age of transition, from a more tranquil existence to a more intense one.

Just like the moving images in the picture house, life outside presented previously unseen spectacles that were altogether too fleeting to absorb in anything but fragments. One of the first to characterize modernity in such terms was the poet, Charles Baudelaire. For him, the very hallmark of modernity was “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent” (13), and it is this that set into motion a different relation to, and perception of, the world. In his essay “The Painter of Modern Life” (1863), we can sense how the modern city impacted on his sensibility as an artist. Strolling through Paris, which Baudelaire saw as *the* nineteenth-century capital, meant throwing oneself into “the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and infinite” (9). Whether this midst was experienced with excitement as “an immense reservoir of electric energy” (Baudelaire 9), or the throng of the crowd and the vibrations of city traffic fatigued people, the point is that the modern city dweller was continually bombarded by what O. Winter, in his article “The Cinematograph” (1896), called “an endless series of partial impressions” (296). In this respect, what has been called the “mobilized gaze” of the *flâneur* (Baudelaire’s term for the urban stroller), who wandered through the Parisian arcades watching faces, gestures, and movements, or that of the window-shopper transfixed by the array of consumer goods on display, is not dissimilar from that of the early film viewer (Friedberg 61–65). These spectators are all put into a state of distraction by what they see; for none of them is the eye ever allowed to rest.

In much of nineteenth-century fiction we find protagonists trying to come to terms with the experience of modernity. Take the narrator of Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Man of the Crowd" (1840), for instance. He has been sitting in a café all afternoon, watching the movements of passersby from its window, as if looking at a screen in a movie theater. When he remarks that the "rapidity with which the world flitted before the window, prevented me from casting more than a glance upon each visage" (183), he captures in a sentence the evanescence that defines his age. If the ebb and flow of movement glimpsed from behind a café window is too fugitive to be fully legible (179, 188), the speed with which the landscape flits by from the window of a moving train carriage only exaggerates the sensation recounted by Poe's narrator, namely that it "gave an aching sensation to the eye" (183). Thus, when Russell Reynolds, in a piece on traveling, "Travelling: Its Influence on Health" (1884), says of the experience of looking out of a moving train that "the eyes are strained, the ears are dinned, the muscles are jostled hither and thither, and the nerves are worried by the attempt to maintain order," he in effect sums up the experience of the industrialized age as a whole. Modernity not only leaves its populace irritable, but also makes great demands on the organ of looking, making itself felt, suggests Reynolds, as it "pull[s] at the eyeballs on looking out of the window" (qtd. in Schivelbusch 118). In a flash, the landscape recedes and what the traveler sees are "no longer flowers," Victor Hugo writes, "but flecks, or rather streaks of red and white" (qtd. in Christie 16). Everything we see out of the train, just as what we see of it, remains impressionistic. What these descriptions by Poe and Reynolds and Hugo evoke are not only how face superimposes on face in the urban crowd, or how one image, glimpsed from behind a window, bleeds into the next, but what a small step it was from the street into the picture house, from the window to the screen, toward what Schivelbusch calls a "filmic perception" (42).

The modern perception of the world as ephemeral, fugitive, and contingent is protocinematic insofar as it involves the same two elements that define the cinema: "the juncture of movement and vision" (Charney and Schwartz 6). And it is this insight that lies at the very heart of the works cited up until this point. Since most of these accounts, critical or fictional, were written some time before the emergence of the *Cinématographe*, their insights remain visionary, a precinematic history of

what was yet to come: the motion-picture industry. In one of the most famous comments on living in the modern metropolis, made by the sociologist Georg Simmel only eight years after the introduction of the Lumières' *Cinématographe*, the correlation between city life and the cinematic experience could not be implied more strongly: he describes the "rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions" that confront inhabitants on a daily basis (175). In fact, Simmel's experience of the city sounds a lot like Siegfried Kracauer's description of the cinematic experience, of which he said in 1926 that "the stimulations of the senses succeed each other with such rapidity that there is no room left for even the slightest contemplation to squeeze in between them" ("Cult of Distraction" 94). In such an environment there is no time to reflect on or to "digest" anything at leisure, but responses are, to go back to Nietzsche, necessarily "reactive." It is hardly surprising, then, that thinkers such as Simmel saw the modern condition—given the "momentary" nature of its impressions—in terms of its heightened sense of the "intensification of nervous stimulation" (175), or that Nietzsche gave a physiological explanation of the modern "sensibility" as having become "immensely more irritable." Modern life, as any New Yorker or Londoner knows only too well, causes nervousness, because the unrelenting influx of visual stimuli perpetually threatens to overwhelm and overload us. It is in this sense that we must understand Walter Benjamin's thesis that film itself is a response to modernity: "There came a day when a new and urgent need for stimuli was met by the film. In a film, perception in the form of shocks was established as a formal principle. That which determines the rhythm of production on a conveyer belt is the basis of the rhythm of reception in the film" (132). So, what happened then when that day came and the Lumières presented their *Cinématographe* to the world?

