A Cinema in Search of a Spectator: Film-Viewer Relations before Hollywood

1

From its inception in 1895–96, cinema was defined as the projection of films upon a fixed screen before a paying public. But the film spectator, as distinct from a member of an empirically variable audience, did not come into existence until more than a decade later. As a concept, a structural term, the spectator emerged along with the set of codes and conventions that has been analyzed as the classical Hollywood cinema. Specifically, classical cinema offered its viewer an ideal vantage point from which to witness a scene, unseen by anyone belonging to the fictional world of the film, the diegesis. With the elaboration of a type of narration that seems to anticipate—or strategically frustrate—the viewer's desire with every shot, the spectator became part of the film as product, rather than a particular exhibition or show. As reception was thus increasingly standardized, the moviegoer was effectively invited to assume the position of this ideal spectator created by the film, leaving behind, like Keaton in *Sherlock Jr.*, an awareness of his or her physical self in the theater space, of an everyday existence troubled by social, sexual, and economic discrepancies.

The classical mode of narration and address began to be formulated around 1909, although it can be discerned as early as 1907.[1] During the early and mid-teens, respective innovations in framing, editing, and mise-en-scène were normalized on a wide scale and came to complement each other more systematically. By 1917 the classical system "was complete in its basic narrative and stylistic premises."[2] As film historians have emphasized in recent years, classical cinema did not simply arise from the inventions of a few solitary pioneers, inventions that, as traditional film histories would have it, were fused into an art by the genius of Griffith. The emergence of the classical system was a complex process intertwining developments in modes of production, distribution, and exhibition, including the beginning

of a journalistic discourse on the new medium. Nor can the rise of the classical system be described as a linear evolution of techniques, let alone a gradual perfecting of a natural "film language." On the contrary, the transition involved a paradigmatic shift from one kind of cinema to another—a shift, above all, in the conception of the relations between film and spectator.

This view of film history maintains that "primitive" or early cinema has to be considered as much a paradigm in its own right as its classical successor, a mode of representation relatively elaborated in its technical and stylistic options.[3] More than a chronological distinction, the concept of early cinema implies a paradigmatic otherness in relation to later practices—even though certain *elements* of the classical continuity system (such as the point-of-view shot) appeared earlier. Moreover, "primitive" devices lingered well into the mid-teens, and were often used along with classical conventions; they made a most spectacular return, on the threshold to classical cinema, with Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916). As Tom Gunning contends, the kinds of fascination prevalent in early cinema did not disappear from film history but persisted underground—in the tradition of avant-garde filmmaking and as a component of certain genres (such as the musical).[4] They also could be traced in the development of the star cult, both in its general aesthetics of display and in the erotic personae of individual stars such as Valentino.

Early films, although they lacked the mechanisms to create a spectator in the classical sense, did solicit their viewer through a variety of appeals and attractions and through particular strategies of exhibition. In the attempt to reconstruct early film-spectator relations, however, we confront the methodological problem of measuring them against the later norm: either heuristically, by focusing on modes of reception that have disappeared from subsequent film history, or conceptually, by drawing upon methods of formal analysis developed primarily in the study of classical cinema. If recent historiography has taught us to avoid evolutionary models and metaphors, we should also resist a kind of inverse teleology which would idealize early cinema in its paradigmatic otherness.[5] Still, a modicum of teleological bias is almost inevitable: not only can we not escape viewing early cinema from the perspective of the fully developed institution (with its own semblance of teleology), but any reconstruction of historical relations of reception—as textual, psychic, and social configurations—is bound up with the writer's own critical subjectivity and historical contingency. Because I am interested in formations of spectatorship primarily in terms of their function as public horizons, as structural conditions for the articulation and reflection of experience, I will seek to elucidate early film-spectator relations less in an abstract opposition to the classical norm than in their multiplicity and complexity, in their uneven makeup and development.

An Excess of Appeals

The invention of film both challenged and undercut historically available modes of reception. While the receptive behavior rehearsed in traditional branches of entertainment, popular or "legitimate," no doubt fostered the desire and disposition required for the consumption of films, it was not quite adequate to the new medium. As a perceptual technology advertised for the "illusion of lifelike movement," film had been prepared for by realistic directions in the theater as well as screen entertainments like the magic lantern and stereopticon shows.[6] But as cinema, as a particular type of social and aesthetic experience, the reception of films was without institutional precedent. The "proper" relations among viewer, projector, and screen, the peculiar dimensions of cinematic space, were part of a cultural practice that had to be learned.

A celebrated document of this learning process is Edwin S. Porter's short film *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (Edison, 1902), a remake of a British import, Robert Paul's *The Countryman's First Sight of the Animated Pictures* (1901).[7] The country rube was a stock character in vaudeville, comic strips, and other popular media, and early films seized upon the encounter of supposedly unsophisticated minds with city life, modern technology, and commercial entertainment as a comic theme and as a way of flaunting the marvels of that new urban world (compare *Rube and Mandy at Coney Island* [Porter/Edison, 1903]). In *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* the country rube is a naive spectator who mistakes the representations on the screen for reality. Initially standing in a box to the left of a stage and screen, Uncle Josh is shown watching three different films which successively appear on the screen during this brief one-shot film: *Parisian Dancer, The Black Diamond Express,* and *The Country Couple.* Besides being clips from earlier Edison films (the major departure from the British source), the films-within-the-film represent a selection of popular genres: a dance film, a scenic view showing a train (rushing toward the camera at an oblique angle, as in the well-known Lumière film or Biograph's *Empire State Express* [1896]), and a sexually suggestive knockabout comedy.

Uncle Josh's transactions with each film demonstrate particular misconceptions about the nature of the cinematic illusion; they also highlight different components of spectatorial pleasure. Thus, seeing the Parisian dancer, Uncle Josh jumps onto the stage and attempts to dance with her,

expressing a need for participation, mimesis, and reciprocity. His expectations are thwarted by the screen, the barrier between absence and presence, which teases the viewer—as does the dancer's skirt—by concealing what it promises to reveal. But, as the second film suggests, this barrier also functions as a shield, protecting the viewer from the impact of the perceptual thrills it affords. Like the legendary early spectators who fled from their seats at the sight of oncoming trains or waves, Uncle Josh withdraws in terror from *The Black Diamond Express*, returning to the safe distance of his initial place. Not accidentally, it is the final film, a larger-than-life depiction of a "country couple," which agitates him beyond control. As he watches the rube's unmistakable advances toward the woman, Uncle Josh most acutely feels the structural exclusion of the cinematic spectator from the space observed—a primal scene par excellence.[8] Now altogether infantilized, he assaults and tears down the screen. Aiming at the paternal rival, he gets embroiled instead with the projectionist *behind* the screen, the hidden author of the illusion. By transgressing the boundaries between theater space and the space of illusion, Uncle Josh ends up destroying the latter.

