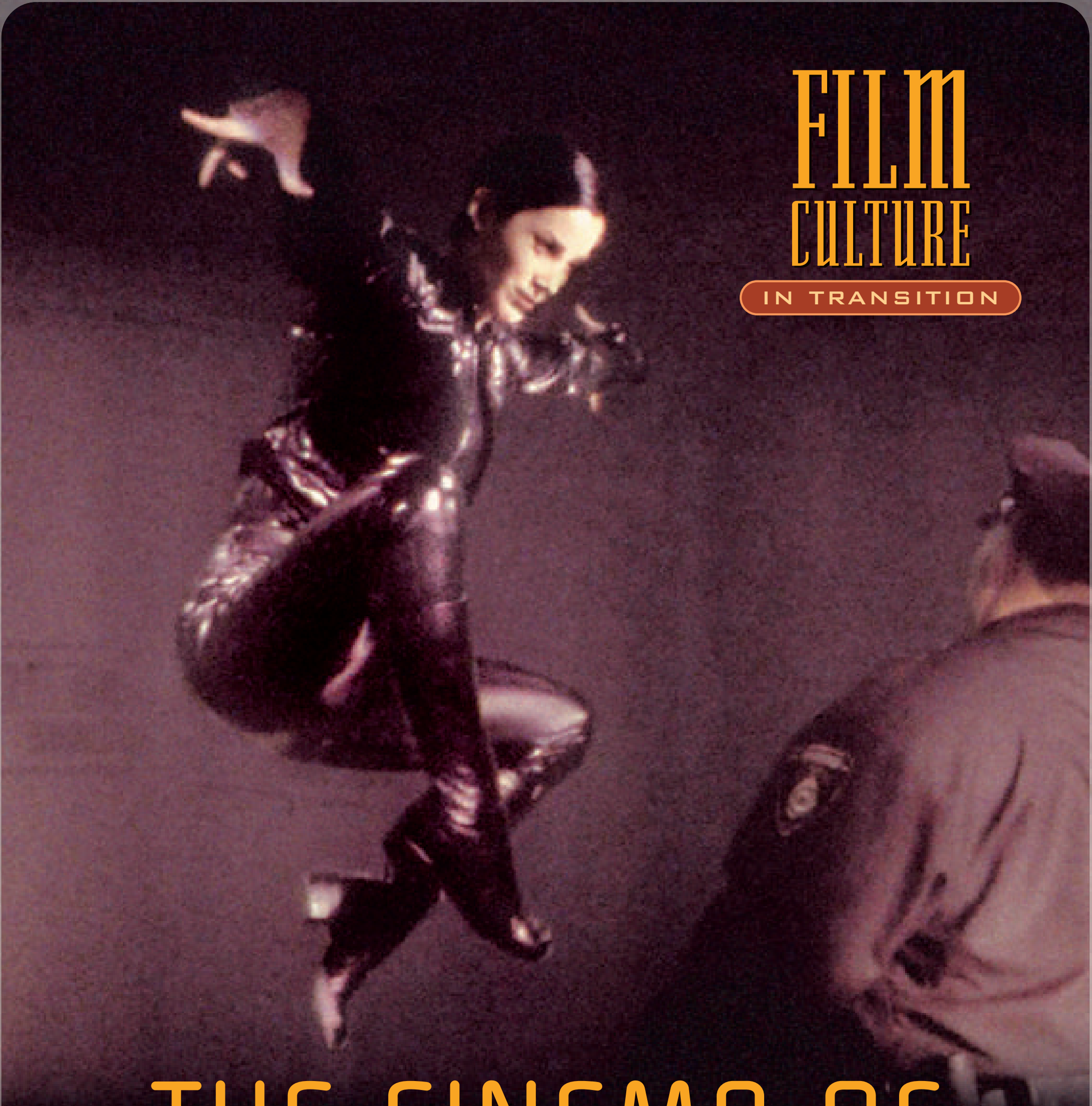

FILM CULTURE IN TRANSITION

# THE CINEMA OF ATTRACTIONS RELOADED

EDITED BY

WANDA STRAUVEN

AMSTERDAM UNIVERSITY PRESS

# The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded

# The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded

*Edited by Wanda Strauven*

Amsterdam University Press

Cover illustration: Carrie-Anne Moss in *The Matrix* (1999). Directors: Andy and Carry Wachowski. © Photos 12

