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## Programming and Performing Early Cinema Today: Strategies and *Dispositifs*

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Since the foundation of the *KINtop* yearbook in 1992, the presentation of early films to audiences today has continued to be an important issue for the editors. Over the past two decades we (Sabine Lenk, Martin Loiperdinger and myself) have organised a series of programmes in collaboration with, among others, the film museums in Frankfurt, Düsseldorf and Munich, the Arsenal in Berlin or the Kino 46 in Bremen, but also the Cinémathèque de la ville de Luxembourg (the latter cooperation resulting in the *Crazy Cinématographe* initiative). From attempts to recreate the build-up of an early cinema screening to more didactic presentations on, for instance, the relationship between film and the Magic Lantern, but also combinations of avant-garde films from the 1920s to the 1990s, these programmes have tried to find a way to make contemporary audiences appreciate moving images from the period around 1900 as something other than “primitive” curiosities from another age.

In addition to, and sometimes also in connection with these screenings, *KINtop* regularly invited scholars and archivists to reflect on their own or their institution’s activities and experiences in this area.<sup>1</sup> In spite of the obvious differences between them with regard to the objectives, the means, the strategies or the target audiences of these projections, a number of similarities can be observed, which in the first instance are linked to the specific status of early films.

### **Bridging the gap, marking the difference**

Above all, and maybe self-evidently, there seems to be a shared conviction that showing films from the period around 1900 to present-day audiences, even more or less specialised ones, requires some sort of a framing that offers to the viewers a perspective on the material (nothing, of course, can guarantee that

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EXTIRPATION D'UN KYSTE DU CORPS THYROÏDE (France 1898/1903), performed within  
*Dr Doyen's Surgical Cabinet* programme, in the *Crazy Cinématographe* fairground cinema tent at  
Luxembourg's *Schueberfouer* 2009.

the individual spectator will indeed accept this offer, as one can always adopt an alternative attitude towards the images shown).<sup>2</sup> This is due to the fact that, when early films are being shown today, those presenting them need to take into account the profound *difference* of animated photographs or, to use a term suggested by André Gaudreault and Denis Simard, their *extranéité*.<sup>3</sup> Gaudreault and Simard use this latter expression, because according to them early cinema is not ‘strange’ (*étrange*), but rather ‘alien’ (*étranger*), which leads them to declare: “Early cinema is irreducibly alien to the cinema that followed it, and it is also irreducibly alien to us, who are spectators watching it at a different time”.<sup>4</sup>

This twofold alien-ness not only concerns scholars of film history, who always need to be aware of the fact that their object of research should not be ‘naturalised’ by looking at it from the viewpoint of institutionalised narrative cinema. This issue is even more important when one programs such films for contemporary viewers. Non-specialised audiences, in particular, may indeed more often than not experience the alien-ness of early cinema simply as strangeness, because the filmic forms appear ‘primitive’ compared to modern ones. This clearly has consequences for the way in which programmes of films from that period can be presented. Their alien-ness, on the one hand, needs to be attenuated to some degree in order to make possible an appreciation by the spectators, and on the other hand it needs to be foregrounded to some degree, for otherwise they will indeed be viewed as primitive forerunners of a cinema to come. So while having to try and bridge the gap between the cinema of today and the views and scenes from around 1900 in order to make the latter accessible, it is also necessary to mark the difference to prevent simplistic assimilations to the larger traditional story of how film developed from ‘an infant state’ to a ‘mature art form’.<sup>5</sup>

At a more conceptual level it can be useful to address early cinema’s alien-ness in terms of *dispositifs*. This latter term, suggested in the 1970s by the French theorist Jean-Louis Baudry to describe the relation between screen, projector and spectator in a movie theatre is generally translated into English as ‘apparatus’ (hence the expression ‘apparatus theory’).<sup>6</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, I find it useful to keep the original French term, not only because it more explicitly connotes the idea of a specific arrangement or disposition, but also in order to mark the shift from a psychoanalytical approach to spectatorship to one that frames the relation between the film, the viewer and the viewing context rather in terms of a historical pragmatics.<sup>7</sup> From this point of view one can indeed state that the so-called cinema of attractions constitutes a *dispositif* that is almost diametrically opposed to the one described by Baudry and taken to be characteristic of classical narrative cinema.

