Early American film

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Early cinema as a challenge to film history and theory

Since the early 1970s the study of early American cinema (from its origins until about 1916) has transformed conceptions of film history and of the relation between theory and history. When this research began in the late 1970s film history was a neglected field. Previous film historians had only limited access to films of the primary materials from the early period, and usually operated under implicit teleological assumptions, chronicling film's gradual technical and aesthetic evolution. Cinema's beginnings were viewed as mere babblings, followed by precocious discoveries and a growing mastery of editing and storytelling. Scholars who began working in the 1970s questioned the teleological approach, benefiting from increased access to archival collections of films and other primary materials. These scholars abandoned the pejorative connotations of describing early film as 'primitive', maintaining that this era possessed a different approach to filmmaking than that of later cinema, so often considered the norm.

Under the dominance of apparatus theory (see Chapter Part 1, Chapter 9), which marked film studies in the decade of the 1970s, film theorists tended to view history with suspicion. From an amalgam of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Althusserian critique of ideology, a systematic model of the way cinema operated had been fashioned that owed little to historical research. Film history as it had been practised was viewed as an empirical gathering of facts that could hardly shed light on the deep structures of the way the cinematic apparatus constructed its spectator as subject—a process, theorists claimed, which embodied ideologies endemic to Western thought at least since Plato. How could chronicling changes in industrial practices reveal anything of deep significance?

New approaches to early cinema emerged, however, not so much in opposition to film theory as in dialogue with it, and from a desire to test some of its propositions. Apparatus theory constructed a model of cinema based on a number of assumptions about cinematic form and text-spectator relations: the centring of the film spectator as master of a visual field and decoder of narrative puzzles, and a viewing process in which the spectator remains immobile and loses all sense of surroundings, in thrall to an illusion of reality deriving from psychological regression (Baudry 1986). Investigating early cinema, historians could ask whether these assumptions functioned during cinema's first decades.
Early cinema as a different sort of cinema

Work on early cinema took on historical and theoretical tasks. As models of new research methods and increased rigour, Gordon Hendricks, George C. Pratt, and Jay Leyda provided inspiration for the systematic use of archives, drawing on contemporary documents and looking more thoroughly at archival films. The event which many scholars see as the origin of the rethinking of early cinema, the conference *Cinema 1900–1906* (Holmann 1982), held by the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) in Brighton in 1978, was devised by a group of forward-looking archivists (particularly Eileen Bowser, David Francis, and Paul Spehr) to pull early films out of the vault and have them examined by scholars. In many ways the renaissance of early-film studies was begun by film archivists (Cherchi Usai 1994). Around the same time seminal works, such as Robert C. Allen’s (1980) dissertation on the interrelation between vaudeville and early film, exemplified new carefully focused research projects.

Realizing that early cinema could offer new theoretical insights was primarily the inspiration of Noël Burch, whose interest in oppositional film practices led him to approach early films in a radical manner (Burch 1990). Burch located the significance of early film in its differences from the way films were made and understood within the dominant mode of filmmaking, which he termed the IMR, the institutional mode of representation, exemplified by Hollywood film, but international in scope. He described early cinema as an alternative approach, a PMR, or primitive mode of representation. The PMR consisted of a number of unfamiliar structures: a spatial approach combining frontality with non-centred composition and distant camera placement to create a ‘primitive externality’; a lack of narrative coherence, linearity, and closure; and an underdevelopment of character.

Burch’s view of the relation of this PMR to the later IMR was complex and ambivalent. At points, he related the different approaches of early films to the working-class background of early cinema’s audience and of at least some of its shownmen producers. The IMR, in contrast, introduced bourgeois values of coherence and subjectivity into this originally primitive and popular mode of entertainment. Burch raised what has remained a vexed issue in the history of early cinema: the role of class in its development and the class make-up of its audiences. However, he stressed that his interest in the PMR lay primarily in the light it could shed on the IMR, the dominant cinema as it was described by apparatus theory. As a contrast to IMR, PMR allowed Burch to denaturalize this dominant mode, revealing it as the product of historical development rather than the discovery of the natural language of cinema, a teleological film history had assumed. In this respect Burch launched a strong critique of linear teleological film history. But he also resisted any conception of early cinema as a ‘lost paradise’, claiming (particularly in his later work) that early cinema was less rich and complex than IMR. For Burch an assumption of progressive development remained, and he retained the term ‘primitive’ partly to indicate that in his view this early mode remained underdeveloped. Burch’s analysis of early film often does not stress its difference from the IMR as much as the way early film techniques anticipate many of IMR’s basic assumptions in a primitive fashion. He therefore saw early cinema as rehearsing a variety of elements essential to IMR and the apparatus theory of the cinema. Thus, the evolution of early cinema strove to overcome the primitive externality that marked PMR. The centred masterful spectator of apparatus theory appeared in the PMR in a number of precocious yet underdeveloped ways. This classical spectator acted as a goal which impelled the development of centred compositions and continuity editing strategies, but it also appeared in a number of semantically deviant features, as later practices appeared in ‘turtle’ versions. For instance, Burch claimed that the frequent theme in trick films of a body that explodes into fragments (as in Cecil Hepworth’s Explosion of a Motor Car, 1900) anticipated the later schema of fragmentation through editing. Following from the assumptions of the apparatus theory that the cinema in its barest apparatuses (the camera, the projector, and the movie theatre) reproduces the Western ideology of subordination, Burch found that early cinema already laid the seeds for these later structures. Although he added a historical dimension to his analysis, the determination of theoretical structures provided the ultimate significance of early cinema.

