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WHAT REALLY HAPPENED AT THE FIRST MOVING-PICTURE SHOWS

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Why are we so fascinated by the earliest moving-picture shows? Much more so than, for instance, the earliest demonstrations of recorded speech, or of television? The obvious answer must be that we wonder if those first spectators had any inkling of what would become cinema within a decade after the first presentations of the mid-1890s. Were they so enthusiastic, so impressed, that the future was already foreseeable?

This is a question that I have been working on, or working around, for nearly thirty years, and what I'm going to present this evening is a summary of trying to answer what has become a much more complex question than I first suspected. The first issue we have to tackle is what 'the first moving picture shows' were. Those who have attended earlier lectures in this series will know that I backdate the 19th century 'media revolution' to considerably before the 1890s. We could start with De Loutherbourg's Eidophusikon of the 1790s, which is known from this image that gives us a sense of the audience and how they related to its 'moving pictures'. And we certainly need to be aware of the well-established tradition of Magic Lantern shows throughout the 19th century, as a precursor to projected film. Anyone who believes that audiences gathering to watch projected entertainment, usually in colour and with accompanying music and narration, was a novelty, should realise that Lantern shows were a well-established feature of Victorian life, for the wealthy and for the poor.

So did these lead directly to moving pictures? Not exactly. What came between, in 1894-5, was the brief interlude of the Kinetoscope parlour – the first practical and commercial display of moving pictures, which took the novel form of a coin-in-the-slot machine. There is plenty of evidence of the popularity of Kinetoscope displays, with people queuing to watch, and a special appeal to women – entering one of these new-style establishments carried less social risk than, say, a theatre or music-hall. The success of the Kinetoscope must have demonstrated the potential for moving pictures as a business.

However, the Kinetoscope business model was flawed, requiring high initial investment and incapable of capitalising on high demand. So in a number of countries, especially France, Britain and Germany, local inventors set out to couple the moving-picture principle with projected display. The results were the Lumières' Cinematograph (nearly named Domitor!), Paul's Theatrograph, and the Skladanowskys' Bioscop – this last, actually the first to be shown to a paying audience, in Berlin on 1 November 1895.

The Lumière premiere in Paris in December is certainly the best-known of these 'firsts', although even this is often misreported. It was neither of the actual brothers, Louis and Auguste, who presented the Cinématographe, but their father Antoine, who had pushed them towards creating it. Antoine hired an elaborately decorated room in central Paris, the Salon Indien, beneath the Grand Café on Boulevard des Capucines, and presented a programme of ten 'subjects' on 28 December 1895.

What do we know about the debut? That among those invited at least three made offers to buy the equipment, ranging from 10,000 to 50,000 francs, all of which were politely refused by Antoine, who is reported to have said: 'This apparatus is a great secret and I don't want to sell it. I want to manage its exploitation myself exclusively'. And this is what the Lumières did: they sent out trained operators, who would film locally and show programmes around the world. Eventually they would sell territorial licenses, but mostly they managed the business from their base in Lyon, and programmes made up of the same 50 second '*vues*' would continue to be shown until the end of the decade.

Apart from the directors of several theatres immediately wanting to add the Cinématographe to their novelty attractions, what did these first spectators make of the programme? One of those present, Clement Maurice, reported that the first small audiences grew as people who had dropped in out of curiosity came back with friends to show them this new experience, so that within hours, and over the coming days, there was a queue on the pavement stretching several hundred metres with receipts at 1 franc per entry sometimes reaching 2,500 F in a day. *But what did they think of it?* The short answer is that we don't really know, except that the first spectators thought it worth bringing or sending their friends. It was 'something you had to see'. But one curious reaction was that of the two Paris newspapers that reported on the show. Both hailed it as demonstrating a kind of immortality: 'Death will cease to be absolute'; and 'It will be possible to see our nearest alive again long after they have gone'.