In addition, such a change of perspective allows taking into account the fact that there is not simply one cinematic *dispositif* (as Baudry’s theory is often read), but that throughout the history of animated photography, both synchronically and diachronically, a large variety of *dispositifs* have co-existed and continue to do so. Thus, for instance, and to stay within the realm of early cinema,

screenings in vaudeville or variety shows, in fairground tents, in town halls and in nickelodeons, all provided rather diverse viewing contexts for moving pictures and by the same token they can be described as so many different *dispositifs*. Consequently, each of them can be said to have produced its own pragmatic framework within which audiences experienced animated views. So, again, even for the period up to the First World War there is not just one *dispositif*, which can be defined in opposition to the one of classical narrative cinema, but quite a range of them, allowing for a much more nuanced approach. Consequently, the main point here is not so much an identification and definition of *dispositifs* in terms of historically attested practices with the goal to establish some kind of a taxonomy, but rather a perspective on these practices in terms of *dispositifs*, using the concept more modestly as a heuristic tool to investigate the manifold ways in which the various types of moving images (including also home movies or the many forms of what Rick Prelinger called “ephemeral films”)<sup>8</sup> were presented to audiences. The aim of such studies, then, is to understand the complex interaction between texts, viewers, and viewing situation (including also aspects of technology and institutional framings) in a given historical context.

Thus, to begin with, there just simply is no all-encompassing *dispositif* of early cinema, which could be used as a normative model for archival or museological reconstructions. And, obviously, even in cases when it is possible to trace and bring together all the films shown in a historically attested programme, it would be an illusion to presume that anything only remotely like the historical experience could be retrieved. The *dispositifs* of archival or museological screenings, per definition, function in a profoundly different way, as they have to both bridge and mark the historical gap.

### ***Dispositifs* of archival and museological screenings**

When looking at the various reflections on the archival and museological practices to organise screenings of early films for audiences today, these quite evidently aim at serving a twofold purpose. On the one hand, they pursue a didactic or scholarly project of providing a framework for today’s spectators to appreciate these films as historical objects, that is with regard to their original viewing context, their functions and what they may have meant to their audience at the time. On the other hand, such screenings also want to offer a specific aesthetic experience, which is obviously different from the one viewers are used to nowadays when going to the movies, but which for that very reason should give them a new and unexpected kind of pleasure. One possible strategy here is to create an environment that evokes the period around 1900, so that audiences are, as it were, prepared for a different kind of viewing experience (as does, for instance, the *Crazy Cinématographe*). Both dimensions are generally intertwined, and there are different ways through which these aims may be achieved.

An important point, though, is the goal to make possible a positive appreciation

of early films. In this respect the practices of archival and museological screenings today differ from the ones presented in a traditional teleological perspective with their emphasis on the way in which the “primitive” films foreshadowed the art of a cinema that blossomed from the 1920s onwards. So while underscoring certain of their qualities, such earlier programmes did frame the productions from the turn of the century up to the 1910s as being not yet capable of reaching the aesthetic and formal standards that were established by the masterpieces of the later silent period. Even more radically, as Ansjé van Beusekom has shown, the avant-garde movements in London, Paris or Amsterdam in the 1920s programmed ‘pre-war’ films mainly in order to point toward the difference between these outdated and ridiculous specimens from a bygone era and the current state of the art.<sup>9</sup> Even though these screenings did in fact pursue something like an educational or didactic purpose, they did so by using the films from the past as negative examples allowing to appreciate the artistic progress made since.

In order to offer audiences a possibility to experience early films in a more positive way, archives and museums need to provide them with a different kind of context, and also to address them in a different way. To begin with, the fact that such institutions organise screenings with the goal to provide both instruction and pleasure to their audiences of course not only is valid for presentations of early films. More in general, watching a film at a film museum or at an archival film festival is an experience that differs profoundly from simply going to the movies to see a recent release, because there is at least in principle always something like a tacit assumption that there is some kind of purpose to such a show. In accordance with the larger cultural function of these institutions, the viewer presupposes an intentionality, which then can be stated explicitly (in programme notes, announcements, introductions etc.) or remain an implicit presupposition. At the same time (and this is where the strategies developed in recent years with regard to early cinema differ from the traditional presentations, and especially from those organised by the avant-garde circles mentioned above), the (re-)discovery of a historical film or film programme is also meant to give pleasure to the audience. In this respect, that is in the combination of these intentionalities, the archival or museological *dispositif* is quite different from the one that is dominant in mainstream moviegoing.