Burch’s approach to early cinema received severe criticism from David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (1983). The authors offered a critique of the linear and teleological assumptions of traditional film history inspired by Jean-Louis Comolli’s call for a matriarchal history of film, based on discontinuities and ruptures rather than a schema of evolution. While Comolli never
Burch’s description of the exteriority of early cinema, she related this to the dominant influence of vaudeville on early cinema both economically and as a model. Thompson claims primitive cinema transformed itself by taking up the task of storytelling, overcoming the exteriority of the vaudeville spectator and replacing it by a spectator immersed in the narrative space of the film.

My own work also defined the difference between early cinema and the later classical mode in terms of its relation to narrative. The work of my colleague and collaborator André Gaudreault, analysing the structures of early cinema through structuralist narrative theory, differentiated cinematic narrators (cinematic devices which narrated a story) and monstrosators who, instead of telling a story, displayed or showed things (Gaudreault 1988, 1990). For Gaudreault, these two different functions in cinema corresponded to the narrating function of an edited sequence and the monstrative display of the single shot. Early cinema, particularly in its very earliest period in which films most often consisted of a single shot (before 1904), related more to monstrosation than to narration. In my work, this contrast between formal devices of storytelling and display became less a matter of a contrast between the single shot and the edited sequence than a broadly based address to the spectator in early cinema, which I termed the cinema of attractions (Gunning 1990).

While Thompson had shown that early cinema differed from the classical model primarily through its lack of narrative dominance, there remained the question of how to describe what early cinema was, rather than what it wasn’t. Burch’s ideas about exteriority and Gaudreault’s concept of monstrosation were useful guides. Taking a cue from Sergei Eisenstein’s theatrical work in the 1920s, I felt that the essential gesture of early cinema (which could not be described simply as an incomplete mastery of the task of storytelling) lay in its aggressive address to the spectator’s attention. The spectator addressed by early cinema was very different from the spectator of classical cinema, absorbed in a coherent fictional world, attentive to character cues and immersed in following a story. The exteriority noted by Burch and Thompson corresponded to an outward address of the films themselves, a sort of hailing of the viewer, most obvious in the look at the camera and the bows and gestures directed at the audience so common in early cinema (as in such films as From Show Girl to Burlesque Queen, Biograph,
1903, or nearly any Méliès films, e.g. The Man with the Rubber Head, 1902) but taboo in most genres in classical cinema.

The exteriority of early cinema expresses the basis of the cinema of attractions: the act of display of something to a viewer. The attraction itself is aware of the viewer’s gaze, is constructed to attract it. Rather than narrative development based on active characters within detailed fictional environments, the cinema of attractions presented a series of curious or novel views to a spectator. These views could be non-fictional actualities (current events, human oddities, natural wonders), vaudeville acts (dances, acrobatics, gags), famous fragments (peak moments from famous plays, realizations of well-known paintings), or trick films (magical transformations and illusions). In contrast to the temporal development inherent in narrative, the cinema of attractions presented bursts of interest, such as the rapid transformations in a magic film, or the succession of sights in a scenic film (Gunning 1995a). In this cinema, characterization was unimportant and the spatial and temporal relations essential to narrative development were basically irrelevant.

Although there are differences and even continuations between these models of early cinema, they emphasize the difference between the early period of film history and the cinema which eventually became dominant. These models were primarily focused on formal aspects of early films. Further discoveries have shown historians broadened the focus from films to its contexts in which they were shown.

From early film to early cinema: exhibitors, audiences, and the public sphere

The new generation of historians of early film investigated not only the films themselves, but also the way they were shown and understood. This involved a shift to use the terms suggested by Christian Metz for early films to early cinema, the culture surrounding films, including their industry, their theatres, and the audiences. Of course, cinema culture and actual films are inseparable, the one implying and enlightening the other. Charles Musser’s (1991) work on Edwin S. Porter and other early American filmmakers emphasized looking simply at archival prints of early films, but essential, was not sufficient for a full understanding of early cinema. Not only editing, compositional techniques, and narrative strategies differed in early versus classical cinema had also transformed the ways films were presented and the means audiences used in understanding them.