With his deviant and excessive behavior in relation to the projected images, the spectator-within-the-film becomes himself a spectacle, an object displayed to someone else's view, for someone's viewing pleasure. As a comic allegory, then, the film implies certain lessons for the spectator *of* the film: lessons concerning the spatial arrangement of cinema, especially

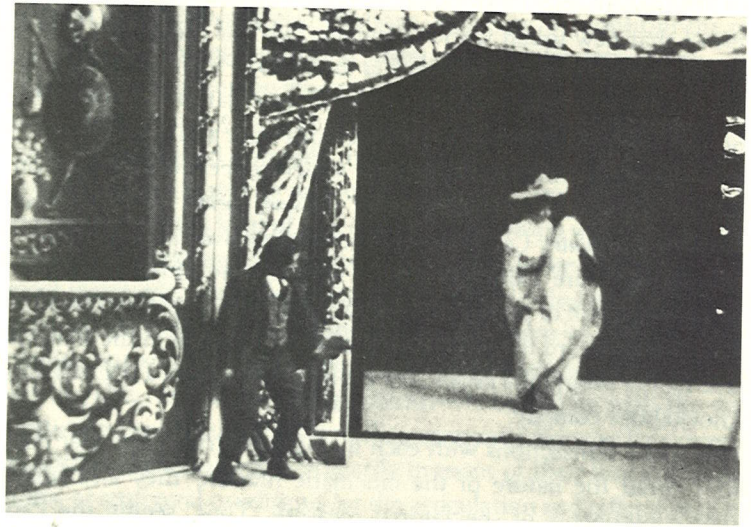

Figure 1.1

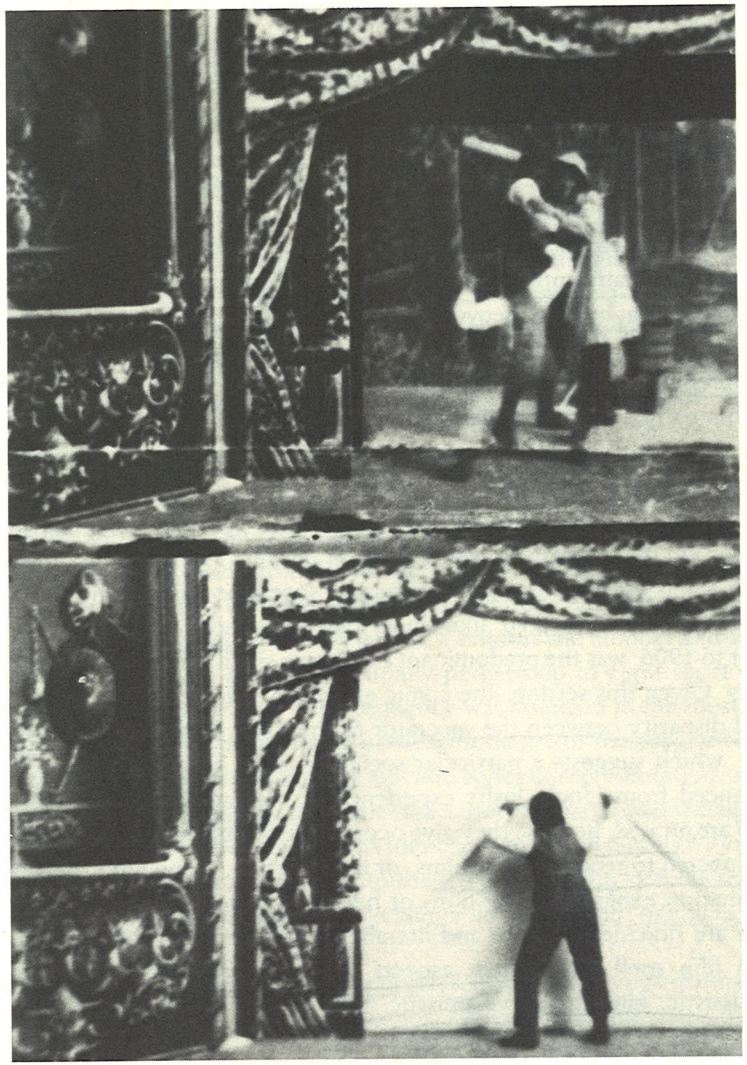

Figure 1.2

the role of the fixed screen; lessons of sexual economy, in particular regarding the image of the woman; and lessons in film history.

By 1902 the viewers of *Uncle Josh* were no longer likely to repeat the naive behavior of those legendary viewers who had become part of the novelty of motion picture screenings, whether in Paris, Berlin, or at Koster and Bial's Music Hall in New York. The comic appeal of the film thus turns on an

underlying assertion of "progress," with respect to representational techniques and to the development of a mode of reception appropriate to the cinema. In its formal construction, *Uncle Josh* belongs to the tradition of the primitive tableau, a one-shot scene presenting an extended action from a singular (usually frontal) viewpoint and long-shot (stage) distance.[9] Stylistically, however, the film is more complex than any one of the films projected within its mise-en-scène; what is more, by quoting these films, it marks them as earlier and more "primitive." For one thing, *Uncle Josh* displays a sense of narrative progression and closure which, in the projected films, is rudimentary at best. Moreover, by juxtaposing diverse genres and representational styles, the film subsumes them into a larger whole, at once more comprehensive and more advanced than the fragments quoted. Thus, even at this early stage the cinema's sense of its own, albeit brief, history is inscribed with a tendency toward subsumption and integration characteristic of the later institution.

A similar tension is at work in the relations *Uncle Josh* sets up with its viewer, on the thematic as well as structural level. The viewer addressed by *Uncle Josh* is certainly not yet the classical spectator. Instead, he or she was likely to have been seated, like Uncle Josh, in a vaudeville theater—which, prior to 1906, was the predominant exhibition site for films, at least in urban areas. Given this setting, the comic effect is predicated on an alleged cultural disparity between the spectator-in-the-film and the spectator-of-the-film, which suggests a particular social dynamic of identification. While distanced from Uncle Josh's experience of the projected films—because they are quoted, because they give occasion to his misbehavior—the viewer is expected to recognize the films, or types of film, along with the kinds of fascination experienced by him- or herself not too long ago. For even as they are ridiculed as naive and literalizing, Uncle Josh's transactions with each film spell out distinct aspects of spectatorial pleasure—mimetic-narcissistic, kinesthetic, voyeuristic. Like the style of the individual films shown, these pleasures are marked as regressive, partial, and disorienting, inappropriate to the receptive attitude expected from the viewer *of* the film. The narrative clearly articulates a pressure for these pleasures to become integrated, subordinated to a more mature mode of reception; but it can do so only by negative example. What had yet to be developed was the matrix of integration: a mode of narration that would grant the viewer fictional presence and identification on the very condition of his or her perceptual absence, the segregation of film and theater space.