Cover design: Kok Korpershoek, Amsterdam
Lay-out: JAPES, Amsterdam
Production: Textcase, Hilversum, the Netherlands

ISBN-13 978 90 5356 944 3 (paperback)
ISBN-10 90 5356 944 8 (paperback)

ISBN-13 978 90 5356 945 0 (hardcover)
ISBN-10 90 5356 945 6 (hardcover)

NUR 674

© Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2006

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the written permission of both the copyright owner and the author of the book.

# Contents

Acknowledgments 9

Introduction to an Attractive Concept 11
*Wanda Strauven*

## Theory Formation
## [“The Cinema of Attractions”]

Attractions: How They Came into the World 31
*Tom Gunning*

A Rational Reconstruction of “The Cinema of Attractions” 41
*Warren Buckland*

The Cinema of Attractions as *Dispositif* 57
*Frank Kessler*

Spectacle, Attractions and Visual Pleasure 71
*Scott Bukatman*

## Attraction Theories and Terminologies
## [“Early Film”]

From “Primitive Cinema” to “Kine-Attractography” 85
*André Gaudreault*

From “Primitive Cinema” to “Marvelous” 105
*Wanda Strauven*

The Attraction of the Intelligent Eye: Obsessions with the Vision Machine in Early Film Theories 121
*Viva Paci*

Rhythmic Bodies/Movies: Dance as Attraction in Early Film Culture 139
*Laurent Guido*

## Audiences and Attractions
## [“Its Spectator”]

A Cinema of Contemplation, A Cinema of Discernment: Spectatorship, Intertextuality and Attractions in the 1890s 159
*Charles Musser*

The Lecturer and the Attraction 181
*Germain Lacasse*

Integrated Attractions: Style and Spectatorship in Transitional Cinema 193
*Charlie Keil*

Discipline through Diegesis: The Rube Film between “Attractions” and “Narrative Integration” 205
*Thomas Elsaesser*

## Attraction Practices through History
## [“The Avant-Garde”: section 1]

Circularity and Repetition at the Heart of the Attraction: Optical Toys and the Emergence of a New Cultural Series 227
*Nicolas Dulac and André Gaudreault*

Lumière, the Train and the Avant-Garde 245
*Christa Blümlinger*

Programming Attractions: Avant-Garde Exhibition Practice in the 1920s and 1930s 265
*Malte Hagener*

The Associational Attractions of the Musical 281
*Pierre-Emmanuel Jaques*

## Digital Media and (Un)Tamed Attractions
## [“The Avant-Garde”: section 2]

*Chez le Photographe c’est chez moi*: Relationship of Actor and Filmed Subject to Camera in Early Film and Virtual Reality Spaces 291
*Alison McMahan*

The Hollywood Cobweb: New Laws of Attraction 309
*Dick Tomasovic*

Figures of Sensation: Between Still and Moving Images 321
*Eivind Røssaak*

"Cutting to the Quick": *Techne*, *Physis*, and *Poiesis* and the Attractions of Slow Motion 337
*Vivian Sobchack*

## Dossier

Pie and Chase: Gag, Spectacle and Narrative in Slapstick Comedy 355
*Donald Crafton*

Early Cinema as a Challenge to Film History 365
*André Gaudreault and Tom Gunning*

The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde 381
*Tom Gunning*

Rethinking Early Cinema: Cinema of Attractions and Narrativity 389
*Charles Musser*