Research into primary sources about the production of early film led Musser to stress the role of the exhibitor. In cinema’s first decade, particularly before 1903, the person showing the film took on important roles in what is now termed post-production, roles that would later be under the control of film producers. Since many films consisted of a single shot, the exhibitor assembled them into a programme. This could be done with great ingenuity, joining individual films together to stress similarity or contrast, interspersing other material, such as lantern slides or recitation, adding music or other sound effects, and frequently narrating the whole with a spoken commentary or lecture. The exhibitor therefore endowed each film with aesthetic effects and meanings, becoming the author of the film programme (Musser 1991; Musser and Pearson 1991). Buttressed by research into the importance in this era of the film lecturer (the performer who presented a commentary as the film was projected by Gunning...
Musser has pointed out that, even before the nickelodeon, a range of contexts existed in which films were shown, including not only the middle-class vaudeville palaces, but also fairground exhibitors, travelling tent shows, sponsored entertainments in local opera-houses or other public halls, educational exhibitions in schools and even churches (Musser, 1990). As Robert C. Allen (1980) found, vaudeville possessed a range of levels, moving from palaces to purveyors of 'cheap vaudeville', which also offered motion pictures at a price considerably below that of high-class vaudeville. While the audiences for motion pictures when they premièred as the latest novelties were undoubtedly middle class, patrons of all classes had seen films before 1905. But the nickelodeon, with its low admission price of 5 cents, specifically targeted new entertainment seekers, the working class, whose gains in the early twentieth century of a bit more leisure time and disposable income provided an opportunity for small-time entertainment entrepreneurs. But were the working class the main patrons of the nickelodeon?

Doubt was cast on this traditional thesis by a number of scholars. Russell Merritt (1976), Douglas Gomery (1982), and Robert C. Allen (1983) investigated Boston and New York City and decided that the location of nickelodeons in those cities actually avoided working-class neighbourhoods in favour of more central commercial districts, areas frequented by middle-class shoppers as well as working-class patrons. The patrons of these cheap theatres might well have been more frequently middle class than traditional histories had assumed. Further, as Merritt in particular emphasized, the nickelodeon operators wooed middle-class patrons, seeming uncomfortable with their identity as 'democracy's theatre', and anxious for middle-class respectability. But scholars have also rushed to revise these revisionists. Robert Sklar objected to Allen's and Merritt's thesis, maintaining the importance of working-class culture to the development of the nickelodeon and to our understanding of the role of film in working-class experience (Sklar 1990). Recently Ben Singer (1995b) has returned to the site of Allen's research, New York City, and found that nickelodeons were more prevalent in working-class neighbourhoods than Allen had indicated. Clearly this is an area of continuing debate, as recent exchanges between Allen and Singer indicate (Allen 1996; Singer 1996).

At issue, however, is more than the accurate description of the class make-up of New York neighbourhoods or the number of film theatres. The effect of class
antagonism and class definition on early American cinema remains a vital issue. The work of social historian Roy Rosenzweig showed that the relation between film theatres and working-class culture cannot simply be dismissed as a sentimental myth of traditional historians. It is not necessary to attribute early American cinema to the domain of a single class. Rather, the most valuable approach sees cinema as one of the areas in which turn-of-the-century America defined class relations, culture, and dominance. Preliminary work by J. A. Lindstrom (1996) on nickelodeons in Chicago centred less on attributing theatres to specific owners than on the way film theatres inspired new systems of zoning and regulation, as leisure time and entertainment became an aspect of municipal control and class struggle.

The history of film exhibition has become one of the liveliest areas of film scholarship. It occupies important sections of the carefully researched and comprehensive volumes in the History of American Cinema series by
and Eileen Bowser (1990) and is exemplified by the fine work of Douglas Gomery (1992), showing early cinema's vanguard position in framing questions in film history. Greer Waller's (1995) work on exhibition in a smaller city, Lexington, Kentucky, demonstrated the value in investigating exhibition contexts beyond the metropolis. Her work also investigates African-American exhibition and audience patterns, an area too often ignored in favor of immigrant populations. Waller places early cinema within pre-existing patterns of entertainment, including not only vaudeville, but the multi-purpose nickelodeon, the amusement park, and local fairs. Robert Allen (1996) has theorized that such viewing conditions in small-town and rural America were different from the urban nickelodeon in terms of class and surroundings.

The most broadly conceived attempt to theorize the basis of the nickelodeon came in Miriam Hansen's (1991) conception of the nickelodeon as a working-class public sphere. The concept of the public sphere was introduced by Jürgen Habermas's (1991) consideration of the rise of bourgeois democracy, in which forms of public discussion—coffee-houses, newspapers, literary discussion groups—formed an ideal of equitable exchange and reasonable debate. The public sphere provided Hansen with a historical model of the manner in which institutions and discourses created new forms of subjectivity quite different from the ahistorical model of subject formation offered by apparatus theory. However, for Habermas, the classical public sphere was almost immediately compromised by the rise of capitalism, which undermined the claim of a realm of free discussion divorced from economic power. Further, for Habermas, the modern commercialized technological forms of media have usurped the classical terms of debate and participation through techniques of manipulation and opinion management.