Uncle Josh's confusion seems to result less from the unique and unprecedented appeal of film than from an *excess of appeals*; less from a lack than an *overdetermination* of models of receptive behavior. As Alan Williams has pointed out, the celebration of cinema as a unique invention concealed from the start the heterogeneity of the medium's origins, its fundamental character of "*bricolage*."[10] Just as it borrowed inventions from other areas of technology (such as the bicycle and the sewing machine), early cinema relied for its subject matter and representational strategies on a vast repertoire of commercial amusements that flourished around the end of the century. The Wild West, minstrel and magic shows, the burlesque, the playlet, the dance number, pornographic displays, acrobatics, and animal acts—all supplied the cinema with subject matter, performance conventions, and viewer expectations; so did the magic lantern and the stereopticon shows with their configuration of projected image, darkened theater space, and sound accompaniment.[11]

In a rather basic sense, early film-spectator relations were determined—and overdetermined—by the contexts in which films were first exhibited: vaudeville and variety shows, dime museums and penny arcades, summer parks, fair grounds, and traveling shows. These institutions provided not only the locations and occasions for film exhibition, but also a particular format of programming, the *variety format*. Whatever the number and status of films within a given program—initially perhaps up to eight short films filling a twenty-minute slot—their sequence was arranged in the most random manner possible, emulating the overall structure of the program in its emphasis on diversity, its shifting moods and styles of representation. As an entrepreneurial and aesthetic principle, the variety format shaped reception even after 1905–06, when the cinema found an exhibition outlet of its own, the nickelodeon. It persisted well into the teens, when the introduction of the feature film enforced a major change in exhibition practices and audience behavior.[12]

The rapid succession of seemingly unrelated films and live performances encouraged a mode of reception incompatible with that mandated by the traditional arts—a tendency toward "distraction" or "diversion" that notably Siegfried Kracauer and, following him, Walter Benjamin valorized as a practical critique of bourgeois culture.[13] If the traditional arts required an extended contemplation of and concentration upon a singular object or event, the variety format promised a short-term but incessant sensorial stimulation, a mobilization of the viewer's attention through a discontinuous series of attractions, shocks, and surprises. This type of reception was perceived very early as a specifically modern form of subjectivity, reflecting the impact of urbanization and industrialization upon human perception. A 1911 survey by the Russell Sage Foundation compared the

variety format to "the succession of city occurrences," describing it as equally "stimulating but disintegrating."[14] More than a mere reflection of urban life and industrial technology, the principle of short-term and excessive stimulation had been elaborated by the media of an emerging consumer culture from about the mid-nineteenth century on, whether in advertising and shop-window displays or in a whole range of consumption-oriented spectacles—from the World Fairs and Pan-American Expositions, through the Panoramas and Dioramas, to amusement parks like Coney Island.[15]

The diversion experienced by viewers of early cinema was thus predicated on an excessive supply of visual sensations, at once modernist bricolage and ideological mirage. The variety format not only provided a convenient structure for adapting as many existing traditions as possible, it seems also to have encouraged the production of diversity, in a sense literalizing the root of diversion. This is most strikingly the case in the degree of heterogeneity among genres or types of early film—a heterogeneity which, as we saw from Uncle Josh's predicament, was something of a mixed blessing, inasmuch as it gave rise to diverging and deviant viewer responses.

Diversity and Display

While many of the films, especially before 1903, were modeled on familiar acts and vernacular iconography, the transposition of these into a new medium emphasized distinctions between genres rather than, as in later classical practice, making them variants of a relatively homogeneous mode of representation known as cinema. Fictional genres were derived largely from vaudeville acts, such as comic skits and sight gags, dances, erotic scenes, highlights from popular plays and operas, and melodramatic episodes; they were also reenactments of historical events and tall tales of the Wild West, tableaux from Passion Plays, and trick films in the tradition of the magic shows. Interspersed with these—and proportionally predominant—were films depicting non-acted, ostensibly unstaged scenes that could be categorized as documentaries: news films or actualities (events from the Spanish-American and Boer wars, parades, prizefights, sensational murders, executions, or disasters); views of everyday life, work, and leisure in the Lumière style; and a large number of travelogues and scenics (exotic locales, panoramas of buildings, landscapes, and exhibitions), the genre most closely affiliated with the tradition of the stereopticon.[16]

Imposing the later distinction between documentary and fictional genres upon primitive diversity, however, is problematic in several respects. Many actualities involved reconstructions—such as the notorious examples of Spanish-American War films shot on a New York rooftop or bathtub recreations of naval battles—yet not necessarily with the intent to deceive; as a subgenre, dramatic reenactments of current events were considered legitimate. Though occasional complaints were heard early on, the standard of authenticity by which all such films would be rejected as "fake pictures" evolved with the classical paradigm and became one of the war cries in the campaign against primitive modes.[17] While the boundaries between documentary reality and mise-en-scène may have been relative, they seem to have mattered less than the kind of fascination which connects, for instance, the "realistic imitation" of President McKinley's assassin in the electric chair in *The Execution of Czolgosz* (Porter/Edison, 1901) with historical reenactments such as *The Execution of Mary Queen of Scots* (Edison, 1895)—or the substitution trick in *Execution by Hanging* (Biograph, 1905) with the authentic footage of *Electrocuting an Elephant* (Edison, 1903). The sensationalist appeal of such films cuts across documentary and fictional modes of representation and overtly caters to sadistic impulses; later films could do this only in the guise of narrative motivation and moral truth. A distinctly different sensibility speaks from catalog descriptions like that of *Beheading the Chinese Prisoner* (Sigmund Lubin, 1900)—"the executioner displays the head to the spectators to serve as a warning for evil doers[,] [v]ery exciting"—or from the copy advertising a comedy like Porter's *Appointment by Telephone* (Edison, 1902), which has an angry wife wreck the interior of a restaurant and "horsewhip" her husband and the young lady she finds in his company: "A very fine photograph, full of action from finish to start, and a subject that will appeal to everyone."[18]

If sadism played an important part in early cinema's appeal, so did other partial pleasures that elude the fiction-documentary label. Robert Allen cites the popularity of the "local actuality" films shot in a particular city one day and shown in a local theater the next.[19] Public interest was captured by the work of the camera team and by the reproduction of scenes from people's everyday lives, the possibility of seeing oneself or someone familiar on the screen. This interest, which Allen terms "narcissistic," could also be linked to Benjamin's political assertion that "any man today can lay claim to being filmed."[20] At any rate, the viewer's investment in the screen as mirror differs from later, narratively mediated forms of identification—with characters, star images, and the look of the narrating camera—which effectively displaced interest in local and personal representation from the institution of cinema, relegating it to the private province of "home" movies.