Analysis

Arrival of the Cinema at the Railway Station

Almost all the films the Lumières made were shot by operators other than themselves. However, most of the very earliest films were shot by Louis himself, and all of these were short. Lasting less than a minute, each film ended when there was nothing left in the camera of the

seventeen-meter-long reel it could house. The shows, too, at which the films were exhibited, were short. Lasting no more than twenty minutes, each program comprised ten or so films, with enough time in between to change the reels for each film. The programs themselves, screened at half-hour intervals throughout the day and part of the evening, were short-lived since the repertoire of films shown was changed every few weeks. Even the venues—sometimes set up in cafés, fairgrounds, or music halls—were temporary, for when the exhibition moved on, no cinema as we conceive of it in the modern sense remained. Yet, the new technology, widely advertised in the press, could attract as many as four thousand visitors in a given day. What they came to see was a screen about nine feet wide and six feet high, and what they saw were actuality films; that is, the Lumières (or one of their operators) set up the tripod outside their factory; in their garden; on the Place du Pont in their hometown of Lyon; on a beach in Neuville-sur-Saône; at a railway station in La Ciotat; on a moving train, boat, or balloon; on the lift of the Eiffel Tower; on the Champs-Élysées; in Piccadilly Circus; on the Brooklyn Bridge; in Stuttgart, Tokyo, Venice, Constantinople, Mexico, Russia, Egypt, or Indochina, and recorded everything that moved. With each film, comprising a single shot and taken from a fixed point of view, they captured “life at its least controllable and most unconscious moments,” presenting, according to Kracauer, “a jumble of transient, forever dissolving patterns accessible only to the camera” (*Theory of Film* 31). They also transmitted a sense of how the world, after the arrival of faster networks of transportation, had both shrunk as a globe and yet expanded into a cosmopolitan playground. By 1897, only two years after the introduction of their *Cinématographe*, their company had produced over a thousand films, taken at numerous international locations, and displayed them in hundreds of cities all over the world.

Not only were these films about everyday life but, unlike the dead pictures of photography, the *Cinématographe* had brought these pictures, filmed “live,” to life. During a typical program, viewers would first see a projected still photograph “all frozen into immobility” (Gorky, “Review” 407). But according to the writer and dramatist Maxim Gorky, who was present at a Lumière screening in Russia in 1896, what happened next was this: “suddenly a strange flicker passes through the screen and the picture stirs to life” (407). Early projection-

ists, by delaying the cranking and showing a still image first, were clearly aiming to intensify viewers’ first experience of the moment of filmed movement.

In addition, many of the films that the Lumière Company made were about movement, so as to show off what the *Cinématographe*, as opposed to an ordinary photographic camera, could do. Hence, many of their films recorded people walking, running, jumping, marching, or dancing, and even a toddler taking its first steps. Others featured all kinds of vehicles on the move: prams in *Procession of Baby Carriages at the Paris Nursery*; bicycles in *Leaving a Factory*; horse-drawn carriages in *Quay de L’Archevêché*; electric trolley cars in *Place du Pont*; trains either arriving at stations in La Ciotat, Perrache, or Battery Place in New York, or leaving the station in Jerusalem; boats rowing out to sea in *Boat Leaving a Port*, or gliding down a waterslide in *Water Toboggan*; cars in *Festival of Paris, 1899: Parade of Flowered Cars*; and moving pavements in *Universal Exhibition, 1900: View of a Moving Sidewalk*. For their first-ever film, *Leaving a Factory* (available in three versions), the Lumières positioned the camera like a rock in the rapids, filming workers streaming out of their own factory onto the yard outside. Similarly, in *Place du Pont*, the camera captures the ebb and flow of traffic, with trolley cars, horse-drawn carriages, and pedestrians dangerously crisscrossing each other at a busy junction in Lyon.

