

# The Lecturer and the Attraction

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“Come here! Come here! Ladies and gentlemen, come to see the most surprising and exciting fairground attraction, the cinematograph.” Such was the commentary of dozens, if not of hundreds of barkers (*bonisseurs*<sup>1</sup>) in front of theaters where the first “animated photographs” were presented all over the globe circa 1895. They invited passers-by to come to experience a “state of shock.” This expression is appropriate to portray the first film spectator because the views represented the quintessence of what art historians have named the distraction, which characterized modernity, and that cinema historians have named “cinema of attractions.”

Still, the ambivalence of the “cinema of attractions” notion has to be stressed: narratives and shows have always consisted of attractions, surprises, which had been invented by the circus well before cinema. The cinematograph, unlike a sword swallower or a gladiator, was a technological attraction. The cinematograph is in itself an attraction, a characteristic that is later transferred to films, which will progressively become more narrative than “attractive.” The views then became an attraction, but the cinematograph had been mediated, that is presented, introduced, announced, and familiarized by the speakers and the lecturers who had played, in fact, the narration’s role before its integration into films.

Beyond this encounter, the lecturer was also the encounter’s mediator between tradition and modernity, between the traditional arts and the cinematographic technique. He softens the shock of the attraction and the modern, and at the same time accustoms the audience to this state of shock, that the movie about to be presented will cause, and that facilitates technical and cultural hegemony of some nations. So the lecturer is the “proof of attraction,” but also the “voice of attraction”: by the lecturer’s mouth the cinematograph speaks; this new and virtual world attracts the spectator in itself for the duration of a program. It is a hypnotic trance, like those presided over by a priest or a shaman, but this time the catalyst is a machine to which a person’s voice is given. The question of the lecturer’s commentary will be discussed here as a proof, then as a mediator of the attraction, and finally as a witness of the transition between a world of human attraction to the mechanized attraction, and of the conceptual implications of this transformation.

## The Commentary as a Proof of the Attraction

In this discussion, I will speak about the cinema of attractions as it has been defined by Tom Gunning in 1998 in "Early American Film," in which he comes back to this very notion and its appositeness by bringing together insights from a number of works on early cinema.<sup>2</sup> Gunning reminds us in this article that his notion is based on Eisenstein's concept, which he considers equivalent to the sensible experience of modernity as described by early 20th-century art historians Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin: an experience made of shocks, surprises, encounters with new and disparate things, fragmented, an experience that Benjamin referred to by the word "distraction."<sup>3</sup> The cinema of attractions relates to this experience by its aggressive address to the spectator and its content made of elements of shock and surprise: trick films, train travels, novelties, and exoticism. Furthermore, these elements are presented in accordance with the same mode of experience as that of urban life: surprise, discontinuity, and rapidity.

In a manner of speaking, the lecturer is the proof of the attraction, and consequently of the relevance of the "cinema of attractions" as a concept. How and why can one consider this role as a proof? The first screenings are performed by lecturers, or at least by lecturers who introduce the show (and by journal entries that prepare what is coming next). The barker calls upon spectators to see the novelty, the surprise, and the lecturer presents, explains, and comments on the attraction. He is there both to amplify the shock and to attenuate: he informs the spectator that he will see something unexpected, which will be surprising, disturbing, even frightening. So this predictable shock is anticipated, expected, but less surprising than if the spectator were not prepared at all.

The lecturer stimulates and praises the entertainment and the attraction by introducing them to soften the shock, but then he amplifies the surprise. So, the lecturer can be considered as an entry-exit process. Besides, the lecturer was generally situated at the theater's entrance, telling what would be experienced inside as well as what had been experienced by spectators who were leaving the place. However, if the movie was the main attraction, it had to be emphasized, and for this reason the lecturer was indispensable. For the spectator unfamiliar with the story, it was impossible to understand *UNCLE TOM'S CABIN* (Edwin Porter, 1903), and the lecturer's commentary was almost essential to indicate and to accentuate the attractions: who is the character on the left, why does he move forward, what does he want?