Another aspect of primitive fascination can be gleaned from a variant of the travelogue: kinesthetic films, which convey the sensation of traveling by

means of a mobile camera, or, rather, a camera carried on a car, a boat, or even an aerial balloon, though more often a vehicle moving along railway tracks. Add the darkness of a tunnel (as in *Interior N.Y. Subway, 14th Street to 42nd Street* [G. W. Bitzer/Biograph, 1905]), and the representational object is abstracted by the thrill of motion and varying speeds, the changing proportions of the passing space, the dizzying play of light and shadow. The most unsettling effect, however, may have been the viewer's inescapable consignment to the place of the invisible camera, experienced in terms of an overpowering orality—an oral fascination that seems the flipside of Uncle Josh's fear of the oncoming train. A review of a 1897 Biograph film taken by a camera riding through the Haverstraw Tunnel describes this effect in diction overwhelmed with its own helplessness:

> The spectator was not an outsider watching from safety the rush of the cars. He was a passenger on a phantom train ride that whirled him through space at nearly a mile a minute. . . . There was nothing to indicate motion save that shining vista of tracks that was eaten up irresistably, rapidly and the disappearing panoramas of banks and fences. The train was invisible and yet the landscape remorselessly [sic] and far away the bright day became a spot of darkness. That was the mouth of the tunnel and toward it the spectator was hurled as if a fate was behind him. The spot of blackness closed around him and the spectator being flung through that cavern with the demoniac energy behind him. The shadows, the rush of invisible force and the uncertainty of the issues made one instinctively hold his breath as when on the edge of a crisis that might become a catastrophe.[21]

The genre reached its peak with Hale's Tours, a form of exhibition that premiered at the Saint Louis Exposition in 1904 and became popular in several American cities over the next two years. Designed like a railroad car, complete with conductor and simulated sways and jolts, clickety-clack and brake sounds, this theater projected scenic views taken from a moving train. While the realistic environment motivates the kinesthetic experience (and thus to some extent contains its destabilizing effect), it still betrays a distinctly primitive attitude toward the cinematic illusion, one that includes the spectator in the space and process of make-believe.[22]

Local actualities and "phantom rides" convey a fascination not only with particular moving images but also with the apparatus that produces them, reminding us that "in the earliest years . . . the cinema itself was an attraction"—in addition to being a medium for a traditional repertoire of attractions.[23] Especially during the initial novelty period (1895–1898), audiences went to exhibitions as much to marvel at the machine—the Biograph, the Vitascope—as to view the films. In subsequent years display of the apparatus continued in a less explicit, though hardly more discreet, manner. In many films the view or plot provides an occasion for demonstrating specifically cinematic techniques and possibilities: the camera's ability to traverse and mobilize space (as in the panoramas and phantom rides); its suspension of spatio-temporal laws (fast, slow, and reverse motion, multiple exposure, split screen) and its geographic ubiquity (film as a substitute for mass tourism); its manipulation of perception through magical transformations (stop-motion photography and substitution splices) and its play with scale and proportions (miniatures and matte shots); but also its capacity to witness and record, whether transient phenomena of nature, public events, incriminating situations (like illicit love), or subjects of surveillance and documentation.

A number of early films advertise the process of vision itself, the cinema's capability of bringing objects into view, whether mediated by the scopic agency of a character or put forth directly to the spectator. A British film, *Grandma's Reading Glass* (G. A. Smith, 1900), shows a boy looking at various objects—including his grandmother's eye—through a magnifying glass. These long shots alternate with close views of the respective objects in a circular mask, supposedly representing the boy's point of view; the cut has no function other than to provide the "pleasure point of the film."[24] The type of visual pleasure catered to by such magnified inserts no doubt has fetishistic implications, whatever the narrative pretext. These are most overt in films displaying partial views of the female body, as in Smith's film of the same year, *As Seen through a Telescope*, or Edwin S. Porter's *The Gay Shoe Clerk* (Edison, 1903), both of which focus on the female ankle. In the latter, the closer view shows the object in striped hose as the clerk ties the young woman's shoe and she slowly raises her skirt. This cut-in may be compositionally motivated (in that it condones the clerk's attempt to kiss her in the following shot),[25] yet it is clearly staged for the benefit of the viewer—all the more so since the angle of vision remains the same as before: frontal, rather than from the point of view of the amorous clerk.

Whether showing off the possibilities of the new medium or the object envisioned, the basic conception of early filmmaking is one of display, of demonstration, of showmanship. It is, to use Gunning's term, a "cinema of attractions," closer to the tradition of fairground and variety shows than to the classical priority of articulating a story.[26] This does not mean that early films did not also engage in storytelling; on the contrary, narrative gained considerable ground, especially after 1901. But the specificity of early cinema, its paradigmatic difference, has more to do with the "thrill of display," an exhibitionist attitude that fuels both narrative and non-

narrative, both fictional and documentary forms. Accordingly, the "cinema of attractions" implies a fundamentally different type of address than is found in later films. This address is predicated on diversity, on distracting the viewer with a variety of competing spectacles (rather than absorbing him or her into a coherent narrative by way of a unified spectatorial vantage point). But the display of diversity also means that the viewer is solicited in a more direct manner—as a member of an anticipated social audience and a public, rather than an invisible, private consumer.