Hansen draws on critical reformulations of Habermas's concept. Emphasizing that the classical public sphere had always excluded certain groups (obviously the working class, but also women), critics such as Negt and Kluge (1993) developed the idea of oppositional or minority public spheres. The key issue here is less public discussion or overt political action than what Hansen describes as the 'experience' of the participants, 'that which mediates individual perception with social meaning, conscious with unconscious processes, loss of self with self reflexivity' (Hansen 1991: 12). Negt and Kluge claim the collective viewing of films, the way they could speak to viewers' experience, opened the possibility of cinema as an oppositional public sphere.

For Hansen this possibility became a historical tool for approaching not only the stylistic alterity of early films (as in her analysis of Porter's 1907 film The Teddy Bears), but also its specific modes of exhibition and relation to its audience. Hansen theorized that early cinema may have provided 'an alternative horizon of experience' for groups excluded from the classical public sphere, such as working-class and immigrant audiences and women. Following the research of social historian Kathy Peiss (1986), Hansen showed that the nickelodeon moved away from a homosocial, gender-specific world of male entertainment which excluded women, to a heterosocial world of commercial entertainment where women not only attended, but frequently made up the majority.

The importance of cinema as a new public sphere for women has become a key issue in early cinema research, with such scholars as Lauren Rabinovitz (1990), Janet Staiger (1995), Judith Mayne (1990), Constance Balides (1993), and Shelley Stamp Lindsey (1996) exploring the role of female spectators and at points testing the feminist understanding of apparatus theory which saw the cinema as embodying a male gaze. While the patriarchal and even sexist content of early cinema is unquestionable (see such films as Thomas Edison's 1901 Trapeze Disrobing Act, or Porter's 1903 film The Gay Shoe Clerk), women patrons attending this new medium could transform these male-oriented films in unexpected ways, as in Hansen's famous example of the women who flocked to early boxing films, breaching a former male bastion.

For Hansen, early cinema's difference from classical cinema reflects its role as an oppositional public sphere, allowing viewer relationships that would become suppressed in the classical paradigm. The diversity of display evident in the cinema of attractions did not entice viewers to lose their sense of being present in a public space. The direct address of the cinema of attractions encouraged a recognition of the viewer as part of an audience, rather than as an atomized consumer absorbed into the coherent fictional world of the classical paradigm. The lack of devices channelling spectator attention into following a narrative meant that the cinema of attractions allowed its viewer more imaginative freedom. Further, the less controlled modes of nickelodeon exhibition, with live
music, occasional use of a lecturer, egalitarian seating, variety format, and continuous admission, gave it 'a margin of participation and unpredictability' (Hansen 1991: 43) lacking in classical cinema. The alternative public sphere of the nickelodeon gave way to the domesticating of audience behaviour within the elaborate picture palaces which became the premier show-place for films in the middle to late 1910s. This change in exhibition, along with the adoption of the classical paradigm in the feature film, eliminated most elements of earlier film culture in favour of a universal address to a film spectator unspecific in class or gender.

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Periodization and transitional stages

However they might differ in dividing them up, scholars of early cinema agree that in a relatively short amount of time (two decades or so) so much change occurs that several distinct periods exist. This stands in stark contrast to the classical Hollywood cinema, which for Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson (1985) remained stable for more than four decades. The period of early cinema stretches from the origins of motion pictures in the late nineteenth century to around 1916. The year given by Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson for the consolidation of the classical Hollywood cinema is 1917, so this end-date marks early cinema as pre-classical. Around 1913 to 1915 the American film industry moved definitively to the production of longer feature films (from one to several hours) as the new basis of the industry, exiling one- or two-reel films to marginal theatres, or to 'added attractions' in a feature programme. The middle 1910s witnessed new institutions (feature films, the star system, the picture palace, new studios, and systems of distribution) essential to the classical Hollywood cinema.

Exhibition, production, and distribution underwent a series of reorganizations in the two decades of 'early cinema'. Originally films and projection machines were produced by the same company, and these were offered to vaudeville theatres as a complete package. By the turn of the century, both films and machines were sold publicly, and entrepreneurs acquired them and became exhibitors, marking the first differentiation within the industry. Around 1905 the next essential differentiation occurred as exchanges appeared: middlemen who purchased films from production companies and rented them to exhibitors. This increased the availability of films to an exhibitor and led to the nickelodeon explosion. The multiplication of cheap theatres showing new films on a daily basis created a demand for films the American producers could not initially fulfill, and the French company Pathé took up much of the slack. Around 1909 American producers attempted to seize control of the industry again, and submit the exchanges and exhibitors to a series of regulations. The organ for this was the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC), in which Edison and Biograph tried to exert control through their ownership of patents. Opposition to the MPPC arose with 'independent' producers, but even they soon adopted its methods of control over distribution through regulation of release dates and price schedules. By 1913 the power of the MPPC had waned, as well as the popularity of the one-reel film, replaced by longer feature films and the rise of new 'independent' companies, such as Universal, Famous Players in Famous Plays, and Mutual. Exhibition became dominated by large urban picture palaces, some of which were already owned by production studios, paving the way for the later vertical integration of the industry. While changes in film style
cannot be neatly tied to all these changes, the volatile nature of the industry explains why there is probably more transformation in the way films were made and conceived (both by producers and audiences) in this period than in the rest of film history.