Notes on Contributors 417

General Bibliography 421

Index of Names 435

Index of Film Titles 445

Index of Subjects 451

# The Cinema of Attraction[s]: 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 theater. 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 theater 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 filmmakers 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 filmmakers 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 than 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 filmmaking, 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 filmmakers 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 1906-1907. 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 attraction[s] 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 attraction[s]? 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 analyzed 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 grivioses 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 OR 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 LE 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 shown,[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 theaters exclusively showing films before 1906. Not only did the films consist of non-narrative sequences taken from moving vehicles (usually trains), but the theater 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 theater. 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 summarize, 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 filmmaking. 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 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 theater. In his search for the "unit of impression" of theatrical art, the foundation of an analysis which would undermine realistic representational theater, Eisenstein hit upon the term "attraction."[9] An attraction aggressively subjected the spectator to "sensual or psychological impact." According to Eisenstein, theater 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 favorite 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 of *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 theater, 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 theater. The spectator at the variety theater 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 program, 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 theater 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 theater, organizing popular energy for radical purpose.

What happened to the cinema of attraction[s]? 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 theater 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 1920s (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 filmmaking.

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 theater 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 that the radical heterogeneity which I find in early cinema not be conceived as a truly oppositional program, one irreconcilable with the growth of narrative cinema. This view is too sentimental and too a-historical. A film like THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY (1903) does point in both directions, toward 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 fulfill its revolutionary possibilities. Both Eisenstein and Marinetti planned to exaggerate the impact on the spectator[s], 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

First published in *Wide Angle* 8.3-4 (1986): 63-70; and subsequently, with some variations, in *Early Cinema: Space Frame Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (London: British Film Institute, 1990) 56-62. The variations and additions to the original version are put between squared brackets.

1. Fernand Léger, "A Critical Essay on the Plastic Qualities of Abel Gance's Film *The Wheel*," *Functions of Painting*, ed. and intro. Edward Fry, trans. Alexandra Anderson (New York: Viking, 1973) 21.
2. See my articles "The Non-Continuous Style of Early Film," *Cinema 1900-1906*, ed. Roger Holman (Bruxelles: FIAF, 1982) and "An Unseen Energy Swallows Space: The Space in Early Film and its Relation to American Avant Garde Film," *Film Before*

*Griffith*, ed. John L. Fell (Berkeley: U of California P, 1983) 355-66, and our collaborative paper delivered by M. 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 further investigate the history and the archaeology of the film spectator.

3. Robert C. Allen, *Vaudeville and Film: 1895-1915, A Study in Media Interaction* (New York: Arno, 1980) 159, 212-13.
4. Georges Méliès, "Importance du scénario," in Georges Sadoul, *Georges Méliès* (Paris: Seghers, 1961) 116 (my translation).
5. Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster and Alfred Guzzetti (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1982), particularly 58-80, 91-97.
6. Charles Musser, "American Vitagraph 1897-1901," *Cinema Journal* 22.3 (Spring 1983): 10.
7. Raymond Fielding, "Hale's Tours: Ultrarealism in the Pre-1910 Motion Picture," *Film Before Griffith* 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. S.M. Eisenstein, "How I Became a Film Director," *Notes of a Film Director* (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, n.d.) 16.
10. S.M. Eisenstein, "Montage of Attractions," trans. Daniel Gerould, *The Drama Review* 18.1 (March 1974): 78-79.
11. Eisenstein, "Montage of Attractions" 78-79.
12. Yon Barna, *Eisenstein* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1973) 59.
13. F.T. Marinetti, "The Variety Theater [1913]," *Futurist Manifestos*, ed. Umbro Apollonio (New York: Viking, 1973) 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," *Film Before Griffith* 207-22.
16. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16.3 (Fall 1975): 6-18.
17. Paper delivered at the FIAF Conference on Slapstick, May 1985, New York City.
18. Nicholas Vardac, *From Stage to Screen: Theatrical Methods from Garrick to Griffith* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1968) 232.