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EARLY CINEMA

FROM FACTORY GATE TO DREAM FACTORY

SIMON POPPLE & JOE KEMBER
was a cinema for which the spectator, bombarded by a sequence of images onscreen, noisily participated in the production of meaning.

Given the derivation of the term, it is not surprising that the attractionist model has been most convincing when applied to early film shows at sites such as variety theatres and fairgrounds. At these sites, which had traditionally depended on an intriguing blend of exhibitionism, shock, and audience interaction, the film show was, after all, just another attraction. However, in the years since its initial formulation, the cinema of attractions has often served as a rationale for the great volume of recent micro-historical work. The fragmented and often inconsistent nature of such work is easily justified by reference to a model of film exhibition that already celebrates fragmentation and inconsistency. For students, this model usefully suggests that a simple logic underlies seemingly disparate strands of research concerning early cinema.

Conclusion

A number of approaches have been applied to the study of early cinema, all of which have passionate advocates and offer students a coherent reading of an inherently complex subject. As students you will need to be aware of these approaches and will undoubtedly adopt your own perspectives, drawing upon aspects of these traditions. In order to fully appreciate the subtle variations in emphasis and approach, you will need to read as widely as possible across historical and academic boundaries and be prepared to experiment with aspects of often disparate opinion.

3 THE 'USES' OF CINEMA

When we think of early cinema we tend to regard it primarily as a new mass entertainment form, another stage in the development of an increasingly pan-global visual culture. Our responses and interrogative inclinations are to attempt to understand it in isolation and to privilege our understanding of its form, technologies and aesthetic development. What we miss in our initial enthusiasm for this new media are the contexts and conventions which bind it to a broader set of mass media cultures. Our own readings of the film text, for example, are far removed from the lives and responses of cinema’s initial consumers and their real life experiences (see Craey 2000).

As a consequence our contemporary ideological orientations tend to predominate, and we are in danger of becoming disengaged from cinema’s original contexts and constituencies. We cannot, obviously, re-create or even successfully re-imagine these conditions fully, but we can study and hypothesise with relative certainty many facets of the early period of cinema. One such area of study resides in our notion of the initial ‘uses’ of the medium.

The consideration of the uses of the cinematic form in this period opens up a wide-ranging and extremely rich field of study. It encourages us as historians to raise a series of questions about the nature and range of those contexts and to answer a common set of questions about the ownership, regulation, content and consumption of cinema. As John
Tagg has suggested in relation to the photographic image, we need to be constantly aware of questions concerning why images are made, who made them and who consumed them, and what were the conditions under which they were made (1988: 119).

The early cinema, in its multiple guises, was used to perform a number of roles that related directly to diverse social, political, cultural and economic circumstances. Whilst it is dangerous to generalise, as national and even regional conditions varied enormously, we can examine the general uses of the medium as a means of understanding its survival and development. Contemporary reactions to its uses are often equally revealing, as we will now show. The question of regulation, for example, offers a strong insight into specific notions of political, religious and moral orthodoxy, and the series of relationships that developed between cinema and state.

*Cinema, state, propaganda and censorship: an ordered society?*

The arrival of cinema represented a new technological means of communication with the potential to reach a truly mass audience. Film became increasingly easy to manufacture and disseminate, and seemed destined to draw a swift series of responses from the state as it was increasingly deployed to represent difficult and contentious material. In Britain, however, the first example of direct government intervention in the industry had to wait until 1909. The Cinematograph Act was introduced to protect the safety of cinemagoers at the various venues in which films were exhibited (Harding & Popple 1996: 46–8).

One of the defining moments in the early history of the cinema had been the Paris Charity Bazaar Fire (4 May 1897) in which 121 people perished. The fire was started by an ether lamp at a Cinematograph demonstration and achieved international notoriety because many of those who perished were society figures. The fact that fires and explosions were a common feature of existing magic lantern and theatrical performances that used the same lighting technologies seemed of little importance. Projectionists needed to combine a highly combustible mixture of either oxygen and hydrogen or oxygen and domestic gas to burn in their lime-light lamps to illuminate their shows. These elements were combined from pressurised cylinders in a mixing bag and accidents were a regular occurrence. Fatalities and mutilations were commonplace, exacerbated by the highly flammable nature of nitrate-based early film stock.