The history of the lecturer asserts the assumption of the commentary as a proof of the attraction. The speech function presents, explains, and connects. Its presence corresponds to that of the cinema of attractions. Its decline then coin-

cides with the development of narrative processes (script, editing, insert titles) that will replace the attractions' presenter and announcer. Suspense, one of D.W. Griffith's favorite figures, is in fact based on a speech substitution: while he previously could create expectations by asking questions or pointing out details, knowing what is happening next, the editing and shot size now fulfill this function by cutting the narrative into details and presenting elements that before were provided by the verbal commentary, which prepared and linked the attractions.

In many contexts, like those of colonies and countries that import cinema, or of the national minorities within countries that produce films, the use of the lecturer lasted longer. Closer research would reveal that in these specific situations there is still a relation to the attraction. For a long time the lecturer's function consisted in translating insert titles, so to speak to introduce the attractions, to prepare the spectator to understand the narrative's meaning that otherwise would be drifting away from him. The narration as well as the attraction would escape from the spectator under such circumstances. This situation mattered for countries that were importing movies before the insert titles or soundtracks had been translated, and in a number of countries they have not yet been translated...

The technical "failures" of the inventors had been successful for the owners: the first pictures were animated, but they did not have a soundtrack, although many producers would have wanted to add one. This silence augments the strangeness of the experience that most of the time was perceived as such in spite of frequent projections that were completely silent. In a way, the attraction was counting on this very muteness, and the lecturer's voice that filled in the "blanks." These blanks were the awareness of silence, an anticipation of this strangeness, a rational explanation that reassured the viewer by restoring the connection between his understanding and this strange and amusing as well as disturbing experience.

When speaking about the lecturer's speech as a proof of the attraction, it is also important to discuss the development recently theorized by another disseminator of the attraction notion, André Gaudreault. Gaudreault now speaks of "cinématographie-attraction" (Kine-Attractography), an expression borrowed from the historian G.-Michel Coissac. He proposes this loanword to refer to an historical experience with a corresponding historical vocabulary.<sup>4</sup> The bulk of his demonstration especially insists on assimilating the attraction to a phenomenon of discontinuity. In an article written with Nicolas Dulac, he believes that "animated views" are a cultural series based on the attraction, which appeared with the first optical devices and ended with the first movies, which would take it from approximately 1830 to 1900.<sup>5</sup>

This theoretical development, although defined and historicized, still fails to take account of one element: the commentary (and possibly the subject's innermost speech?). Of course the optical devices could be manipulated only by a single person who, excited as well as surprised by the simulation of movement, understood the movement because it was assimilated to a prior experience: the figures of the optical toys, as well as those of the first movies, were assimilated to the movement because their spectators could assume that there was movement when there was none according to the "phi effect" (that has supplanted the theory of "retinal persistence" as an explanation of the views).

The optical devices were different from the magic lantern because of their "in-loop" attractions without narration, but the lantern's shows had already consisted of attractions as tricks that produce the illusion of movement (for example rotating mobile pieces in metal and glass plates). The attraction of optical devices was not only owing to the surprise caused by movement, but also to the observation of unanimated and separate drawings that can create the illusion of movement. However, this surprise was perhaps less important than one thinks (or than Gaudreault and Dulac think), because it was expected by the spectators who had experienced the lantern shows.

The film lecturer or the speaker was part of the experience of the magic lantern show since its appearance a few centuries earlier. This show was generally educational or narrative, but it often consisted of attractions such as Robertson's shows, which are the most eloquent and well-known example. The verbal narration of these shows was used to introduce the show, but also to prepare the attractions; it puts the spectator in a state of concentration, and often attempts to amplify his reactions the way a good storyteller or script writer usually does.