Another Kind of Voyeurism

The logic of display that inspires a diversity of genres also characterizes the conception of the shot on the level of framing and editing. The type of shot considered most characteristic of the "primitive" style is the theatrical tableau, with its long-shot distance, frontal perspective, and often static and relatively noncentered composition. As in other early shot types, signification relies upon the single frame in its unity of viewpoint, whatever manipulations and transformations it may contain (or enable, as in trick films where the uninterrupted framing in fact constitutes the condition of the magical trompe l'oeil).[27] The shot is perceived as a unit of relative autonomy, as opposed to the classical conception of the shot as a part blending into a continuous narrative space. When a series of tableaux are joined in a narrative, the action depicted in the scene is usually completed before the cut; spatial and temporal connections between successive shots remain confused or unspecified. But even the shot itself is not always immediately readable. In the tableau tradition the image tends to be overloaded with visual meaning, making the viewer hover between multiple points of narrative interest (an extreme case is the department store shot in Porter's *The Kleptomaniac* [Edison, 1905] in which the lady thief goes about her business just as unnoticeable to us as to the customers within the diegesis).[28] All these traits—unity of viewpoint, unspecified spatio-temporal continuity, and noncentered composition—are not only inspired by an aesthetics of display but also require a mode of exhibition in which the sights on screen are presented as part of a larger show.

The frontality and uniformity of viewpoint is clearly the mark of a *presentational*—as opposed to representational—conception of space and address. If classical cinema was to "introduce [the spectator] into the space of the film," as Jean Mitry says regarding Méliès, in early cinema "the space . . . comes forward to present itself to the spectator within a uniformity of theatrical framing."[29] Yet, as Gunning and Musser have argued, this difference in spatial organization should not be reduced to theatricality: the magic-lantern tradition, the comic strip, the political cartoon, the proliferation of picture postcards—all are models of presentation and framing that contributed to early cinema's distinctive style.

The theatrical tableau was not the only type of shot, nor did all films keep "the spectator looking across a void into an action in a separate space."[30] Thus, the appeal of the phantom rides depended upon a specifically cinematic form of reception—the spectator's identification with the viewpoint of the camera, its mobility, and potential ubiquity.[31] The films of the "facial expression" genre may have recruited their personnel from the popular stage, but the medium-shot framing asserts a specificity not available to the theatergoer. *The Kiss* (Edison, 1896), one of the most popular early films, reenacts a highlight from a contemporary Broadway hit, *The Widow Jones*, performed by its stars, May Irwin and John C. Rice. The point of such a film is precisely the "impossible" placement of the viewer: the thrill of witnessing an intimate act from a close proximity which in "real life" would preclude that very intimacy, and which on stage would disrupt the illusion of reality. The privilege of seeing the familiar stars in peep-show vicinity blends into the familial scenario of the primal scene, as in *Uncle Josh*, though that scenario still lacks the dimension of emotional interiority. As in the phantom rides, a classical principle—the welding of the spectator's vantage point with that of the invisible camera—appears quite early, though the device is not yet endowed with narrative function, not yet assimilated in terms of causal motivation and character psychology.

The Kiss, like many early films, displays a titillating sight; at the same time it explores the mechanisms of cinematic voyeurism, in particular as distinct from theatrical forms of voyeurism. Christian Metz argues that the distinction of cinematic voyeurism is its affinity with the regime of the keyhole, the unauthorized, isolated and unilateral scopophilia of the primal scene. For him this affinity is intrinsic to the cinematic apparatus because of the opposition of absence and presence that constitutes cinematic representation—the absolute gap between filmic production and reception—and the attendant segregation between the space of the film and the space of the audience: "the filmic spectacle, the object seen, is more radically ignorant of its spectator, since he is not there, than the theatrical spectacle can ever be." Metz associates the latter with a different kind of voyeurism (also operating in domestic scenarios), one that thrives on a reciprocity of seeing and being seen, an "active complicity" between exhibitionist and voyeur. In its ceremonial self-consciousness, theatrical voyeurism retains a public, "civic" dimension; it involves the viewer as a member of a "true" audience, a "tempo-

rary collectivity." By contrast, "those attending a cinematic projection . . . are an accumulation of individuals who, despite appearances, more closely resemble the fragmented group of readers of a novel."[32]

If we take Metz's argument to refer to a distinction between competing cultural institutions and practices rather than an ontological difference between the cinematic apparatus and that of the theater, early cinema seems closer to the theatrical kind of voyeurism than to the scopic regime of classical cinema. With their emphasis on display, early films are self-consciously exhibitionist, whereas classical cinema disavows its exhibitionist quality in order to maintain the spell of the invisible gaze.[33] For one thing, the segregation of film and spectator space essential to the classical mode was not yet codified or, rather, had not yet achieved priority as an aesthetic principle. Thus, despite the technologically based gap of absence and presence (which characterized other visual illusions as well), there was still a perceptual continuity between the space on the screen and the social space of the theater, including projection and other elements of exhibition, such as music and sound effects. As long as the cinema depended for an exhibition outlet on established forms of theatrical entertainments, the screening of films in the context of a mixed program would not necessarily have diminished the audience's awareness of itself as a public, as a collective body present to the spectacles being exhibited. (This public dimension is obviously missing in what has been considered the prototype of cinematic voyeurism in Metz's sense, the kinetoscope with its isolated viewing conditions and peep-show associations.)

If early film-viewer relations had more in common with theatrical voyeurism, they did so in a necessarily eclectic, composite form. For the diverging traditions of the popular and the legitimate stage in turn involved, in the United States at least, not only a social and cultural hierarchy but also different, conflicting conventions of scenography, performance, and address, particularly with regard to standards of "realism."[34] Thus, within the institution of theater at large, defined vis-à-vis the cinema by the physical copresence of audience and performance, the scopic drive already was engaged with considerable variations, depending upon whether the spectator was intentionally absent or present to the actors, whether the aesthetic goal was diversion, spectacular effect, melodramatic catharsis, or the impression of reality. Although the cinema developed in the context of popular theatrical entertainments, which favored predominantly direct modes of address, at an early stage it also absorbed highbrow traditions of representation, among them the principle of the fourth wall.

