



Enfin le cinéma! Arts, images, spectacles en France (1833–1907)

sous la direction de Dominique Païni, Paul Perrin, Marie Robert

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'It is not a question here of telling the story of the invention of cinema but rather of evoking what it invents: the modern spectator that, for the most part, we are still' (p.26): the unequivocal statement by film theorist and historian Dominique Païni – curator, together with Paul Perrin and Marie Robert, of the catalogue of the exhibition *Enfin le cinéma! Arts, images, spectacles en France (1833-1907)*, which recently took place at Musée d'Orsay, makes explicit, from the very beginning, the underlying assumption that guides the text's structure. The adoption of an alphabetical order by the editors of the book is the pretext for the organization of an atlas of modernity: a portolan chart drawing the tangle of routes that crosses 'a bit haphazardly', not without risks, and drifts towards the unknown – a *pêle mêle*, to use Païni's words (p. 15) –, the handful of years during which the new techniques of the modern observer arose.

By the beginning of the XIX century, the modern metropolis had grown thanks to the engineering of iron as a building material, granting new views above and beyond human perception; simultaneously the urban fabric became lightened and enriched with new *recadrages* due to the replacement of masonry with large glass panels. A city intersected by passages and railways, lifted by the Eiffel Tower, intoxicated by

the sensorial richness of universal exhibitions is what emerges from the words and images of the volume.

Subjected to the optical and motion stresses provoked by the new urban landscape, illuminated day and night by electric light and accelerated by modern modes of transportation, modern women and men demanded a visual entertainment equal to the urban phantasmagoria. The convergence of scientific discoveries, technical achievements, industrialization and rising capitalism, the desire for ever more extreme sensory stimulations and the availability of a portion of free time that had previously been unknown to peasant living led to the invention of optical instruments capable of opening the gaze towards the boundless amplitudes of the world or, on the contrary, concentrating it into an unprecedented, spectacular extraordinariness. This provided the *thrills* and *shocks* that constituted the armamentarium of effects aimed at producing that *aesthetic of astonishment* which, according to Tom Gunning, among others, characterized the production of moving images until 1907.⁴

The book includes a large number of renowned scholars from various disciplines engaged in writing short essays which compose a heteroclitic lemmery. The entries of this abecedary account not only for this technical marvel, but also for the

social construction of modernity, its less obvious manifestations that are nevertheless crucial in outlining the profile of a demanding and shrewd audience, still open to wonder and amazement for the sake of discovery and sensation.

As the editors affirm, in the opening texts of the volume, it is not a question of reconstructing the umpteenth history of cinema or sanctioning its ultimate truth, but of recovering the dimension of *movement*, one that is enthusiastic and often fortuitous, at times even frightening; that is understood not as mere mobility but in terms of *change*, the true index of modernity. Out of time and off the screen, the world continues to happen and cinema, within the boundaries traced by the luminous rectangle of the frame, resigns itself to intercepting a constant absence, chasing after what Jacques Aumont calls 'the feeling of an interminable anecdote' (p. 40), that happens a little further away or a little before, perhaps a little after.

The defining apparatus makes use of concepts consolidated in the field of Film Studies, such as, for example, *screen*, *space* and *montage*, (respectively: *Écran* by Vanessa R. Schwartz, p. 92; *Espace* by Michel Frizot, p. 102 and *Montage* by François Albera, p.158); these are always illuminated by a multidisciplinary gaze that gives an account of the mutual influence between arts, languages and techniques on which the aesthetics of modernity and the new way of looking pivot.

The lemma 'montage', for example, is not only described as intrinsic to the film, but is used to determine a new mode of fruition: the expository form of the *screening program*, which lines up heteroclitic fragments. *Movement*, one of the main categories guiding the book, is investigated – in painting, photography, as well as in the early Lumière's vedutist cinema – as a fortuitous and uncontrollable *accident*: the unexpected that frees bodies from the stasis of Étienne-Jules Marey's chrono-photography and captures the instantaneous nature of action (see, for example, the entries *Aléa* by Jacques Aumont, p. 39; *Animé*

by Paul-Louis Roubert; *Populaire* by Valérie Vignaux, *Hors-champ* by Marie Robert, p. 118; *Immersion* by Livio Belloi, p. 208, *Temps* by Michel Frizot, p. 272; *Vue* by Érik Bullot, p. 292).

The theatre of the world, understood as an *inventory* of images and *repertoire* of experiences (see the entry compiled by Paul Perrin *Inventaires*, p. 134 and Jean François Staszak's definition of *Monde*, p. 154), is Paris: the *city-screen* portrayed in its discontinuity by the Nabis painters.