Changes in film style can be divided into periods partly in terms of the opposition between the cinema of attractions and narrative form. Like all binary oppositions, the contrast between attractions and narrative can lead to unfortunate simplification. These aspects should never be seen as mutually exclusive, but need to be dialectically interrelated. While there are films (particularly in the first decade of cinema) which function purely as attractions with no narrative structure, many early films (especially after 1902) show an interaction between the two aspects. I claim that the cinema of attraction works as a ‘dominant’ up to about 1905, employing forms of direct address, punctual temporality, and surprise rather than narrative development.

The concept of the dominant comes from the literary analysis of the Russian Formalists and has been applied to film by Kristin Thompson (1988). It recognizes that, though various elements might coexist in a work, one element may organize the others. In the classical style, narrative structures act as the dominant, so that, even though attractions persist (such as special effects, the physical attraction of stars, spectacular sets, or musical numbers), they are subordinated to a narrative structure. Likewise, although certain fairy films of Méliès or Pathé, such as *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) or *The Red Spectre* (1907) have stories, they basically serve as showcases for the dominant attractions of camera tricks, costumes, elaborate sets, and stencil colouring. Certain early films, particularly from the years around 1902 to 1907 (such as Pathé's *A Policeman's Tour of the World* from 1906), appear as almost equal contests between the claims of attractions and narrative, veering from one logic to the other. One basic arc of stylistic transformation traces the increasing dominance of narrative structures, leading to structures that are clear harbingers of later classical forms. From 1906 more films were made with narrative structures as their dominant. By 1908, films became increasing narrativized and were provided with volitional characters. However, narrative is an expansive term, including many styles of storytelling. The difference that early films show when compared to films of the classical style should not be reduced simply to a contrast between narrative and non-narrative forms. Even the narrative films of this early period tell stories differently from the classical paradigm.

The non-classical narrative forms of early cinema make up a series of genres. Closest to the form of attractions are fragment narratives. This minimally narrative genre consisted of a single fragment or series of fragments, often famous moments from a play or famous events, to be completed by the viewer's understanding of previous (non-film) versions. Biograph's 1903 production of the famous temperance play *Ten Nights in a Barroom* consisted simply of five key scenes (or rather moments from the well-known play: *Death of Little Mary; Death of Slade; The Fatal Blow; Murder of Willie*; and *Vision of Mary*)—to someone unfamiliar with the play these brief films would be incomprehensible. Such fragments could be more or less incomplete. The versions of the Passion play produced both in the United States and France showed the range of possibilities, from early discontinuous and highly fragmented films to later, nearly narratively coherent, versions. In their lack of temporal development the fragment narratives are close to attractions.

Perhaps the earliest complete narrative form was the gag, the brief visual joke, often centred around physical pranks, which had a minimum essential narrative development: a set-up for the gag and a pay-off as the gag (usually some minor disaster) takes place, creating the fundamental narrative roles of prankster and victim. Early American companies produced scores of such films, and a few titles from American Mutoscope and Biograph in 1903 give some sense of their flavour: *How Buttons Got Even with the Butler; Pulling Off the Bed Clothes; You will Send Me to Bed, Eh?* Their disaster structure gives them a brief and punctual temporality—like an exploding cigar—as well as an often highly visual pay-off which makes them resemble attractions. In the period of multi-shot films, Edison...
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and Biograph reworked such gags into longer films, as a bad boy or other trickster carried out a series of practical jokes (The Truants, Biograph, 1907; The Terrible Kids, Edison, 1906). This form of concatenation led to another simple narrative form, which I have called 'linked vignettes', consisting of a series of brief gags linked by a common character (Gunning 1994b).

As Burch and others have pointed out, the first extended self-contained narrative form in film was the chase. Burch (1990) saw the linearity of the chase as an anticipation of later classical narratives. In its earliest examples (The Escaped Lunatic, 1903; Personal, 1904, both Biograph) the chase created a continuous fictional space, rendered coherent by its methodical following of a single physical action. While chases often included attractions (such as dogs leaping fences and swimming streams, or ladies revealing legs as they slid down a hill), a single-minded focus on a pursuit through several shots created a new narrative dominance. However, unlike later classical films, the chase remained dependent entirely on physical action for its narrative structure. Figures running through various locales created the continuous geography of the film. The initiation of a pursuit provided the inciting incident of the film and capture marked its completion. This picks out a decidedly non-classical aspect of early film narrative, its lack of characterization or motivation behind action.