The 1909 act charged local councils with the responsibility of licensing all premises for exhibition of films including itinerant and non-theatrical venues. Whilst the act was not primarily used to restrict what audiences actually observed on screen, it was also employed by local authorities as a device to prevent exhibitions. Existing laws such as Lord Campbell’s Obscene Publications Act of 1857, aimed at photographic obscenity, could be invoked, yet no formal obscenity act was legislated against the cinema in Britain. The industry – as it later did in the US – opted for a voluntary trade system of self-regulation. The British Board of Film Censors emerged in November 1912 and commenced a programme of classification of films in 1913 that forms the basis of the system still in operation today. Film-makers were under no legal compunction to submit their films for classification, but to refuse could mean exclusion from exhibition in certain areas by powers vested in local councils. This self-regulation, which later became codified, would seem to suggest that cinema was considered an unimportant phenomenon and not worthy of serious state regulatory control. This could not be further from the truth, as many of its uses in this early period unleashed a wave of moral and religious panics that blamed the cinema for growing social problems as diverse as juvenile delinquency, prostitution and atheism. Many commentators began to make direct connections between what was seen on the cinema screen and trends in social behaviour. These debates centred around issues of social conformity, crime, political unrest and broader public morality. The very venues associated with the exhibition of cinema were often characterised as being unsanitary and encouraging immorality. Many of these attacks were class-based, and levelled at venues, particularly the music hall and the transient penny gaff and fairground shows, which were associated with working-class dissolution, drinking, sedition and prostitution. In a survey carried out by the National Council of Public Morals in 1917 Dr
Marie Stopes, pioneer of women's birth control, conducted a number of interviews with children concerning the perceived dangers of cinema.

*Dr Marie Stopes:* Have you seen any picture which you thought at the time was bad to see?

*School Child:* No, but I saw a picture once which I thought was vulgar. It was called ——.

*M.S.*: Supposing you went into a picture house and you met a fairy at the door who told you you could see any picture you like, what kind would you like to see?

*S.C.*: I should like to see a picture about a circus.

*M.S.*: What sort of picture would you like best?

*S.C.*: I should like a good drama, but not a love drama. A nice drama like *Little Miss Nobody* which I thought was very nice.

*M.S.*: Why don't you like love dramas?

*S.C.*: There is too much fooling around in them, and there is always hatred between two men and two women.

*M.S.*: You don't like to see two men hating each other?

*S.C.*: Well, it is a lot of silliness. I do not think it would happen in real life.

*M.S.*: You never got any disease at the cinema?

*S.C.*: No, but once I got scarlet fever, but not in a cinema.

*M.S.*: Did you ever get anything?

*S.C.*: No, I did not catch my disease there.

However, social commentators also advocated the use of cinema as a means of social instruction. The cinema thus operated between these twin poles of moral condemnation and moral improvement. Much of the rich evidence of these debates lies in the contemporary press, and even a cursory survey provides us with a rich commentary concerning the effects of films on their spectators. The question of media effects remains as contentious today as it has always been, and evidence of this particular debate is well represented by the press. These following two extracts from *The Times* in 1913 and 1914 illustrate a common set of perceptions:

**Judge on Picture Shows**

At the London Session yesterday Mr. Wallace, dealing with the case of a boy who pleaded guilty to burglary, said he believed that cinematograph shows were responsible for the downfall of many young people. Many of the lads who came before him owed their position to having been influenced by pictures of burglaries and thefts at such shows ... These shows, as far as young boys were concerned, were a grave danger to the community. (Anon. 1913a)