The Lumières also, however, shot many of their films in such a way as to manipulate and exaggerate the viewers’ sensations of movement and speed.² In a film such as *Arrival by Train in Perrache*, the camera does not merely record motion but is itself positioned on a moving train. Although the camera itself remained immobile, because it moved *with* the train, it appeared mobile, reproducing the kind of kinesthetic effect so instantly recognizable from traveling on a train: the spectator sees a mixture of panoramic views of the city in the distance and fragments of buildings in the foreground, the latter coming into view so quickly that the naked eye can barely make out details. While *Arrival by Train in Perrache* shows us a sideways view from a moving train, presenting us with one of the very first tracking shots, *Leaving Jerusalem by Railway* belongs to the popular “phantom ride”

²See also the Lumières’ film *Demolition of a Wall*, which was screened both forward and, to audiences’ delight, backward.

film, where a camera is either strapped to the front of a locomotive, or, as is the case in this film, to the last carriage of the train, so as to give the illusion of moving through space, thereby allowing spectators the thrill of "identification with the viewpoint of the camera" (Hansen 35).

In contrast to *Leaving Jerusalem by Railway*, where the viewpoint of the camera coincides with that of the spectator, in films such as *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* and *La Place des Cordeliers*, "the position of the viewer and the camera's field of vision do not coincide" (Tsivian 147). Although the objects in both these films appear to be coming straight at the camera (in the former it is a locomotive, in the latter it is horse-drawn carriages), they do not run into the camera (and by extension into the spectator); rather, they leave the camera's field of vision. This is how Gorky describes his experience:

Carriages coming from somewhere in the perspective of the picture are moving straight at you, into the darkness in which you sit; somewhere from afar people appear and loom larger as they come closer to you; in the foreground children are playing with a dog, bicyclists tear along, and pedestrians cross the street picking their way among the carriages. All this moves, teems with life and, upon approaching the edge of the screen, vanishes somewhere beyond it. ("Review" 407)

What seemed striking to viewers at the time, as is evident from Gorky's account, was the way in which people or objects moved in and out of the frame. Something first seen in the background, as if in a long shot, moves toward the camera and appears bigger and bigger as it approaches, as if in close-up, only to disappear from sight altogether. What is at play here is a radical "discomposition" of space. As Richard de Cordova explains, while the frame of a painting marks the borders of a composed space, film "discomposes" this space insofar as it allows movement to exit into an off-screen space (83). Movement is not contained within the frame but seemingly spills out of it. The sense of flux and instability produced in terms of the composition is further enhanced by the use of diagonal perspective.

Many of the Lumière films rely on objects moving from one corner of the frame to another corner, in diagonal motion. The *mise-en-scène* here does not make use of the vanishing point, as has been the case in

perspectival painting since the Renaissance; neither does the use of a diagonal create a static view, whereby one sees where the image begins and ends. Instead, organizing the composition on a diagonal, which the Lumières so skillfully did, means that the viewer merely sees a fragment of a direction, which both emanates from and moves beyond the edges of the frame. This is one aspect of the creation of dynamic movement. Another concerns the movement of people or objects from background to foreground, which not only makes them "loom larger as they come closer," but also makes them appear to accelerate as they approach the camera, even if the object, such as the locomotive in *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat*, actually slows down before coming to a stop (Loiperdinger 57). When, like Gorky, Georges Méliès recalls that "the train dashed towards you as if about to leave the screen and land in the hall" (qtd. in Bottomore 194), what he is describing is this effect:

The nearer the engine comes the larger it appears, the dark mass on the screen spreads in every direction at tremendous pace (a dynamic dilation towards the margins of the screen), and the actual objective movement of the engine is strengthened by this dilation. Thus the apparent alteration in the size of an object which in reality remains the same size enhances its actual activity. (Arnheim 58)

This explanation, by the psychologist Rudolf Arnheim, written in 1932, also clues us in to the viewers' apprehension and nervousness with respect to vehicles seemingly rushing from the screen toward the auditorium. The impression the film gave, as George Brunel put it in 1897, was that the train was actually "going to hit you and run you over" (qtd. in Bottomore 186).