Around 1906 a number of films attempted stories with a greater degree of character and less physical action (such as Edison’s The Miller’s Daughter, 1905, or Fireside Reminiscences, 1908). Contemporary comments leave no doubt that many character-based films of this era were obscure to their contemporaneous audiences. Basic codes for conveying thoughts and emotions had not yet been devised by filmmakers, nor were they understood by audiences. Perhaps the greatest transformation of early film style came with the adoption of new narrative codes which conveyed character motives and organized storytelling devices. To some extent, this shift in narrative style parallels the attempts to regulate and rationalize the film industry which culminated in the formation of the MPPC in 1908 (Gunning 1991a). This large-scale transformation of American filmmaking has frequently been referred to as the ‘transitional’ period, marking its mediation between the radically different earlier cinema and the establishment of the classical paradigm. Narrative in the transitional period obeyed new rules: interior coherence (lack of reliance on audience foreknow-

ledge or other extra-filmic aids); a strong narrative closure; and, especially, an emphasis on characterization, frequently building stories around changes in character or key decisions whose motivations are indicated within the film. Many of the Griffith one-reel dramas produced for the Biograph company display these qualities (such as The Drunkard’s Reformation, 1909), as do the films produced by the Vitagraph Company (such as An Official Appointment, 1912, so well analysed by Ben Brewster (1991a)). This form differs sharply from the earlier forms based primarily in physical action, although many films united the two forms (including Griffith’s Biograph melodramas, such as The Lonedale Operator, 1911).

However, this transitional period remained vague and ambivalent, as the term suggests. While new narrative structures were evident in many films (particularly dramas from the Vitagraph, Biograph, and Edison studios), and were praised by trade journals devoted to the film industry (which began to appear around this time), variation occurs. Research by both Ben Singer (1993) and Charles Keil (1995) has stressed that the most advanced films by Griffith are not typical of the period. Films even as late as 1913 sometimes show uncertainty in conveying character psychology or even a coherent plot. Singer (1993) cites an episode from the Thanhouser Company’s 1913 serial Zudora as an example of pure incoherence.

While actual achievements varied from studio to studio (or film to film), organizing films around clear stories and motivated, volitional characters was, in the less, an acknowledged value in this period. Of course, action genres like westerns and other sensational films still showed the importance of non-narrative attractions, but these were largely absorbed into character-driven plots. At the same time, while the narrative integration of the transitional period certainly looked forward to the later classical style, it maintained a unique style. Ben Brewster (1991b) and Charles Keil (1995) have stressed that the one-reel film standard of this period demanded narrative compression and encouraged patterns of recurrence. While these aspects are not contradictory to the classical style, they seem more endemic to short films than to features. Brewster (1991b) has pointed out that early features, such as the scandalous Traffic in Souls from 1912, often reflected the patterns of individual reels in their structure (partly due to the fact that many theatres owned only one projector, necessitating a pause between reels). Indeed, one of the earliest long films
Comics, the serial (appearing around 1912–13 with subjects What Happened to Mary), literally spun out a narrative reel by reel, as single-reel instalments were unveiled every week. The serial, with its strong emphasis on thrilling attractions, its often rather incoherent plot, and its compromise between the single reel and the feature structure, may, as Singer (1993) claims, stand as an emblem of the often contradictory impulses of the transitional period.

The transitional period corresponds to an attempt to bring order and regularity to film production and distribution (often through legally dubious practices, as the US courts decided when they ruled against the UDC in an antitrust action in 1914), how does this new centrally integrated film structure relate to changes in exhibition and audience? A number of scholars, myself included (Gunning 1990), see the cinema of romance integration as an element in a concerted attempt to attract a middle-class audience and gain respectability for the cinema. Production companies adapted literary classics, while filmmakers devised diegetic codes to tell stories of the type familiar from middle-class forms like the short-story magazine, apparently with such audiences in view.

However, this view of the bourgeoisification of cinema during the transitional period can be exaggerated, particularly if one relies on trade journals, whose desire for the imprimatur of respectability led them to exaggerate the number of middle-class patrons attending movies or the comfort and order of theatres. Careful reading of trade journals and industry publicity reveals a strong desire to retain working-class patrons, while the emphasis on signs of middle-class approval partly served to allay the attacks of reformers suspicious of the new form, rather than indicated real conditions. The only existing survey of film audiences indicates that in New York City the working class still made up nearly three-quarters of the audience in 1910, while a category called 'clerical', referring most likely to office workers (i.e. a newly emerging lower middle class), constituted most of the other quarter (Davis 1911; Singer 1996). However, small-town audiences may have had a different composition, as Allen (1996) stresses.

William Uricchio and Roberta Pearson's (1993) investigation of Vitagraph's 'quality films'—adaptations from Dante or Shakespeare (Francesca di Rimini; Julius Caesar, both 1908), or films on cultural figures such as Napoleon or Moses (Napoleon, the Man of Destiny, 1909; The Life of Moses, 1910)—found that while such films aimed at attracting an audience who might scorn typical nickelodeon fare, they were also carefully designed to be accessible to the working-class audience most exhibitors relied upon. This 'dual address' seems typical of this period and should alert us to the dangers of seeing the bourgeoisification of the cinema.
at the end of early cinema as an established fact without complexity or resistance. The transitional period appears to be less a gradual fade into the classical paradigm than a period of ambivalence and contestation.