So, taking up the term discussed earlier, for early cinema this means that its alien-ness should be appreciated as such, on its own terms. In order to achieve this, curators and programmers use various strategies of contextualisation, ranging from the reconstruction of historical viewing conditions (knowing of course, that the historical experience as such cannot ever be retrieved) to the creation of specific new environments into which the historical films are embedded. This concerns, by the way, also other forms of distribution such as DVDs, in which case the contextualisation is provided by means of various paratexts. Giovanna Fossati and Nanna Verhoeff have termed this the “chaperone model” where “archives present film programs as *selections* made by

the archive that holds the film, often with the use of explanatory titles or with an accompanying catalogue, which explain (and justify) the archive's choice and contextualize the films either historically or aesthetically".<sup>10</sup> To this, one can add that also the programming strategies themselves are part of the model (and of the *dispositif*).

### Contextualisation through information

In a thoughtful essay on the rediscovery and programming of early non-fiction films in the mid-1990s, starting with a workshop at the Amsterdam Filmmuseum in 1994 and a retrospective organised by the Giornate del Cinema Muto in 1995, Stephen Bottomore discusses the problems of making accessible these films to an audience today, even one composed of archivists and scholars.<sup>11</sup> Apart from advocating a programming strategy that would rather follow the historical practice of mixing genres instead of confronting viewers with a series of similar films (in this case non-fiction views), he also engages with the approach the Amsterdam Filmmuseum chose. The participants of the workshop viewed the films without receiving contextual information about them, because, as Bottomore puts it, the aim was to "stimulate scholarly reactions to these rarely seen reels, in areas such as the visual style and technique of individual films and variation/evolution between films".<sup>12</sup> For Bottomore, the shortcomings of such an "aesthetic approach" are that in the end it does not help to fully understand the potential complexity of early non-fiction.

As well as helping in identification, extra information really is vital in better appreciating non-fiction films (and here I would definitely part company with the 'aesthetic school'). Indeed it can sometimes be the only way of giving signification or importance to otherwise dull and meaningless pieces of celluloid held by film archives.<sup>13</sup>

This experience has undoubtedly been shared by many who, confronted with views of landscapes, crowds, streets, factories etc. that in themselves presented little visual attraction, discovered the richness of the material thanks to the information provided by titles, catalogue descriptions, introductory presentations or comments during the screenings. In fact, depending on the type of films being shown, these various ways to provide contextual information may even vary in their efficiency. From the elaborate composition of reels with views by the Mutoscope and Biograph Company compiled by Nico de Klerk of the Amsterdam Filmmuseum with only minimal information as an example to Vanessa Toulmin's extensive explanations accompanying the screenings of Mitchell & Kenyon films at the Giornate del Cinema Muto, there are many precedents of successful presentations of early non-fiction. In 2010 those attending both the Domitor conference in Toronto and the Cinema Ritrovato Festival in Bologna could make an interesting comparison when the same material, the expedition film shot by Vittorio Sella for the Duke of Abruzzi's 1909 expedition trying to climb the K2, was shown. In Toronto there was an introduction to the programme with ample contextual information about the

historical background of the footage, which was then shown accompanied by a piano. For the audience, however, it proved to be difficult to link the information provided beforehand to the images that were projected. In Bologna the historian, Giovanni Lasi, not only introduced the films, but also provided comments during the screening, based on the texts used at the time for the illustrated lectures about the expedition. While individual appreciations of either presentation may vary, in this case at least it is quite clear that in Bologna the audience could discover more in the various views because the explanations given helped to orient the spectator's gaze. However, with a different kind of footage such additional information might be experienced as redundant, superfluous and even distracting.