In the same way the optical devices were announced in newspapers, on posters, and by word-of-mouth. Their "spectator" had expectations, or at least was curious. The spectator's experience consisted of a surprise, which was organized, expected and prepared by the individual who presented, sold, or made use of it. Hence, the following proposal: this definition of the attraction as a discontinued experience has to be tempered; it is perhaps more appropriate to consider the attraction as a new experience in which narration is minor and attraction is major, but in which the spectator is not a clone fresh out of his box without any previous experience, and above all cut off from contextual discourses, spoken or written, of his period.

The attraction is a surprise that disturbs social or individual experience. The uniqueness of the attraction even stands out as an almost autonomous show that is rapidly caught by the stream of discourses, of which the spoken discourse that circulates, among its users and those who offer them attractions, is the smoothest and most enticing one. The commentary is the proof of the attraction because it tends to master it; it is the first narrative device by which there is

an attempt to examine and control the attraction, to demonstrate the existence and strength of the attraction, but also to present its discursive and narrative strength.

### **The Commentary as a Mediator of the Attraction**

If by his presence and intervention he demonstrates the existence of the attraction, the lecturer can also be portrayed as a mediator of the attraction, that is, the person who is able to disseminate this unusual form, to arouse and maintain the interest in its favor, and to prepare and negotiate its encounter with the audience. The word mediator has to be understood as an ambiguous position where the subject can make choices, indicate directions, and activate operations. The mediator lecturer can “manipulate” the audience because it is often “his own” audience. He recognizes the spectators and knows what they can appreciate as an effect (surprise, shock, discovery) or affect (fear, worry, anxiety).<sup>6</sup> If he does not always recognize the audience, at least he knows his art, he knows what he can do and what he can experiment with as effect or affect. He can sometimes be unaware of the precise outcome of the experience, but he knows its possibilities and can expect what happens next. He is a showman, and his art consists of preparing and amplifying the spectacular, and to ritualize it as a particular effect.

He was first the mediator of the transition between the magic lantern and the cinematograph: the lantern was an attraction that sometimes stimulated movement. The attractive characteristic of the cinematograph consists in a more sophisticated simulation of the movement, the “animated photography” meaning photography with movement added. The lantern’s speaker who acquired a cinematograph certainly changed his commentary: whereas before his commentary consisted of still images, he will now probably announce the images’ movement, and change his explanation according to this new characteristic. Richard Crangle supports a different opinion according to which the commentary of the lanterns and that of the animated views were quite different practices, educational versus recreational.<sup>7</sup> Although this observation is accurate in general, it neglects the numerous attractions used by the lanternists, many of whom became projectionists. Some will even become theorists of projection and eventually emphasizes the projector’s abilities as attraction. Cecil Hepworth in England and G.-Michel Coissac in France are two notable examples.<sup>8</sup>

For that matter, the lecturer’s history is the history of this mediation, or of the emergence of cinema that gradually becomes “auto-mediated”: the lecturer first presents the invention and attraction; he then uses the views as attractions in his

magic lantern animated show; finally, he is “thrown” out by the movie he “swallowed.”<sup>9</sup> Although Gunning has questioned the generalization of this three-phase story, the lecturer’s existence can appropriately be assimilated to the history of mediation of animated views.<sup>10</sup> Besides, this story softens the strength of attraction and theory based on it, since the lecturer’s role was to prepare the surprise and distraction. However, as said earlier, the organized lecture confirms that it took place, and therefore that it happened.

Yet Gunning was the first to notice this important relation between the film lecturer and the attraction. In his well-known article “An Aesthetic of Astonishment,” he insists on the fact that “[l]ike a fairground barker, [the film lecturer] builds an atmosphere of expectation, a pronounced curiosity leavened with anxiety as he stresses the novelty and astonishing properties which the attraction about to be revealed will possess.”<sup>11</sup> Gunning gives as examples the projections presented by Albert E. Smith that were introduced and provided by a commentary during which Stuart Blackton was doing everything he could to dramatize the projection and film’s effect. Gunning goes beyond this description to explain that “it expresses an attitude in which astonishment and knowledge perform a vertiginous dance”<sup>12</sup> in accordance with the aesthetic of distraction theorized by Benjamin.