Whether the camera positioned the spectator in the path of a moving object, such as the locomotive in *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat*, or whether the mobile camera conveyed the dizzying sensation of speed, as in *Arrival by Train in Perrache*, what these effects produced were not simply "the negative experience of fear but the particularly modern entertainment form of the thrill" (Gunning, "Aesthetic" 122). It is in this respect that Tom Gunning sees the early cinema's ancestry located not in the literary or dramatic arts, but in "the recently appearing attractions of the amusement parks (such as the roller coaster), which

combined sensations of acceleration and falling with a security guaranteed by modern industrial technology" (122). When Gunning therefore characterizes the early cinema as a "cinema of attractions," it is to draw our attention to the differences between these early shorts, in which each scene is more or less played out from beginning to end, and the later narrative traditions of cinema, which rely on complex editing techniques to make transitions between scenes.

While the films of the now-dominant classical realist paradigm deploy narrative strategies of absorption so as to enable its spectators to get lost in the fictional world they create, early actualities were largely nonnarrative films, part of a "cinema of instants" that "favored direct visual stimulus over narrative development" (Gunning, "Heard over the Phone" 218). What Gunning notes concerning the early "cinema of attractions" (lasting until about 1908), which, "rather than telling stories, bases itself on film's ability to show something" (D. W. Griffith 41), is also true of the action film today: it, too, subordinates the story to the thrill, and the narrative to the spectacle. The effect of such films on their audiences is quite different from that of classical Hollywood cinema or art-house cinema. The "cinema of attractions" does not lull its spectators into a dreamy state (classical cinema), nor drive them toward a critical stance (counter-cinema), but just like in the cinema of spectacles today, its viewers are continually startled and astonished by the thrilling displays: cheering, screaming, or flinching in terror or delight.

A film such as the Lumières' *Automobile Accident*, in which a pedestrian is run over by a car, before being reassembled by passersby, is a case in point. Like the threat of the head-on movement in *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat*, there is an "aggressive aspect" to this film, because "the attraction confronts audiences and even tries to shock them" (Gunning, "Now You See It" 75). As one of many films made during that period featuring collisions, and as a forerunner to countless contemporary Hollywood blockbusters and reality film shows that proudly present the biggest yet in thrills and spills, spins and bashes, smashes and crashes, *Automobile Accident* surely appeals less to our higher sensibilities than to our hunger for sensations.

When William Wordsworth in 1800 deplored his own age's "thirst after outrageous stimulation" (160), he in many ways foresaw a culture that had yet to take shape. Critical of urban expansion and consumer culture, he blamed cheap novels and theatrical exhibitions for

sustaining this thirst. Had he lived to see the *Cinématographe*, he might well have found his worst fears come to life on the big screen. By the end of the nineteenth century, the lust for sensations had become stronger than in Wordsworth's time, not least because having become used to the pace of modernity and largely desensitized to its effects, modern men and women were, Gorky notes, "reacting less and less forcefully to the simple 'impressions of daily life' and thirst[ing] more and more eagerly for new, strong, unusual, burning and strange impressions." As Gorky already sensed in 1896, this is precisely what "the cinematograph gives you" ("Gorky on the Films" 229). This was also echoed by the German writer Friedrich Freska in 1912:

Rarely has a time suffered so much from eye-hunger [*Augenhunger*] as ours. This is because the telegraph, newspapers, and lines of communication have brought the whole world closer together. Here, working people, bound to their chairs, are assaulted by a welter of images from all sides. . . . That is why we suffer from eye-hunger; and as a means, at least materially, to satisfy this hunger, there is nothing so fitting as the cinematograph. Eye-hunger is just as important for us in our time as once was the potato, which made it possible to feed the rapidly amounting mass of people. (98; my translation)

The onrushing locomotive of *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat*³ has gone down in cinema history as the most enduring image to encapsulate the "new, strong, unusual, burning and strange impressions" that film can give its audiences. It is also very clear from early viewers' own accounts that they reacted very "forcefully" to this celebrated film. So, what exactly were their reactions, and how in turn have contemporary film critics reacted to these reactions?

³Several films featured the arrival of trains (at stations in La Ciotat, de Villesfrances-sur-Saône, and Perrache). Given that *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* alone is known to have existed in three versions, the first of which was possibly shot as early as 1895 and the last made in the summer of 1897 (and now the most widely known), there is considerable uncertainty, as Martin Loiperdinger quite rightly finds (50–51), as to which "train film" eyewitnesses are commenting on when they recount their reactions to an onrushing locomotive.