Nevertheless, it is quite obvious that giving contextual information and offering a historical framing of early films generally is one of the most important aspects of the archival and museological *dispositif*. The forms in which this is done may differ considerably, yet no one would deny that this is indeed a fundamental and important task for the organisers of such screenings.

### Contextualisation through defamiliarisation

When arguing in favour of mixed programmes emulating the structures of the early period instead of adopting the model of the retrospective organised around a single theme, Bottomore evokes the example of the concert hall: “[...] a concert has to be carefully programmed to attract and hold an audience. The most popular programme would probably combine a variety of different styles and composers.”<sup>14</sup> Bottomore uses this example to underscore his point that generic diversity is more appropriate for early cinema programming than homogeneity, but does so presuming that the films presented date from more or less the same period. However, as Karola Gramann and Heide Schlüpmann point out, one of the amazing, yet characteristic features of concert programmes lies in the fact that they can quite easily combine a Baroque flute concerto with a Brahms piano piece and a composition by Busoni.<sup>15</sup> In their own work with students at Frankfurt University, Gramann and Schlüpmann had them present combinations of short films from different periods, the common denominator then being the limited length and the fact that, in relation to mainstream cinema practices today, the short format as such is marginalised. So here the alien-ness of the films from the period before the First World War is to some extent neutralised by the contact with another type of films that for today's audiences also represents an out-of-the-ordinary viewing experience. In this respect, the contextualisation here functions as a defamiliarisation, because the early films are no longer seen simply as embryonic forms of the narrative feature films but as examples of short films as a distinctive aesthetic practice.

In a similar fashion a programme compiled by *KINtop* that toured in Germany in 2001 and 2002 combined a series of views from the early period with avant-garde films from the 1920s to the 1960s. In contrast with the aforemen-

tioned strategies adopted by the avant-garde associations in the 1920s and 1930s that used the “pre-war” films to underscore the difference between their own artistic work and the commercial productions from a bygone era, *KINtop* rather focused on the way in which such a framing could open up the visual richness of the early films to 21st century viewers. The link between early cinema and later avant-garde films was in fact established already by Tom Gunnings famous essay “The Cinema of Attractions. Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde”, as well as in the writings of Noël Burch.<sup>16</sup> As Jan-Christopher Horak points out in quite some detail, the experimentations with movement, speed, light and the cinematographic technology in general that one finds in many films from around 1900, can be linked to similar filmic strategies in the avant-garde movements in later years.<sup>17</sup>

The *KINtop* programme *Alles dreht sich, alles bewegt sich* (taking up the title of an experimental film by Hans Richter) not only tried to establish such a connection between early and later avant-garde films, but also to offer a contextualisation of the former allowing to perceive them in a new way. The idea, however, was not to establish them as “forerunners” of the avant-garde, but rather to have the audience look at them from a much more uncommon angle. The frame of reference now being not the institutionalised narrative cinema, but the much more marginalised experimental forms, viewers could experience them in a different manner. With a horizon of expectation oriented towards already defamiliarising avant-garde practices, and thus towards non-conventional cinematic modes, the alien-ness of early cinema was no longer a mark of “primitiveness”, but could be perceived as just another kind of unorthodox filmmaking.

In both these examples, contextualisation does not aim – or at least not in the first instance – at an embedding of early films within the exhibition practices of their time, nor do they seek to convey historical background information as their main goal (while of course leaflets and introductions to the screenings did offer this to quite some degree, certainly in the *KINtop* programmes). The *dispositif* in these cases did not imply that the spectators were addressed first and foremost in a didactical manner. The organisers proposed instead an aesthetic contextualisation that, as it were, defamiliarised the alien-ness of early cinema to a second degree, by creating a connection with other films that do not correspond to mainstream cinema. This strategy was then meant to reduce early cinema’s alien-ness, or to make it at least graspable as a mode of filmmaking that is different rather than “primitive”.