Thus, the notion of attraction is related to a cognitive operation and corresponds to another interesting theoretical development, “*l’image-attraction*” (the attraction image), proposed by Livio Belloï. Belloï considers his designation more accurate than previous theories of attraction because it makes the notion of attraction more specified and therefore less general as well as more relevant.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the notion of attraction image corresponds better to the transition of magic lantern to cinematograph because it shows what is most distinctively attractive and what constitutes the spectacular element in films. Belloï cites different examples, such as the “*vue attentatoire*” (assailing view).<sup>14</sup> The Lumière’s and Biograph’s trains are as many projectiles launched towards the target-spectators that are used to flabbergast them with disappearing rather than appearing locomotives, thus showing the assailing view as a fiction that reveals the reality of the image as an interlocutor.<sup>15</sup>

These attraction images are often accompanied by a spoken commentary, a prime example being the “Hale’s Tours,” of which the lecturer’s interpretation is a fact that is often and even now ignored.<sup>16</sup> If one believes in the effect of attraction (the spectator’s interest in a maximal distractive experience), how to explain the presence of this “he who explains” here? Without a doubt it is useful to go back to what has been previously considered: he softens the effect of the shock by introducing it, but he then amplifies it while integrating it in a performance that focuses on the exacerbation of the spectacular and distractive. Here the train operator with an abundant speech echoes the mediator discussed be-

fore: he invites the travelers to board, to take their seats, and announces the tour's stops. But when travelers approach a destination, they hear declarations and exclamations that arouse and stimulate their reactions.

The lecturer's role ends and is even disqualified from the moment the movie and the cinema become phenomena that are known, accepted, and legitimized. Indeed, the critical or aesthetic discourses attack the lecturer, and successfully eject him from the institution in many countries. In a way, the mediating role of the lecturer served the transition from the pre-industrial stage as a crisis to the institutional stage where cinema has become an accepted and normalized practice, as Denis Simard defines it in "De la nouveauté du cinéma des premiers temps."<sup>17</sup> The lecturer has been somewhat useful for the spoken institution, un-fixed, and unregulated by written rules; he was the first practitioner who served to fasten the attraction to existent practices. After his disappearance, the attraction remains, but is now integrated into familiar practices whose device is assimilated to the point that it has become unconscious and implicit. The attraction is now included in a narrative, it is inscribed in a temporal and spatial development, it is an element of an expansion, it expresses modernity, but a modernity actually mastered as an experience where the surprise has become the usual instead of the unusual.

## **The Commentary as a Mediator of Modernity**

Beyond his mediating role of the attraction, the lecturer has been the mediator of the transition between tradition and modernity. As demonstrated by Gunning, the notion of attraction refers very well to modernity as portrayed by historians mentioned earlier (Benjamin, Kracauer) and others like Georg Simmel. Mediator of this (violent) transition, the lecturer is therefore both proof and witness of the attraction: a proof, because his presence shows the necessity of an introducing and negotiating authority, that comes to attenuate the violence of the shock, and at the same time causes this shock and in a way justifies it; a witness, because his profession sees the rapid development between the surprise caused by the cinematograph and the posterior interest for narrative cinema including the attractions.

The cinematograph served the consolidation of scientific and materialist knowledge of the world, offering the spectator a narrative build-up by the reproduction of the real. Cinematograph images are the product of a knowledge that is not metaphysical nor empirical, but physical and objective. A train can be called to mind by speech and text, but thanks to the camera and the projector it can be copied and shown. The showing has become a technical operation

achievable by machines. Ontotheology of images has become completely discredited, and historians have also located the sources of this "crisis." In *Une invention du diable*, a book-length study that pays tribute to the first Domitor congress, many historians examine the important conflicts opposing religious authorities of the period and the growing of cinematographic industry.<sup>18</sup> In most catholic countries, these authorities not only opposed the moral contained in films that was considered as scandalous, but they also attacked the very nature of the machine, proclaiming that it aggressed human nature, and moreover the supernatural order of the world. The cinema was an important part of the modern way of life as it upset traditions, laws, and beliefs; there is every reason to believe that if the lecturer had sometimes been the accelerator of this disruption, he also and at times decelerated it, to be more precise he had been the mediator, the one who knew how to adapt the show to the audience. Film lecturers were criticized for their outrageousness; but in general they could also do the exact opposite, and make what was not acceptable nonetheless acceptable to the public.