Reactions to Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat

The French newspaper *Le courrier du centre* (July 14, 1896) announced that the approaching locomotive made "spectators draw back instinctively fearing they'll be run over by the steel monster" (qtd. in Bottomore 213). In the British news review *The Sketch* (March 18, 1896), reporting about the first Lumière show in Britain, the reviewer made it known that "in common with most people in the front rows of the stalls, I shift uneasily in my seat and think of railway accidents" (qtd. in Christie 15). In Russia, the film director Yevgeni Ivanov-Barkov remembered that "People leaped up. Some rushed toward the exit" (qtd. in Tsivian 136). Whether the Lumière train made them "recoil in horror," as one reviewer reported in Lorraine, or utter "cries of terror," as another witnessed in Switzerland (qtd. in Bottomore 187), or whether spectators at the Lumière première sat there "with gaping mouths," as Méliès said he did (qtd. in Gunning, "Aesthetic" 119), what is common to all these responses is that they were physical.

Does the nature of these reactions therefore indicate that early film viewers were unsophisticated? On the surface, it would seem to suggest just this, first, because they responded not with their minds but, animally, with their bodies and, second, because they mistook a representation of a train for the real thing. A third issue that follows from this is that the cinema itself is unsophisticated because it appeals to an audience's hunger for sensations (like the cheap amusement thrills of the fairground) rather than its higher sensibilities, and as such it is a medium ideally suited for the duped masses.

So, did audiences flee the scene of the first screening of *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* because they were fooled by the illusion of a screen image? Given that "it all seemed absolutely real," as a French reviewer claimed in June 1896 (qtd. in Bottomore 180), this hitherto unmatched realism could well be taken as an index of this new technology's unprecedented power over its powerless, and by implication unsophisticated, recipient. Yet, if we consider the way these films were first exhibited, there is little correlation between screening venues then and the dark and largely quiet movie theaters of today. In the modern cinema, the projector is hidden in a booth to conceal from the audience the machine that produces the illusions. By contrast, the *Cinématographe* was in full view, rattling noisily, and producing black-and-white pictures, which were not only very grainy but also flickered annoyingly.

In addition, films were not projected in utter silence. Apart from the accompaniment of piano music, there would often have been a showman commenting on the films displayed (Gaudreault 275), or allegedly even issuing "calming assurances" to audiences that "it is a real train, but it cannot come off the wall" (Alexander Voznesensky, qtd. in Tsivian 145). This, taken together with other early films in which the people being filmed often looked directly at the camera, would have undoubtedly disrupted the illusion, thereby making the audience as aware of the artifice of filming as they must have been of the artifice of projection. In such an environment, it is hardly likely that spectators confused the image with reality.

On the other hand, did film have a kind of direct impact then, as Yuri Tsivian wonders, that is now forever lost to us (144)? It is feasible that early filmgoers first had to get used to the conventions of the new medium, like their ancestors had to learn the conventions of perspectival painting so as not to walk into a solid wall but recognize a *trompe l'oeil* for the illusion it is. In other words, their reactions might well have betrayed, as Michael Chanan has suggested, "that they didn't yet see the screen as a screen" (32; italics in the original), and were therefore "not sure," according to Tsivian, "where the limits of the space that the train intended to transcend lay" (135). A counterargument to this would be that the reactions were not real or genuine in any case but largely staged. As Martin Loiperdinger has pointed out, the story of audiences running out of the auditorium might well have been a propaganda ploy, the new industry's way of exaggerating its product's impact in a bid to attract ever larger audiences. After all, other than eyewitness accounts (potentially unreliable due to later embellishments), there were no official reports either in the press or by the police to suggest that panic-stricken audiences had actually been hurt when hurtling out of the Salon Indien (43–44). In addition, there is considerable doubt, Loiperdinger finds, about whether *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* was actually shown on December 28, and should therefore be taken as the "origin myth" of the cinema (50).

Conversely, we might adopt Gunning's argument, that these reactions—whether expressed in terms of flight or fright—were very much "part of the attraction of the new invention, rather than a disturbing element that needed to be removed" ("Aesthetic" 116; italics in the original). In this case, to take the argument a little further, spectators might

not have screamed involuntarily but screamed because they would have screamed at Coney Island; in other words, they reacted in line with the conventions of the fairground amusement. This is how Gunning assesses the impact of the Lumières' (in)famous film:

Rather than mistaking the image for reality, the spectator is astonished by its transformation through the new illusion of projected motion. Far from credulity, it is the incredible nature of the illusion that renders the viewer speechless. What is displayed before the audience is less the impending speed of the train than the force of the cinematic apparatus. ("Aesthetic" 118)

The reason audiences came to the Lumière shows, then, was not for the films themselves, but because they were curious as to what the new technology could actually do. This idea is also borne out by the way in which publicity for screenings advertised not specific films but actually named the particular projection technologies on display (the Lumières' *Cinématographe*, Edison's Vitascope, the Skladanowsky brothers' Bioskop). If early viewers therefore remained, according to Gunning, "aware that the film [was] merely a projection" ("Aesthetic" 119; italics mine), then we would be mistaken to assume that they were unsophisticated bumpkins.