The eclectic and ambivalent make-up of early cinema's scopic relations is most evident in one recurring practice: an actor's sudden and direct look at the camera. Whether as a comic aside or an erotic wink, such a look ruptures the illusion of a self-enclosed fictional world, by prevailing standards of theatrical realism as well as those to be developed with classical cinema. At the same time, however, the direct look at the camera already plays with the difference between two aesthetic registers: between conflicting conceptions of cinematic space, and between distinct types of voyeurism. Some films seem to be testing the boundary between the illusionist space on screen and the spectator's space in the theater rather aggressively, in the manner of the much-discussed medium close-up of the outlaw pointing his gun at the viewer at the beginning—or end—of *The Great Train Robbery* (Porter/Edison, 1903). In *The Burlesque Suicide*, an Edison film of the previous year, this kind of transgression is the whole point: within a single medium shot we see a man take a drink, look at his pistol, and raise it to his temple; then he stops, and points his finger toward the camera, laughing at the audience for having taken him seriously.[35]

The direct look at the camera became a virtual taboo in the early teens because, in the words of Frank Woods, one of the most eloquent advocates of the classical mode, "facial remarks directed at the camera destroy the illusion of reality."[36] Woods's insight is concerned less with an equivalent between representation and referent than with the spectator's willing absorption into the self-contained fictional world on screen, the diegesis. In the view of practitioners and theorists of the classical mode, such absorption crucially depends upon the spectator's ability to witness the narrative from an ideal vantage point—that of the narrating camera—unseen by any of the characters within diegetic space. The direct look at the camera by an actor or character undermines this mechanism, because it not only foregrounds the fact of filmic enunciation but jeopardizes the segregation of film and theater space and thus the spectator's position as invisible intruder.

However, Marc Vernet reminds us, the disruptive power traditionally attributed to the look at the camera is itself based on a fiction, that of the temporary alignment of actually separate and incompatible spaces: "the space of filming, the diegetic universe, and the space of the theater." While the look at the camera may momentarily disturb the classical voyeur, it also epitomizes the gap upon which the cinematic institution thrives; it stages a "failed encounter," beckoning the spectator into a nostalgic mise-en-abîme. The nostalgia Vernet observes in conjunction with particular instances of the look at the camera extends to the cinema's past symbiosis with popular entertainments, especially in genres like the musical and comedy in which the direct address invokes conventions of the music hall and burlesque.

What is invoked along with these conventions is the desire for a mythical popular audience, the ideal public: "the addressee implied by the 'look at the camera,' far from being the real individual spectator, is actually a collective addressee (the public) but also an imaginary one (the other public)."[37]

From the perspective of the established institution, with its mass audience of isolated, alienated individuals, the appeal to such an ideal public more often than not serves ideological purposes.[38] At this early stage in film history, however, the look at the camera suggests other possibilities. On one level, it no doubt asserts a link with performance conventions familiar from the popular stage; yet on another level, especially when the look occurs suddenly and unexpectedly, it seems to project a spectator not yet in place, and perhaps never in place in the classical sense—the possibility of combining the cinema's technological potential for generality with the structural conditions of a public sphere, of an intersubjective horizon for the articulation of experience.

The alternative implications of the recurring look at the camera, as of early cinema's affinity with theatrical voyeurism in general, are especially relevant to questions of gender and sexuality. As feminist film theorists from Laura Mulvey to Mary Ann Doane have elaborated, the psychic mechanisms of voyeurism and fetishism inscribed in the classical apparatus reproduce the patriarchal hierarchy that makes the woman the object and the man the agent of the look. Predicating cinematic pleasure on these mechanisms involves a *structural* "masculinization" of the spectator position, regardless of the viewer's actual gender.[39] To be sure, early cinema was no less patriarchal than its classical successor, considering that many films were inspired by the male-oriented repertoires of the peep show, the burlesque, or the concert saloon. But they still lacked the formal strategies to predetermine reception in the classical sense, the power of an indirect mode of address predicated on the regime of the keyhole and fetishistic distance.

It is no coincidence that the direct glance at the camera most often occurs in erotic films. The object of fascination is usually a woman, with an emphasis on her body (preferably ankles and legs) in various stages and suggestions of unveiling and concealing. The performer frequently participates in staging herself as spectacle through physical skills, movement, and action, as in the Serpentine and Butterfly dances or in the numerous routines of (mostly partial) disrobing. Often, as in *From Showgirl to Burlesque Queen* (Biograph, 1903) or *The Wine Opener* (Biograph, 1905), the woman's flirtatious look at the camera culminates—and thus foregrounds—the act of exhibition. Such rituals recapture metaphorically some of the self-reflexivity that Metz attributes to theatrical voyeurism: "If there is an element of triumph in this kind of representation, it is because what it exhibits is not exactly the exhibited object but, via the object, the exhibition itself."[40]

Stressing the act of exhibition in conjunction with the female body recalls the psychoanalytic concept of the "masquerade," as it has been elaborated in feminist film theory.[41] By putting the representation in quotation marks, as it were, the female performer at once enacts traditional norms of femininity (including their pornographic violation) and displays them as cultural conventions. So even when the woman is reduced to an object of prurient anticipation, the performer's glance at the camera may add a twist to an otherwise sad joke. In *What Happened on Twenty-Third Street, New York City* (Porter/Edison, 1901), for instance, a young woman's skirt is blown up as she walks across a subway grate. Set in a real location, the film shows people in the street occasionally casting a curious glance in the direction of the camera, as does the performer when she completes her turn. While her closing aside could be read as a come-on, it also asserts a modicum of distance between the performer and her objectified image—a distance that would have been of greater significance for women in the audience than for the textually inscribed spectator of male, homosocial entertainments.[42]

The foregrounding of exhibition in early erotic films conveys a sense of role-playing, a degree of interchangeability of roles within the transgressive scenario. The lure—as well as the limit—of such role-playing is thematic in a 1903 Edison film, *What Happened in the Tunnel*. A male passenger tries to steal a kiss from a young woman as the train enters the tunnel and the screen goes black; when the train emerges, he discovers with horror that he had kissed the woman's black maid. This racist and sexist joke is complicated by the fact that the man becomes the object of ridicule as the two women burst out laughing. While the figure of the prankster falling prey to his own prank is quite common in the genre of mischief comedy, the maid's direct glance at the camera suggests not only that she was not merely a prop but that she, rather than her mistress, might have authorized the substitution.[43]

A similar emphasis on role-playing and ambivalence (in Freud's technical sense referring to the coexistence and relative reversibility of opposite drives)[44] can be seen in films that feature acts of voyeurism, staging the look through a character's point of view. Films like *As Seen through a Telescope* (G. A. Smith, 1900), *Ce que l'on voit de mon sixième, Peeping Tom* (both Pathé, 1901), or *Inquisitive Boots* (Hepworth, 1905) show a nosy character peeping through some kind of device—telescope, keyhole—then cut to a view of what the character supposedly sees, usually indicating the mediated vision by means of a—circular or keyhole shape—matte; often, the alternation concludes

with the voyeur being caught and punished. In an illuminating essay on what he calls the "Peeping Tom" series, Gunning discusses the difference of such early versions of the point-of-view shot from its later, classical deployment: "Rather than providing narratively significant information, or indications of character knowledge or psychology, these glimpses deliver bits of scopic pleasure, spectacle rather than narrative." The scopic pleasure thus delivered, Gunning underlines, may be mediated by the character's look but is still acknowledged and shared with the spectator. Significantly, the Peeping Toms often "perform a mocking pantomime of what they see" and communicate their delight to the viewer by directly addressing the camera.[45] Just as the voyeur can play exhibitionist to an implied audience, his or her ultimate denouement suggests a similar role reversal for the object spied upon. This display of ambivalence not only asserts the primacy of the perverse scenario as an aesthetic principle over narrative causality and closure, it also has important implications for the gendered economy of vision and concomitant arrangements of public and private.