Early cinema and modernity

The study of early cinema has consistently expanded its area of investigation. Research into the exhibition of early films extended into a consideration of audiences and the role the nickelodeon played in American society. Uricchio and Pearson (1993) found that determining what audience producers aimed for, or how widely films were comprehensible to different classes, called for an investigation of the intertextual framework in which images of Napoleon or scenes from Shakespeare circulated outside cinema, from school textbooks to advertising cards.

Perhaps the most far-reaching (and possibly most controversial) extension of the study of early cinema relates techniques of early film, particularly the cinema of attractions, to large-scale transformations of daily experience in the era of urbanization and modernization. This approach draws inspiration from Walter Benjamin (1969) and Siegfried Kracauer (1995) as well as Miriam Hansen’s (1987, 1991b, 1993, 1995) discussion of these authors’ writings on the cinema. Benjamin, writing in the 1930s, related the shock of the rapidly changing experience of the urban environment and new technology to cinematic techniques, such as rapid montage, slow or fast motion, and huge close-ups. Kracauer, writing in the later 1920s, found that the visual stimulus of the picture palace captured the mechanization and surface character of the modern life as the pursuit of distraction. In my writings (Gunning 1994a, c, 1995b), I have claimed that Benjamin’s and Kracauer’s analyses could be used to describe the cinema of attractions with its aggressive viewer-confronting address and discontinuous structures.

Early films dealing with the railroad provide a powerful intersection of the aggressive address of the cinema of attractions and the technological transformations of modern life. The many early films taken from trains of the passing landscape (e.g. Biograph’s Into the Heart of the Catskills, 1906) and the Hales Tours exhibition of films in theatres designed to imitate railroad cars (including sound effects and ticket takers) reveal early cinema’s affinity with the railroad. Lynne Kirby’s (1996) work on this subject, as well as works by Mary Ann Doane (1985) and myself (Gunning 1994a, 1995) drew on the work of a contemporary Benjaminian Wolfgang Schivelbusch, whose book The Railway Journey (1977) claimed that the experience of railway travel, with its speed and potential danger, was emblematic of modern perception. In films shot from moving trains Kirby found a fascination with what Schivelbusch calls ‘panoramic perception’, a view of the world in motion through a window or other framing device. The shocklike structure of the abrupt transitions and often aggressive imagery of the cinema of attractions also reflected for Kirby the sense of hysteria which the fear of the railway accident brought to modern consciousness. Eileen Bowser (1995), Yuli Tavger (1994), and Gunning (1991b) have made a similar case for the telephone in early cinema, knitting together distant spaces and creating new dramatic situations.

Following Walter Benjamin’s example, writers on early cinema have isolated a number of emblematic instances of modernity besides the railroad and the telephone: the World Expositions, the department store, the city streets, the diorama and panorama, urban billboards. Anne Friedberg (1993) has related a number of these to the ‘mobilized virtual gaze’, the heightened involvement of a viewer in a visual illusion combined with motion which she sees as essential not only to the pre-history of cinema (in devices like the diorama and panorama), but also to the subjectivity of modernity. My writings (Gunning 1994a, 1995b, 1995) emphasized that such relations are embedded in the way early films embraced modern technology as new environments (such as the World Expositions or the amusement park) as subjects for films (Porter’s Candy Island at Night, 1905; Biograph’s Panorama St Louis Exposition, 1904). Ben Singer (1995b) has detailed how the most aggressive aspects of the cinema of attractions reflected both the experience of urban life with its threats and danger, and its portrayal in the sensationalist press. Lauren Rabinowitz’s (1994) research on Chicago amusement parks sees these mechanized forms of amusement as another example of accelerated modern experience with a strong relation to early cinema, focusing as well on the way amusement parks shed light on female subjectivity, an issue central to many investigations of modernity, including the work of Hansen (1991a), Friedberg (1993), Brown (1993), and Singer’s (1995a) work on the serial queen, the powerful woman protagonist of the films of the
The physiology of perception of the nineteenth century (such as those of Helmholtz and Fechner), claiming that these new models of perception switched focus from the accurate reflection of exterior phenomena to the physiology of the senses. This view found support in the perceptual illusions that optical devices, such as the phenakistoscope and the stereoscope (which are often seen as precursors to the cinema), make visible, but which do not actually exist other than in the observer’s sensorium. Crary claims that the breakdown of representation in painting associated with modernism has its roots in this earlier technological and philosophical modernization of vision. Closer to Foucault than to apparatus theory, Crary sees subject formation as a historical process inscribed in techniques and institutions specific to different periods. He locates a major shift in the conception of visibility in the modern period. Although Crary discusses early cinema only in passing, his insights provide a basis for the historicization of perception and visual experience.