When contemporary critics argue that spectators then were *aware* of the illusion as an illusion (Gunning), or not as yet *aware* of the filmic conventions for producing illusions (Tsivian, Chanan), or only too *aware* of the new medium's capacity for creating make-believe (Loiperdinger), it seems to me that these critics are very much in the business of rationalizing why early viewers responded to the films in the way they said they did. Tsivian's notion of viewers with "untrained cognitive habits" (145; italics mine) and Gunning's point that if they "screamed" then they did so in order "to acknowledge the power of the apparatus" ("Aesthetic" 121; italics mine) both place considerable emphasis on the *conscious actions*—as opposed to the involuntary *unconscious reactions*—of these first spectators. What is significant about the reaction of early audiences to *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* is that they are "reactive," to invoke Nietzsche's point once more. Felt first at the level of sensations—as reflexes—before they entered the conscious mind as reflections, these responses were immediate and

visceral before they were mediated critically by the mind. Neither irrational (a naïveté that mistook the illusion for reality) nor rational (an acknowledgment of the apparatus), these reactions were prerational: the result of a forgetting of the conscious self in favor of the physical self, and as such an index of the way in which film "affects primarily the spectator's senses, engaging him physiologically before he is in a position to respond intellectually" (Kracauer, *Theory of Film* 158); that is, before he or she has the presence of mind to recognize, appreciate, or analyze the artistry of effect.

Reflex actions, such as recoiling or screaming, are not mental phenomena, but are profoundly bodily manifestations of unpleasure or pleasure. We would be wrong to assume, however, that such reactions were confined to early films and early audiences. Just like the Lumières' actuality features, contemporary action, disaster, or special-effects films, too, prompt such reactions, which is why film venues from vaudeville to the multiplex have continued to be "get-thrills-quick theatres" (Hansen 65), whose visual shocks send tremors through the bodies of their audience members. Indeed, Margaret Cohen makes a very similar point:

Such reactions have by no means disappeared with the maturing of the cinema and its audiences. We still use our bodies to stage our participation in its half-light, a participation facilitated by our lack of self-consciousness in the darkened space where cinematic projection occurs. I bite my nails, avert my eyes, smile, feel tears welling up at moments drawing me into the cinema's zone of ambiguity with compelling force. (247)

Rarely, however, do critics now, like Cohen does here, show an interest in the flesh-and-blood viewer. In much contemporary film criticism the viewer is made into either a "spectator-fish taking in everything with their eyes, nothing with their bodies" (Metz 97) or a textual spectator—"a concept, not a person" (Doane 143). By contrast, early viewers, just as early theorists, talked about the ways in which the *Cinématographe* was a "strain on the nerves" (Gorky, "Gorky on the Films" 229), or how movies caused "blood fever" (Serner 56). What is common to such responses is that they deemphasize a cognitive moment in looking and reemphasize that which excites the nerves and makes the flesh crawl.

What Freska called "eye-hunger" in 1912 or what Edward Rees a year later in the *Manchester Guardian* referred to as the film spectator's "lust of the eyes," such cinematic modes of looking have little to do with voyeurism, the paradigmatic description of spectatorship by modern film theorists. Eye-hunger, unlike voyeurism, is neither about gratification at a distance nor part of a private activity; instead, it seeks the immediate impact of the thrill or the physical shock. It is in this sense that early film viewing has much in common with what I have elsewhere called *Schaulust*,⁴ of which the antecedent can be found in nineteenth-century figures such as Baudelaire's restless *flâneur* or Zola's distracted shopper. Neither of these figures is alone, nor hides, but emerges in full view as part of the crowd: irritable and yet thrilled, eyes roaming and yet transfixed, retinas inflamed, these spectators, as Nietzsche said, "merely react to stimuli from outside."