Insofar as the "Peeping Tom" films reproduce the peep-show perspective of the kinetoscope or mutoscope parlors, with their overwhelmingly male clientele and lure of cheap pornography, they no doubt assume a patriarchal economy of vision. At the same time they register the breakdown of the hierarchic segregation of male and female spheres that crucially defined nineteenth-century demarcations of public and private. Whether in the tradition of popular cross-dressing or in response to an emerging female audience, the Peeping Tom films occasionally acknowledge the threat—and thrill—of sexual disorientation and the confusion of gender roles. In *A Search for Evidence* (Biograph, 1903), for instance, the role of voyeur is assigned to a woman who, accompanied by a male detective, tracks down her adulterous husband by peering into a succession of hotel rooms.[46] A less respectable and less motivated version of female scopophilia occurs in *The Indiscreet Bathroom Maid* (*La fille de bain indiscrète*, Pathé, 1902). The voyeuristic desire for a glimpse of the female body may be frustrated on the other side of the threshold as well. The most bizarre example is a British film, *Inquisitive Boots*, in which a nosy bootblack introduces us to a series of keyhole views showing, successively, a man cross-dressing in front of a mirror; a man with six toes trying to remove the surplus member with a handsaw; a woman rocking a dog in a cradle; and a couple squirting water with a syringe at the optical intruder.

Like Uncle Josh, these Peeping Toms must be read as figurations of early film-viewer relations. Like the former, they articulate the precarious nature of cinematic space, its peculiar interpenetration of public and private realms. For the psychosexual ambivalence displayed within the film invites the spectator to play a part in the scenario, to engage in a collective ritual of seeing and being seen in the tradition of the theatrical public sphere. While classical cinema eclipses this public dimension in favor of the spectator's privileged, invisible access to the most private of dramas, the Peeping Tom series "forces private dramas into the public space of corridors, and the invoked space of the place of exhibition itself."[47] Though perhaps intended as nothing more than a practical joke, the scopophilic transgression of boundaries enacts a practical critique of historical demarcations of public and private—the possibility of bringing hitherto unrepresented discourses of experience into the view of a radically inclusive, heterosocial public sphere.

However, only the more perverse examples of the Peeping Tom series celebrate a reciprocity of scopic pleasure with the spectator; others are inspired by the narrative purpose of bringing a private transgression into the light of moral censure. In *A Search for Evidence* the wife's voyeuristic excursion culminates in ascertaining her husband's guilt, rather than in a sadistic reversal of her own transgression. In a similar vein, *The Story the Biograph Told* (Biograph, 1904) stages the infringement on someone else's privacy as a legitimate function of the cinematic apparatus, complete with a public theater situation. A mischievous office boy secretly films the proprietor kissing his secretary; the film is then projected in a vaudeville show attended by the proprietor and his wife. The film within the film (which repeats the illicit action from the boy's camera angle) combines the possibility of seeing oneself (or one's philandering husband) on the screen with the spectacle of public exposure and embarrassment. Although both strands of the plot—the practical joke administered by a mischievous boy and the motif of marital infidelity exposed—are familiar staples of early cinema, *The Story the Biograph Told* already points beyond the sheer accumulation of sadistic and voyeuristic pleasures to a later conception of spectatorship as medium of moral truth and social uplift.

The difference between the early use of point of view and its later, classical function is not merely narrative motivation but a deliberate yoking together of vision and truth, a moral inscription of the gaze that has come to be associated with the name of D. W. Griffith.[48] During the transitional period this tendency is allegorized in characters who see their own fate dramatized as spectators, such as the penitent father in *A Drunkard's Reformation* (Griffith/Biograph, 1909) or the seduced country boy recognizing his own destruction in *The Vampire* (Kalem, 1913); in each case, a family is restored as a result of the vision. Although both of these films stage a

personal conversion experience in response to a theatrical performance, they undoubtedly imply an analogy with the institution of cinema, considering the concurrent battle against the threat of censorship. The message of uplift becomes explicit, albeit in the form of a parody, in *Tillie's Punctured Romance* (Sennett/Keystone, 1914), when Chaplin and his moll (Mabel Normand) visit a movie theater that looks like a cross between a Salvation Army mission and a court of law. Seeing a felonious couple get caught on the screen, Mabel and Charlie's behavior hyperbolizes a conception of spectatorship radically different from the anarchic and perverse appeals their own comedy still thrived upon.

Exhibition as Public Performance

The emphasis on exhibition distinguishes early cinema's voyeuristic ceremonies from the classical model in more ways than a general aesthetics of display and flagrant exhibitionism. The lack of closure that radical formalists like Noël Burch have exalted as an aspect of primitive cinema's paradigmatic otherness is predicated upon a particular practice of exhibition: the mediation of the image on the screen by exhibitors or by personnel present in the theater—lecturers, musicians, or sound-effect specialists. As Charles Musser has shown, these mediating activities were not perceived as compensatory, in the sense of clarifying or lending support to a fledgling language of film, but explicitly continued long-standing practices of screen entertainment. For two centuries magic lantern shows had presented fictional narratives, allegorical themes as well as views of documentary interest. With the increased availability of photographic slides in the second half of the nineteenth century, the travelogue became a more prominent and elaborate genre, in many ways anticipating a mode of presentation for films. Lanternists often tried to articulate spatial continuity by arranging successive views in the manner of later editing figures (cut-ins, exterior/interior, point-of-view, and shot/reverse shots), indicating the type of relationship in the course of the lecture.[49]

Considering this tradition, it no longer seems unusual that early multishot films were often distributed in separate reels so that the exhibitor could assemble them in an order of his own choice. The most famous instance of this is the close shot of the outlaw in *The Great Train Robbery* which was shown either at the beginning or at the end of the film, depending on the exhibition context. Whatever legal and marketing strategies may have prolonged that policy of partial sales (for Edison through 1906), it assumed an exhibitor who was more of a lanternist than a projectionist, with a similar conception of editorial control over narrative and spatial sequencing and in the juxtaposition and mixing of genres.[50] As hyperbolized in *Uncle Josh*, the early exhibitor still had the function, as well as the status, of a master of spectacle—a Wizard of Oz on the verge of being unmasked by Toto.