The lecturer was the mediator of another singular experience of modernity. The silent cinema has often been presented as a symbol of modernity because it was considered as a "universal language."<sup>19</sup> It enabled the spreading of foreign cultures and the consolidation of some hegemony, those of nations able to make films. But as I stressed in my book *Le bonimenteur de vues animées*, the lecturer was still the mediator here and the one who resisted hegemony. He commented on narratives from foreign countries in the local language, could give well-known names to the characters, create convenient explanations to the audience, and establish a distance between the foreign texts rather than strengthen its power. He provided the experience of the attraction image in the local language, so here again he softened the foreign origin of this experience, but could also amplify some of its effects by astonishing explanations.

Could we not consider the film lecturers as mediators of modernity as it is presented and spread by a hegemonic foreign cinema? What has been said about their commentary implies not only that they explain the films, but also that their explanation is an introduction to modernity and values proposed by the film narratives. This assumption would turn the lecture into a colonialist practice. In reality, however, the commentary was mostly an anti-colonialist practice, at least in colonial territories. The attraction often was a characteristic of dominant countries (machines, urban modernity), which by means of the lecture could become a simple surprise rather than a technological superiority.

The expression "vernacular modernism,"<sup>20</sup> used by Natasha Durovicova, seems appropriate to define the film lecturer's work. The lecturer effectively was the voice of modernity in show-business: he announced the new machines, prepared the surprise and its effect, and, in a way, "performed" modernity. He

introduced technology while combining local cultural elements: language, accent, practices, and context. Durovicova believes that movies with multiple versions, like dubbed movies later on, had to preserve the local elements (the “vernacular modernism”) from the hegemonic and inclusive tendency of modernity. The commentary of early cinema can certainly be associated or compared with these practices.

## The Voice of Attraction

The lecturer tends to legitimize the relevance of the expression “cinema of attractions” when speaking of early cinema. The movement of the images and their muteness were essentially “strange attractors” whose foreign origin called for a safe haven, a reassuring space, an educational commentary that prepared and attenuated the strangeness of the experience. The film lecturer in a way softened the power of the attraction by supplying a soundtrack that could “unravel” the surprise. He softened the surprise of muted images and the strangeness of the experience, but he anticipated the soundtrack, which inventors would have wanted to join to the film at the very moment of its distribution.

He was therefore a voice of the attraction since he prepared and stressed it, but he also was the voice of modernity. This undeniably constituted a radically new experience of human evolution, and the cognition was confronted with sensations and questions that were often unexpected.<sup>21</sup> In this respect, the cinematograph was one of the most striking inventions, and that is the reason why it has become one of the most popular practices of the 20th century. However, its sudden and rapid development goes against the individual as well as collective knowledge, which explains the different means developed to control its appearance and diffusion.

This experience is still alive today in a postmodern context where the scientific attraction (such as landing on Mars or looking at neutrons) is the expectation of citizens and subjects, and where the number and the intensity of attractions begin to be a problem. Whereas the consumer of 1900 looked for modern surprise occasions, in 2000 he often looks for the occasion to run away from them, or to escape from their rhythm. His time experience is radically different. Twentieth-century man was fascinated by the speed, and acclaimed with enthusiasm each announcement of acceleration: steam, gas, turbine, car, plane, and rocket. His grandson is confronted to the effects of this velocity and often finds it less

amusing. When he wants to live an experience less rapid, he turns off projectors and listens to the voices.