Félix Valloton and Pierre Bonnard, abandoning the classical framing, break down the vision by highlighting its episodic and fragmentary nature, transforming painting and print into a *proto-cinema*, a synchronic repertory of the attractions that make Paris the *city-spectacle* par excellence, where everything is *on display* (on this subject: *Discontinuité* by Isabelle Cahn, p. 86 and *Nabi* by Mathias Chivot, p. 170).

Moreover, Parisian architecture, the epitome of which is the Eiffel Tower, is a tool for the creation of a composite horizon of views that constantly allude to its outliers, as in Henri's lithographs and plates (see *Hors-champ* by Marie Robert, p. 118).

The body, the inescapable protagonist of the cinematographic language – as much in its presence as in its noisy absence – is narrated as a comic agent (*Corps Comique*, by Laurent Guido, p. 62) and as a pathological patient (*Corps Pathologique* by Rae Beth Gordon, p. 68); it is described as colonized by the Western imperialist gaze (*Exhibitions* by Stéphane Tralongo, p. 109) or by the equally imperialist male eye when it turns to the scrutiny of the female body as a sexual object, further eroticized through the cinematic mediation of keyhole masks or binocular lenses (*Voyeur* by Marie Robert, p. 286).

And if cinema is the place where death seems to be defeated, at least for the duration of a projection, the body is precisely that battlefield where the miracle of animation is accomplished. The cinema of origins takes up the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea, one of the iconographic

themes dearest to sculpture, and elaborates it thanks to its media specificity. (see *Sculpture* by Leah Lehmbek, p. 242).

Pictorial and proto-cinematographic naturalism is complementary to spectacle, the artifice which aims to entertain the masses. The depiction of the act of seeing, traces of scrutinies and evidences of *cinetisme* are the counterpart of another colourful, blithe, abundant progeny: the one of the *dispositives amusant*, of the cheerful or gloomy technologies of vision which determine – or are determined by – the inception of the modern spectator.

Tricks borrowed from prestidigitation, as in the case of Méliès, the use of colour and light in the composition of panoramas and dioramas, stage construction in studios, the fairground attractions, Loïe Fuller's dance and, earlier, the plethora of optical toys and pre-cinematographic devices barely managed to satiate the optical hunger of the public at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (see, among others, the entries *Attractions* by Martin Barnier, p. 53; *Dessin* by Dominique Willoughby, p. 78; *Lanternes* by Ségolène le Men, p. 147; *Studios* by Brian Jacobson, p. 262; *Trucs* by Frank Kessler and Sabine Lenk, p. 276).

Page after page, entry after entry, we observe the shaping of an atlas that is susceptible to continuous amendments and subsequent hybridizations, as if cinema – 'a technical precipitate' in Paini's words – could avoid taxonomies and rigid classifications and could be grasped, albeit for an instant, only in the breadth of a never-too-stringent, evocative map.

The volume is characterised by a composite structure that pushes us to move back and forth between the pages, definitions and tropes, creating a short circuit between the linearity that characterizes the classic construction of a book and the impossibility of harnessing cinema in a single trajectory. In short, the volume itself is in motion. This begins with the title, which defines, with a joyful assertiveness marked by exclamation, the conclusion of a process, a point

of arrival that is also a roaring restart; at the same time it seems to indicate the resolution of an enigma or the occurrence of an alchemical transmutation. An end title, rather than a header, which follows that garble of events that constitute the emergence of modernity, whose brightest manifestation remains cinema.

The book, which can be intended as an autonomous publication, one that is not necessarily entangled with the Parisian exhibition, depicts the city as the perfect example of an intrinsically inter-media text, and indeed the appendix traces back the biographies of those inventors, actors, directors who wove the mesh of modernity into the new urban context.

The repertoire of images belongs to a basin which is, for the most part, urban: street views, perspectives taken from the top of modern construction, boulevard audiences and theatrical spectatorship, storefront windows and department store's display of goods, wall *affiches*, crowded film stills or empty studios in the outskirts of Paris, harbours and train stations: these are the great part of the buzzy visual population which inhabits the pages. The epitome of the cityscape's cruciality as the most powerful cinema incubator is the cover image: Henry Rivière's photograph of a couple caught entering a train station. They are not crossing the threshold of a *salle*, a proto-cinema theatre, they are entering the realm of movement, and, as modern subjects, they are most likely capable of grasping the spectacle of movement. Only there, in the end, at that stage of awareness, lies the cinema.

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Notes

⁴ T. Gunning, 'An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)credulous Spectator', *Art and Text*, 34, (1989), 114-33.