### Contextualisation through dislocation and spectacle

The programming strategies discussed above, whether foregrounding historical information or aesthetic contrast, are generally embedded within the familiar institutional frameworks of archives, film museums, festivals, university film clubs or specialised movie theatres. Some initiatives, however, have chosen to take the screening out of such spaces and try to make audiences

encounter early films unexpectedly or under unexpected circumstances. This is the case for the *Imaginaire en contexte* events organised by Eric de Kuyper for, and together with, the Belgian film archive in cooperation with various other institutions, and also the *Crazy Cinématographe* shows at the Luxemburg *Schueberfouer* fair and elsewhere.<sup>18</sup> Such screenings are always, and consciously, anachronistic, as they explicitly seek to provoke an unexpected encounter of a contemporary audience with historical films. An encounter that is conceived in such a way that the spectators can, and actually should, experience it as an *event*.<sup>19</sup>

The films, in both cases, are but one part of this experience. The music, the set-up, the environment – a cemetery, a painter's studio, or an exhibition hall for de Kuyper's screenings, the tent on a modern fairground for the *Crazy Cinématographe* – are essential ingredients for these spectacles. For the fairground show, two actors performing as both barkers and lecturers play an important role as mediators between the audience and the images. They appear as reminiscences of the historical presenters of fairground shows and at the same time as their modern variant, their interventions being of course of a rather different nature as they include filmographic and other historical background information.<sup>20</sup> Although to some extent at least the films may be considered the main focus of the show, the *Imaginaire en contexte* as well as the *Crazy Cinématographe* screenings could be said to rather function as something like a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Here the archival and museological *dispositif* is indeed acted out as a performance, as an attraction in its own right. In fact, as the lecturers are played by actors and the texts are delivered according to a fixed script, which is repeated during every show, the screenings literally are performances.

Of course, there have been several initiatives of a similar kind inside and outside Europe. As examples one could name *The Living Nickelodeon* by Rick Altman and his colleagues, trying to recreate the experience of American moving picture shows around 1905–1910 or the reconstructions of the 1906 *Ouimetoscope* presentations in Quebec organised by Germain Lacasse together with the Cinémathèque québécoise. Here, as is the case with the Luxemburg initiative, showmanship plays an important role. The performers have to captivate the audiences and create a mood that makes possible an appreciation of the films. What distinguishes the *Crazy Cinématographe*, as well as these North American initiatives from the *Imaginaire en contexte* events, is that the former all have their point of reference in historical practices, the ultimately unbridgeable gap notwithstanding. The special events organised by Eric de Kuyper and the Cinémathèque royale de Belgique, however, have no pretensions in this direction. They leave the traditional *dispositifs* of film projections behind and completely dislocate the screenings into a completely different type of performance.

So on the one hand, leaving the traditional archival or museological context, such initiatives either create spectacular encounters with early films within a



*dispositif* that refers to, or evokes, a historical mode of presentation, while at the same time being aware of the fact that the experience will differ radically from this historical precedent. On the other hand, the dislocation can even go further, creating a form of spectacle that cannot be referred to any screening practice that may have existed in the past. In all cases, however, the contextualisation does give a framework to the films that in a way neutralises their alien-ness as they become part of a spectacle that, as such, does not resemble the habitual experience of going to the movies.

## Conclusion

For more than two, maybe even three decades now, audiences all over North America, Europe and on other continents as well, have had an increasing number of occasions to encounter moving pictures made about a century earlier. While sometimes still presented as “primitive” curiosities that could only fascinate the “naïve” spectators of their time (in spite of all the scholarly efforts, the “train panic myth”, for instance, is still around and repeated *ad nauseam* by programmers, journalists and sometimes even film historians), more and more often the organisers of screenings reflect on how they can not only do historical justice to the films, but also turn them into an attraction for audiences today. Even though, once again, the “death of cinema” is being proclaimed as digital images conquer our media environment, animated photographs from the years around 1900 can work their magic in many and sometimes unexpected ways. The films do need a contextualisation, sometimes in the form of a confrontation, to be appreciated, and archivists, festival curators, scholars and other organisers of such screenings have explored a broad range of possibilities to provide this. Maybe one of the most interesting aspects of this development is that scholarly rigour and showmanship are not mutually exclusive. Quite on the contrary, historical research in fact produces the very basis upon which the acts of showmanship can be performed. And from time to time someone, who is known as a meticulous researcher, a grave academic, or a scrupulous archivist, may even be seen as a performer, standing next to a screen or sitting behind a piano, trying to share with an audience her or his fascination for the animated photographs that enchanted the public a century ago.