*Translated by Julie Beaulieu (with Frank Runcie)*

## Notes

1. The words used to refer to the film lecturer can be confusing. In French, *bonisseur* (barker) generally refers to the person advertising in front of theaters, *bonimenteur* (film lecturer) refers to the person commenting on the screenings, improvising film commentary, and *conférencier* (speaker) refers to the person giving a well-prepared lecture with scholarly explanations.
2. Tom Gunning, "Early American Film," *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, ed. John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998) 255-71. This article constitutes one of the most complete and brilliant synthesis published on the cinema of attractions.
3. Gunning, "Early American Film" 266.
4. André Gaudreault, *Cinema delle origini. O della "cinematografia-attrazione"* (Milano: Il Castoro, 2003). See also his contribution in this volume.
5. André Gaudreault and Nicolas Dulac, "Head or Tails: The Emergence of a New Cultural Series, from the Phenakisticope to the Cinematograph," *Invisible Culture. An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture* (2004) [http://www.rochester.edu/in\\_visible\\_culture/Issue\\_8/dulac\\_gaudreault.html](http://www.rochester.edu/in_visible_culture/Issue_8/dulac_gaudreault.html). See also their contribution in this volume which is a revised version of "Head or Tails."
6. Here I use *effect* to indicate the cognitive aspect of the impression produced and *affect* to point out the emotive or physiological aspects.
7. Richard Crangle, "Next Slide Please: The Lantern Lecture in Britain 1890-1910," *The Sounds of Early Cinema*, ed. Richard Abel and Rick Altman (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2001) 39-47.
8. Cecil M. Hepworth, *Came the Dawn. Memories of a Film Pioneer* (London: Phoenix House, 1951); G.-Michel Coissac, *Manuel pratique du conférencier-projectionniste* (Paris: La Bonne Presse, 1908).
9. On these three stages, see my book *Le bonimenteur de vues animées. Le cinéma muet entre tradition et modernité* (Québec/Paris: Nota Bene/Méridiens-Klincksieck, 2000).
10. Tom Gunning, "The Scene of Speaking Two Decades of Discovering the Film Lecturer," *Iris* 27 (Spring 1999): 67-79. Gunning challenges my conclusions on the lecturer as a means of resistance for local cultures.
11. Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment. Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator," *Art and Text* 34 (Spring 1989): 36.
12. Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment" 42.
13. Livio Belloï, *Le regard retourné. Aspects du cinéma des premiers temps* (Québec/Paris: Nota Bene/Méridiens Klincksieck, 2001) 86.

14. The "assailing view" refers to the movie that seems to stress and threaten the spectator: the train rushing in the audience, the cowboy who is shooting at him, or any form of "attack."
15. Belloï 154.
16. Charles Berg, "The Human Voice and the Silent Cinema," *Journal of Popular Film* 4.2 (1975): 168.
17. Denis Simard, "De la nouveauté du cinéma des premiers temps," *Le cinéma en histoire. Institutions cinématographiques, réception filmique et reconstitution historique*, ed. André Gaudreault, Germain Lacasse and Isabelle Raynauld (Paris/Québec: Méridiens Klincksieck/Nota Bene, 1999) 30-56. In this article Simard depicts GRAFICS works.
18. Roland Cosandey, André Gaudreault and Tom Gunning, eds., *Une invention du diable. Cinéma des premiers temps et religion, Actes du 1er congrès de Domitor* (Sainte-Foy/Lausanne: Presses de l'Université Laval/Payot, 1992).
19. Lillian Gish, *Dorothy and Lillian Gish* (New York: Scribner's, 1973) 60. Gish attributes this discourse to D.W. Griffith, but it was announced by many other silent cinema propagandists.
20. Natasha Durovicova, "Introduction," *Cinéma et Cie* 4 (Spring 2004): 13.
21. Based on Jonathan Crary's work, Gunning in "Early American Film" reasserts this observation, criticizing Bordwell's opinion that wants to soften the novelty of the modern experience.