As long as the exhibitor retained this function, cinematic techniques like editing belonged to the context of a particular presentation rather than to the film as a finished product and mass-cultural commodity. Early exhibition still claimed the singularity of a *live performance*, even though the films themselves were circulated on a national and international scale. That sense of performance also derived from a whole range of other activities that outlived the exhibitor's editorial control and persisted well into the nickelodeon period. These can be divided into two types: activities relating to the projected films more or less simultaneously, such as lectures, sound effects, and music; and activities alternating with the projection of films in keeping with the variety format, such as illustrated songs, vaudeville turns, and occasionally, as late as 1909, magic lantern and stereopticon shows. Although nonfilmic attractions varied in currency, status, and combination, at least some of them could be expected as a rule, especially musical accompaniment.[51]

As a crucial element of cinematic experience, the live portions of the show shaped a mode of reception substantially different from that which was to become the norm, at the latest with the advent of synchronized sound and a standardized speed of projection. Even at a minimum, musical accompaniment gave the audience a sense of collective presence that Norman King maintains persisted throughout the silent era: "Sound functioned *differently* during the silent era. . . . Essentially it produced effects in the cinema that recorded sound could not, a sense of immediacy and participation. Live sound actualised the image and, merging with it, emphasised the presentness of the performance and the audience."[52] The presence of live accompaniment relating to the projected image maintained a sense of continuity between the space/time of the theater and the illusionist world on the screen—as opposed to the classical subordination of the former under the absolute rule of the latter. But the priority of "the feeling of being seated in a theatre in front of a screen" over "the feeling of being carried away by an imaginary time-flow" is not necessarily subversive in itself (as Burch implies).[53] More than simply a formal opposition to the classical concept of spectatorship, exhibitions varying from time to time and place to place allowed for locally and culturally specific acts of reception, opening up a margin of participation and unpredictability. In this margin the cinema could assume the function of an alternative public sphere for particular

social groups, like immigrants and women, by providing an intersubjective horizon through—and against—which they could negotiate the specific displacements and discrepancies of their experience.

Such alternative formations of spectatorship were, for obvious reasons, not as widely documented as the tendencies that prevailed, but they did leave their traces by way of negation. A different notion of cinema can be inferred, for instance, from exhibition practices that were denounced or became the object of conflicts between individual exhibitors and producers, or from efforts to minimize nonfilmic acts and activities or subordinate them to the film (music and sound effects) or transform them to become part of the product (intertitles, editing, camera narration)—in short, from the elimination of conditions around which local, ethnic, class, and gender-related experience might crystallize. This process of negation involved representational strategies aimed at suppressing awareness of the theater space and absorbing the spectator into the illusionist space on screen: closer framing, centered composition, and directional lighting; continuity editing which created a coherent diegetic space unfolding itself to an ubiquitous invisible observer; and the gradual increase of film length, culminating in the introduction of the feature film. The most important vehicle of absorption, however, was "the story," the narrative tradition that cinema adopted with such force, a commentator observed in 1909, that "the people forgot the film, forgot the screen, and forgot themselves."[54]

Narrative, Intertextuality, Genre Crossing

The rise of the story film, which began after 1901, was an important factor in stabilizing the industry—not least because the production of narratives could be planned in a way that wars and earthquakes could not. By the end of 1904 fictional narratives had displaced actualities and scenics as the dominant product of American companies, not only in the share of copyrighted titles (53 vs. 42 percent) but, more important, by the higher number of prints of individual titles sold.[55] The trick film had all but disappeared by that time (it accounted for the remaining 5 percent), its techniques being adapted by other genres. Between 1907 and 1908 the number of narrative titles increased from 67 to 96 percent, while documentaries dropped to only 4 percent of copyright entries. At the same time comedies, which had dominated the fiction film prior to 1907 began to fall behind serious drama, or melodrama; in 1908 they accounted for less than a third of narrative titles.

Historians have discussed the move to narrative in terms of a number of interrelated developments, especially the nickelodeon boom and cinema's eventual emancipation from vaudeville, but also the establishment of film exchanges and the introduction of industrial methods in film production.[56] I will limit myself to the following questions: What distinguishes primitive forms of narrative from the model developed after 1907? What kind of relations do early narratives set up with their viewer? What are the implications of the reduction of nonfictional genres and the decline of trick films and comedies? What happened to the unabashed display of visibility and other aspects of primitive fascination?

One of the basic problems narrative films confronted between 1902 and 1907 was the tension "between scenes perceived as self-contained wholes on the one hand and their potential as part of a more complex sequence on the other."[57] Films tended to be nonlinear in two opposite directions: either the narration was too elliptical, giving the viewer too little information to understand the story; or it might demonstrate spatial contiguity between shots at the cost of temporal overlap, by repeating the same action from two different views (usually interior and exterior).[58] In both cases narrative clarity was not an issue if the films were presented by an exhibitor or lecturer who would specify spatio-temporal connections, point out details, and provide dialogue and motivation for the characters' actions.

Even without such guidance, many of the most popular films succeeded because they drew upon well-known plays, novels (or, more often, their theatrical adaptations), folk- and fairy-tales, comic strips, political cartoons, and popular songs.[59] A famous instance of such primitive intertextuality is Porter's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Edison, 1903), based upon George Aiken's stage version of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, which at the time was probably the most frequently performed play in the history of American theater. The film consists of fourteen tableaux, an episodic series of highlights modeled on the condensed plays that helped gentrify the vaudeville stage. These tableaux do not provide a plot summary but assume the viewer's familiarity with play or novel; they function as "illustrations for a narrative which is elsewhere."[60] Each is introduced by a title which gives away the narrative point in advance (for example, shot 1: "Eliza Pleads with Tom to Run Away"). Some captions refer to actions that do not occur until well into the respective scene.

The reception implied by such procedures differs from the kinds of expectations raised by illusionist types of narrative (whether novelistic, dramatic, or cinematic), such as the pleasures of enigma and suspense contingent upon the reader/viewer's temporary belief that the story is taking place for the first time. Unlike later Hollywood adaptations, which by and large participate in an illusionist disavowal of intertextuality, *Uncle Tom's*