What has been termed the ‘modernity thesis’ has recently been subjected to serious criticism, particularly by David Bordwell (1996a, b). As a cognitivist, Bordwell finds a ‘history’ of vision, perception, or experience a dubious concept, vague at best and absurd at its most extreme. ‘It is highly unlikely that visual perception has changed over recorded human history,’ he claims (1996: 23). Bordwell finds that the ultimate failure of the modernity thesis lies in its dubious attempt to tie stylistic aspects of early cinema to modern experience. Developing an objection also raised by Charles Keil (1995), Bordwell asks how one can relate the fragmentary, aggressive form of the cinema of attractions to abrasive modern experience in the street or to new modes of transportation, since these aspects of modernity continued, or even increased during the transitional period, which subordinated the more aggressive aspects of attractions to the coherence of narrative integration.

In many respects such criticism is well taken, but it may reflect irreconcilable positions about the nature of history and experience. Bordwell is aware that no theorist of modernity could responsibly claim a transformation in the perceptual hard wiring of human beings, so some of his objections seem to be based on a disingenuous reductio ad absurdum. However, there is no question that terms such as ‘experience’ or even the use of the word ‘perception’ remain in need of greater precision and discussion. Crary (1990: 6) states: ‘Whether perception or vision actually change is in-
relevant, for they have no autonomous history. What changes are the plural forces and rules composing the field in which perception occurs.' Thus what needs to be made more precise are the social mediations of experience, observable not only in works of art, but in the scientific and political discourse of the period.

Bordwell's contention that the experience of modernity remains irrelevant to the history of film style is more complex. There is no question that the relations drawn between the structures of modernity and those of early film frequently lack specificity and remain on the level of vague analogies. However, in tying the pace and abruptness of early films to modern experience, contemporary critics are not so much inventing an analogy as rediscovering one. Such connections were frequently made by the first commentators on the cinema, who recognized in the new media an experience related to modern city life. As a fact of discourse this is an important element of the history of film reception, one worth careful research and consideration. Bordwell's and Keil's claim that the modernity thesis cannot explain stylistic change is probably correct, but seems to defeat a claim that no scholar of early cinema ever made. The relations between modernity and early film need not be limited to the cinema of attractions. The thrill melodramas of the transitional period, such as Griffith's last-minute rescues in such films as The Lonely Villa, 1909, and The Lonedale Operator, 1911 (with their use of modern technology such as the telephone, the railway, and the telegraph to convey a new sense of urgency and danger), are prime examples of early film's relation to modernity. Reference to the broader contexts of modernity cannot, and does not desire to, explain everything. Changes in film style derive from many immanent causes: changes in technology, industry realignment, cycles of innovation and canonization, as well as transformations in film's relation to society—relations, I should add, that are fully mediated and traceable in contemporary discourse, and not a matter of a mystical reflection of a Zeitgeist.

Topics for further research

While the history of early cinema in the last two decades has seen a sudden growth that almost recalls the nickelodeon explosion, with many more scholars making important contributions than can be included in this summary, there are still many issues to explore. Many of these, such as the relation between social class and the nickelodeon, or the validity of the relation of early cinema to modernity, have already been discussed. I want briefly to add some others. Since this chapter treats early American cinema, I have not dealt with scholarship on early cinema in other countries. While the United States has served as a key area of investigation, it is hard to conceive of early cinema history without the work done on early French cinema by a large number of scholars in France as well as the United States, and increasingly in Italy, Germany, Britain, Denmark, Sweden, and Russia, as well as work on film production and exhibition outside Europe and the United States. The period of early cinema marks a time when films circulated freely across borders and in which the concept of a national cinema was largely unarticulated. Richard Abel's recent research on the effect of the French production company Pathé on American cinema shows that to examine early American cinema within a narrowly national context leads to distortion. Since Pathé films were the most widely shown and most successful films exhibited in the United States at the beginning of the transitional period (1906–9), Abel's claim that they had a definitive effect on the development of American film seems unquestionable. Pathé's early experiments in parallel editing certainly influenced Griffith's development of this technique at Biograph, as the companion of Pathé's Physician of the Castle (1908) and Griffith's The Lonely Villa (1909) undertaken by both myself (Gunning 1991b) and Barry Salt (1985). In the transitional period the American film industry tried to define and produce an 'American film' in opposition to Europe, a goal that matched the MPCC's attempt to marginalize European producers. The construction of national cinema cultures began in early cinema and calls for more research.

An area of relative neglect in the study of the early cinema is non-fiction filmmaking. While this has gained more attention from European scholars such as Stephen Bottomore (1988) and the archivists at the Nederlands Filmmuseum (Hertogs and De Keersmaeker 1994), it remains in need of more research and theorization from a US perspective. Until about 1903 the bulk of American production was non-fiction films, but these have not received the investigation that reflects their importance in this period.

The transitional period needs more research. Because of its limited focus my work on Griffith at Biograph during this period, while setting up issues of broad concern, cannot serve as an account of these
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