One of the first spectators who had wanted to buy a Cinématographe was Georges Méliès, then running a magic theatre in Paris. His solution was to head for London where he had previously spent some time, supposed apprenticed to his family's footwear trade, but actually attending the Egyptian Hall, 'England's home of mystery'. Méliès must have known that the English electrical instrument maker Robert Paul was now selling his Theatrograph projectors. Like the Lumières, Paul had been first inspired by Edison's Kinetoscope, and had developed a business making these locally. He was certainly in contact with both Edison and the Lumières and may have been spurred by news of the Cinématographe to develop his own projector, which made its debut on the day after the Lumière London demonstration in February 1896.

Once again, we don't know what the first Theatrograph spectators thought, but the potential to run 'animated photographs' as an act in a variety theatre was apparent, and soon both the Cinématographe and the Theatrograph, now renamed the Animatograph, were running in rival music halls in Leicester Square: The Empire and the Alhambra. Within a month, Paul was contracted to four or five other music halls, so that he was serially presenting a show at each of these – with a cab waiting outside to take him to the next. Not surprisingly, one of his first priorities was to train reliable projectionists!

But *what* exactly was he showing? Probably a combination of films originally made for the Kinetoscope in the previous year, and probably these ten: Rough Sea at Dover; Highgate Tunnel: Goods Train; Shoeblack at Work in a London Street; Smiths and Machinery at Work in Nelson Repairing Dock; Dancing Girls [Alhambra girls]; Contortionist; Trilby burlesque; Arrest of a Bookmaker; Traffic on Blackfriars' Bridge

These represented a wider range of *types* of early film subject than the Lumières offered. There was scenery, a moving train, a busy dock at work, and street scenes. But Paul also offered performances – including the famous Alhambra troupe of dancers, and a current stage success, *Trilby* – as well as an early attempt at a staged story, or incident. Two innovations in his programme in mid-1896 are probably evidence of what audiences were thought to want. One was suggested by the manager of the Alhambra, Alfred Moul, who might be expected to be aware of his audience taste. Suggesting that Paul might 'add interest to wonder', together they arranged an early narrative, *The Soldier's Courtship*, shot on the roof of the Alhambra in May, with three performers drawn from its company – a pair of dashing young dancers, Fred Storey and Julie Seale, and an insensitive older woman, who intrudes on their courtship, played by 'Ellen Dawn'. The film has only recently been restored, and I think it does indeed justify the catalogue description 'very funny'.

So staged or 'story' films were on the agenda from an early date, even if 'actualities' still made up the bulk of screen programmes everywhere. Paul's second innovation came in June, when he undertook to film the end of the Derby horse-race at Epsom. This was a well-known English traditional event, already the subject of paintings and photographs, but Paul didn't only see it as an 'event': he wanted to bring it to the screen fast, as a topical subject. In June 1896, he had the extraordinary luck of filming an unusual and popular winning horse: *Persimmon*, owned by the Prince of Wales. He succeeded in getting back to London and processing the film in time to show it the evening after the race at the Alhambra – where it is well-established that he was called up on stage to acknowledge the audience's enthusiasm, and the film was projected three times, following the theatre

practice of encores. We even know that it was accompanied by the pit orchestra playing 'God Bless the Prince of Wales'. And within a short time, the Prince himself had visited the Alhambra to see his horse winning.
Meanwhile, what about the most commonly repeated story of all about early film shows – that spectators had been terrified by the Lumières' *Train Arriving at La Ciotat*? This had not been part of the original Paris programme, although it must have been added later, and featured in many Lumière programmes around the world. And very soon, it began to attract what has been called 'cinema's founding myth' (Loiperdinger). Probably the most famous version of this appeared in Maxim Gorky's account of visiting 'The Kingdom of the Shadows', at the annual fair in Nizhny Novgorod in July 1896:

> *Suddenly something clicks, everything vanishes, and a train appears on the screen. It speeds straight at you — watch out! It seems as though it will plunge into the darkness in which you sit, turning you into a ripped sack full of lacerated flesh and splintered bones, and crushing into dust and into broken fragments this hall and this building…*