## Notes

1. See Livio Jacob, “Arbeiten für den stummen Film. Die Geschichte der Cineteca del Friuli und der Giornate del Cinema Muto in Pordenone”, *KINtop* 3 (1994): 195–199; Dominique Païni, “Der frühe Film zwischen Zufall und Bühne”, *KINtop* 5 (1996): 150–154; Frank Roumen, “Die neue Kinemathek. Ein anderer Ort, ein anderes Publikum, eine andere Zeit”, *KINtop* 5 (1996): 155–159; Karola Gramann and Heide Schlüpmann, “Die Kunst des Filmezeigens – Kurzfilm und frühes Kino in der universitären Lehre”, *KINtop* 11 (2002): 159–164; Ivo Blom, “Eine Reise um die Welt vor 90 Jahren, or: The Travelling Showman Revisited”, *KINtop* 12 (2003): 151–164; Eric de Kuyper, “Der Stummfilm der ersten Jahrzehnte – Studiengegenstand oder Schauobjekt”, *KINtop* 14/15 (2006): 137–150 (for an English version of de Kuyper’s text see elsewhere in this volume).
2. To give an example: a film museum can for instance organise a screening of hand- or stencil-

coloured trick films in order to demonstrate to their audience the amazing visual and attractional qualities of such productions, making use maybe even of a lecturer highlighting these features, whereas someone with a particular scholarly interest might focus on other aspects, trying even to block out the framing discourse provided by the institution.

3. See André Gaudreault and Denis Simard, "L'extranéité du cinema des premiers temps: bilan et perspectives de recherche" in Thierry Lefebvre and Michel Marie (eds), *Les vingt premières années du cinéma français* (Paris: Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1995), 15–28.
4. *Ibid.*, 22 (my translation).
5. One might add that whoever teaches film history faces a similar task when dealing with the early period.
6. See for the English translation Jean-Louis Baudry, "The Apparatus – Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in the Cinema" in Philip Rosen (ed.), *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 299–318.
7. See Frank Kessler, "The Cinema of Attractions as *Dispositif*" in Wanda Strauven (ed.), *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 57–69.
8. See Patrick Vonderau, "Vernacular Archiving. An Interview with Rick Prelinger" in Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau (eds), *Films That Work. Industrial Film and the Productivity of Media* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 51–61.
9. See Ansje van Beusekom, "'Avant-guerre' and the International Avant-garde. Circulation and Programming of Early Films in the European Avant-garde Programs in the 1920s and 1930s" in Frank Kessler and Nanna Verhoeff (eds), *Networks of Entertainment. Early Film Distribution 1895–1915* (Eastleigh: John Libbey, 2007), 285–294.
10. Giovanna Fossati and Nanna Verhoeff, "Beyond Distribution: Some Thoughts on the Future of Archival Films" in *Networks of Entertainment*, 333 (emphasis by the authors).
11. Stephen Bottomore, "Re-discovering Early Non-Fiction Film", *Film History* 13.2 (2001): 160–173.
12. *Ibid.*, 166.
13. *Ibid.*, 167–168.
14. *Ibid.*, 165.
15. See Gramann and Schlüppmann, 159.
16. See the reprint of Gunning's essay in Strauven (ed.) and Noël Burch, *Life to those Shadows* (London: BFI, 1990).
17. Jan-Christopher Horak, "Auto, Eisenbahn und Stadt – frühes Kino und Avantgarde", *KINtop* 12 (2003): 95–119.
18. See de Kuyper in *KINtop* 14/15 and in this volume, as well as Claude Bertemes, "Cinématographe Reloaded. Notes on the Fairground Cinema Project *Crazy Cinématographe*" in Martin Loiperdinger (ed.), *Travelling Cinema in Europe* (Frankfurt am Main / Basel: Stroemfeld, 2008), 191–218, and also Claude Bertemes and Nicole Dahlen in this volume.
19. This of course is in itself an anachronism, as historically, of course, the screening of these films did not have the character of an event.
20. See also Stephen Bottomore, "Workshop Review", *Early Popular Visual Culture* 9.1 (2011): 87–90.