**The Cinema and the Young**

A number of young lads were before the Sutton Coldfield magistrates yesterday charged with a series of thefts, and the assertion was made that their appearance in the dock was largely due to the harmful influence of certain picture theatres. In several cases the lads were bound over not to enter a picture theatre for 12 months. The Chairman said the town had been made notorious as a den of young thieves and shopkeepers had been terrorised. A petition, signed by clergy and ministers of religion and by the local branch of the Women's Temperance Association, was presented, suggesting the closer supervision of picture theatres. They urged that no picture should be allowed to be shown which represented violence and wrongdoing, and objected to certain posters. (Anon. 1914)

Both reports actively promote the notion that there is a direct relationship between the cinema and criminal activity in the minds of the judiciary and certain sections of British society. But whilst they demonstrate these perceptions within a highly stratified social system, they should not be read as direct evidence of the effects of cinema. As a historical source they can be read as evidence of a particular social reaction to the cinema and the imposition of certain moral, social, and by extension, political standards. The second extract explicitly identifies the groups involved in this campaign as judicial, religious and property-owning. We can further read these texts as examples of a class-based response to cinema, one
which clearly identifies young, working-class males as susceptible to temptation. Other targets, particularly women and children, are also commonly identified in similar texts. Such reports have a tendency to generalise about cinema, and largely ignore specific films, referring to generic types as problematic. It is, however, often possible to relate the dates of specific offences to listings in the press in order to determine which films were being screened in a particular area, and which might have formed the basis of the case.

Socially protective groups, such as the Church, often attempted to counter the perceived corrupting influences of cinema by using it as a form of proselytisation for their own causes and applying it to moral campaigns such as the temperance movement. Unlike the Catholic Church, which, for a while, banned priests from attending picture houses, the Salvation Army was one of the earliest advocates of the beneficial role of the cinema, establishing its own Cinematograph Department in 1897. In this context the cinema could not only present wholesome and religious subjects to an audience, but on a more practical level kept them out of temptation's way in the public house or music hall. As leisure time increased, so did the potential for antisocial behaviour, and many religious organisations overcame their opposition to the Sunday opening of cinemas, considering it a lesser evil than having the working classes on the streets once they had left church. As one Salvation Army officer commented in 1906:

As to laughter and merriment, God meant His people to be happy, and, just as the devil has no right to all the best music – let alone the 'catchy' tunes – no more has he any right to a monopoly of pictures grave and gay, or modern improvements on the magic lantern of our youth, which used to show us highly coloured views. (Anon. 1906)

In the same way that films could be used to advance social and moral agendas, they could also provide commentary on contentious political issues such as votes for women. The women's suffrage movement was particularly active in this period and became the subject of several films before World War One. Probably the earliest of these suffrage films was the Bamforth/Riley Brothers film Women's Rights, produced c. 1899. The film depicts two women having their skirts nailed to a fence whilst discussing women's rights. Later series of films included Lady Barber (1905), Sweet Suffragette (1906), She Would Be A Suffragette (1908), A Suffragette in spite of Himself (1912) and Selina's Flight for Freedom (1914). Perhaps the most interesting of these films is Clarendon's film of 1913, Milling The Militants.

The film follows the fortunes of a militant Suffragette and her daydreaming chauvinistic husband. Its depiction of the suffrage movement is deeply stereotyped, the women presented as violent and distinctly unfeminine. In a series of dream sequences the women are punished for daring to demand the vote by being made to wear male clothes, dig the road, smoke pipes and undergo the ordeal of the ducking stool. Yet, as the synopsis from the Kine Weekly suggests and the film evidences, it is also a social comedy in which the women have the last laugh:

The spouse of a suffragette has a sad experience after dreaming dreams of suppressing his better half – Brown is blessed with a large wife and a small family, whom he is left to look after while his better half goes forth armed with a hammer to smash, burn and plunder. Brown falls asleep and dreams that he is Prime Minister and making laws to suppress the militants. Brown is gloating over a recalcitrant female when he is awakened, and his wife is upsetting a pail of water over him, at the same time scolding him for sleeping and neglecting his duties. His courage fails him, and the late 'Prime minister' begs for mercy on his knees. (in Harding & Popple 1996: 44)