So was Gorky reporting his own, or at least a perceived reaction? It has been reported and exaggerated so often that you would be forgiven for assuming this was proven beyond doubt. By 1913, another Russian writer was claiming 'it was one of the most powerful experiences of my life. When the train came rushing toward me from the screen, when three or four hundred people spilled out onto the station platform… I began to scream… [and] everyone else was screaming too' [Proteus]. Clearly this has become so familiar that some embellishment is needed for another telling to have any impact. But there is some contemporary evidence, even earlier than Gorky's account, from a British paper, published in March 1896, less than a month after public screenings started in London:

> *In the distance there is some smoke, then the engine of the express is seen, and in a few seconds the train rushes in so quickly that, in common with most of the people in the front row of the stalls, I shift uneasily in my seat and think of railway accidents. (The Sketch)*

Now this little-known English version is actually much more helpful. If we find it hard to believe that the image of a train pulling sedately (and diagonally) into a French country station would be terrifying to audiences well used to travelling by train, what we lack is that audience's familiarity with railway accidents. These were frequent, and often serious, as trains collided and derailed. And a freakish rail accident had happened in October 1895 in Paris, when a locomotive crashed through the wall of the Montparnasse station in Paris – *and was photographed, hanging in space*. You may recognise that this scene was recreated by Martin Scorsese in *Hugo*, a film about discovering the beginnings of cinema.

The most likely explanation of the origins of the 'train panic' myth is that it evoked a certain sense of danger that attached to train travel itself. But then, it becomes attached to cinema itself, and starts to stand for the first encounter with projected film, as this experience recedes in time. By the mid-20th century, old men are recalling 'Panic! People rushing towards the exit. Total darkness' [Tsivian: 136]. In fact, this mythologisation also started early, as we can discover through another Robert Paul film, from 1901, *The Countryman and the Cinematograph,* which was quickly remade in America. Here, the butt of the comedy is a country bumpkin who thinks film images are real – and what better gag than the old chestnut of being afraid of the train? So, it's a story that people like telling about the 'reality effect' of film, and not an account of actual panic among early audiences.

But even if we can reclassify that story as a myth, there were other early reactions that are worth recording. Perhaps the most interesting is the response of audiences to images of the sea. The French film historian Georges Sadoul recalled his mother, who grew up in central France and had never seen the sea, first encountering it on screen, probably in the last film of the classic Lumière show, *La mer*. And later when she did visit the seaside, she compared this reality with what she had first seen as a rippling black-and-white image. A more sophisticated, but no less admiring response was that of the Russian music critic Stasov, who marvelled at 'the sea moving just a few feet away from our chairs'. Paul and his early partner Birt Acres had filmed waves breaking against the pier at Dover in 1895, and as late as April 1896, this quite primitive film became the most admired hit in Thomas Edison's Broadway show in New York, when he finally capitulated to the rise of projected pictures. The film made for Paul in Portugal in September 1896, *A Sea Cave Near Lisbon*, remained in his catalogue for years, and was the first film he copyrighted. And among the early Lumière subjects, one in which blacksmiths are seen plunging hot iron into water, which gives off steam, was noted by some spectators.

Steam rising and the movement of water; these new kinds of animated photography were just as novel and impressive for many early spectators, as trains entering stations, or the antics of moving bodies on screen. But discovering what appealed doesn't answer the question posed in my title: What really happened in the first picture shows? These, obviously, happened in a wide variety of situations, from tents to halls and theatres, for the decade before anything like dedicated cinema spaces appeared – anywhere, in fact, that could be made darker and had rows of seats. Back in 1995, for the official 'centenary of cinema', I scripted a series for BBC Television, *The Last Machine*, which included an attempt to dramatize on screen the 'ethnography of early audiencehood', drawing on work by a wide variety of scholars who had gathered what clues they could find about early audience behaviour. We shot this in a 'silent' stage at Pinewood Studios, with a company of actors and costumed extras – and showing you part of it is perhaps the best way to convey how the first generation of film viewers learned to be cinema audiences.

Further reading

Ian Christie, *The Last Machine: Early Cinema and the Birth of the Modern World* (BBC/BFI, 1994). Also, episodes of the TV series available on YouTube.

Yuri Tsivian, *Early Cinema in Russia and its Cultural Reception* (Routledge, 1994; Chicago University Press, 1998)

Charles Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon. Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* (University of California Press, 1991)

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