Conclusion

The assumption throughout this essay has been that the visual pleasures audiences experienced in the nonnarrative cinema of the Lumières were also about physical sensations. If we deem these bodily responses unworthy of study, then it is only because in our present age civilization and culture tend to be measured by the very distance from the body. Contemporary spectators' reactions to the Lumières' *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* must not be trivialized, for the "physiological tempests" (Kracauer, *Theory of Film* 159) that raged within them, and that expressed themselves with each jolt, gulp, scream, or hollow feeling in the stomach, are symptoms that for two thousand years defined what was worthy of study in other art forms. When understood within the context of this broader history of criticism, the responses of early film spectators were by no means unsophisticated. The dictum from antiquity that the dramatic or poetic ought to *move* its audience, affect them, reduce them to tears, incite them to passion, or fill them with horror, is what major thinkers from Aristotle to Longinus, from

⁴*Schaulust* is the German term for rubbernecking, which has been widely, and rather misleadingly, translated from Freud and Walter Benjamin as scopophilia (pleasure of looking) rather than what it means literally and connotes very physically: the lust of the eyes (Littau 35–37).

Sir Philip Sidney to Edmund Burke have all deemed to be the hallmark of great works of art. The overly intellectual response by which we now measure art's greatness is a debt, or curse, we owe to the eighteenth century and its Enlightenment philosophy of art.

Worried about the ways in which art (in particular the poetic) was hailed for its power to unleash passions in its beholder, the philosopher Immanuel Kant, in an attempt to curb such "pathological" stimulation, offered the remedy of "disinterestedness." What this rejects is a conception of art that valorizes artworks for their affects, and instead proposes that artworks be contemplated disinterestedly for their beauty. This is to say, the moment of contemplation requires that a distance be established between the self who looks and the object being looked at, the explicit goal being to disconnect one's sensuous responses from that which inspires awe, horror, terror, or passion in us. Whereas the Lumière spectators, by their own admission, were overwhelmed by the *Cinématographe's* affects, for Kant, we are never powerless before such "irresistible" affects, provided we disengage our affective reaction in favor of intellectual activity such as reflection and contemplation. As we have seen, however, the early cinema, because it "assaults every one of the senses using every possible means" (Kracauer, "Cult of Distraction" 92) does not allow sufficient time for reflection or contemplation. By implication, the "cinema of attractions" resists disinterestedness and is therefore—if we take Kant's argument further—harmful to the spectator because it privileges distraction over contemplation, or seeing over understanding: its eye-hunger "does not seek the leisure of tarrying observantly, but rather seeks restlessness and the excitement of continual novelty and changing encounter" (Heidegger 216). For critics of modernity, this involves the impoverishment of our senses and is directly linked to the phenomenon of mass culture that arose in the course of the nineteenth century. The distaste for popular culture, or what is called the culture industry, led critics to formulate a concept of aesthetics that removes genuine art from the realm of sensory experience, now reserved for the "lowly" forms of commodity art, placing it exclusively in the intellectual realm.⁵ Such an aesthetic is deeply indebted to the Kantian principle of disinterestedness, which by creating

⁵I am thinking here particularly of Theodor W. Adorno and his notion of the "aesthetics of negativity," but also of Bertolt Brecht's theatrical practice.

a distance between the observer and the observed can procure the necessary *critical moment* in our relation to art and thereby resist the "Philistine" demand for immediate gratification, which is the only form of aesthetic experience the culture industry knows.

Therefore, if this critical moment is missing in the reactions of early viewers to *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat*, what is missing in modern critical theories of film is not just a moment but an entire history of affect. Rather than downgrading film to a culinary art or, conversely, elevating its study to an air of intellectual disinterestedness, perhaps the time has come to reawaken our "primary levels of aesthetic experience" (Jauss 153), such as screaming, flinching, gaping, astonishment, terror, tears, laughter, and not suppress them "in favour of the higher level of aesthetic reflection" (21). Because only then will we understand the art that the Lumières bequeathed to us.

Note: The best source for the Lumière films to date is in the form of a collection on DVD, *The Lumière Brothers' First Films*, presented in association with the Institut Lumière and available from Kino on Video. It features eighty-five complete works (1895–97), which have been digitally remastered from 35 mm materials, with commentaries in English by Bertrand Tavernier and in French by Thierry Fremaux (director of the Institut Lumière).

Credits

France, three versions: 1895, 1896, 1897, The Lumière Company

Directors: Auguste and Louis Lumière

CAST:

Members of the public

Members of the Lumière family

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