Such synopses are often the only sources available for films that are either lost or in inaccessible archives, and can offer us limited scope for interpretation. This is a particular problem associated with early cinema as the vast majority of films produced during this period have not survived and were not systematically collected until the international film archive movement got into its stride in the 1930s. Those films preserved in archives
are often incomplete or exist in different versions which can be restored, or at least imagined, using the synopses or reviews of early films that can be found in the specialist trade press of the time. However, these useful descriptions only developed fully after the turn of the century, and earlier descriptions must be traced from production and distribution catalogues, or from local newspaper reviews. It is often impossible to uncover more than a title and a brief description of a film, so our interpretation of this information requires careful consideration.

In the case of Milling the Militants we are able to combine both film and a contemporary account in order to suggest a reading of social attitudes towards female emancipation and to demonstrate the use of cinema as a form of social commentary. We can also gauge contrary reactions by consulting a wide range of periodicals that often demonstrated very specific social and political agendas of their own. The more sources we are able to bring to bear upon a film or group of films, the more convincing and cohesive our interpretation. This also brings into sharp focus the narrative sources of particular films, such as newspapers, satirical representations, and theatrical sketches, which were absorbed into films and often informed the response of increasingly sophisticated and diverse audiences. The social and gender construction of an audience was often a crucial factor in relation to the success of a particular film or performance, and provides a fascinating area of study for the early film scholar.

Science and education

Whilst cinema was often contentiously used as a means of moral and social education, it was increasingly adapted to the fields of scientific research and formal education. As a technological recording device, with the capacity to arrest or accelerate time, cinematography had an immediate impact in the field of scientific research. For example, work conducted by Dr Lucien Bull into high-speed cinematography enabled widespread research into the analysis of insect flight and modern ballistics technology. Much of the potential of cinematography had been demonstrated in the photographic experimentation of researchers such as Eadweard Muybridge, Etienne-

Jules Marey and Georges Demeny (see Braun 1992). These experimenters were engaged in the study of human and animal locomotion and had developed sequential, or chronophotographic, cameras in the 1880s which, like the cine-camera, captured continuous sequences of images which could be subsequently animated. Their physiological studies were dramatically extended by the advent of cinematography, and research extended through the application of slow motion and time-lapse films.

Writing in December 1896, V. E. Johnson outlined a number of scientific applications, which included the identification of criminals, the study of machinery, the recording of the pathologies of disease, the study of meteorology, fluid dynamics, surgery and the flight of birds (Johnson 1896). There were many others who quickly realised the potential of scientific cinematography, and one of the most perceptive was the Pole, Bolesław Matuszewski, a Lumière cameraman and fierce advocate for cinema. In 1898 he published the world’s first film manifesto, Une Nouvelle Source de L’Histoire, which suggested the establishment of an archive of historical film. In his subsequent publication La Photographie Animée, he offered a number of suggestions for the use of cinema in the service of science and education. Indeed he had pioneered the filming of surgery in Warsaw that same year. Surgical films were considered an important development because they offered the potential for formal training, as this early account from 1899 indicates:

The Cinematograph in Surgery

The animated photographs which for some time have been the delight of thousands of sightseers and holiday-makers in all parts of the civilised world have now appeared in new and, it would seem, a very useful role. A celebrated French surgeon, M. Doyen, has conceived the idea of picturing in this manner the various phases of an operation form the first cut of the knife to the final adjustment of the bandages, each detail of the work being as excellently shown that a mistake could hardly be made by a receptive observer. At a recent demonstration at the University of Kiel, before a select company of doctors and other scientific men,
a complete series of these surgical films were thrown on a screen, and excited great enthusiasm among those present. (Anon. 1899)

The most direct inference is that these films could subsequently be employed to train surgeons, and the role of cinema as educator was commonly advocated. Indeed its power to widen the franchise for education was keenly appreciated. In an article entitled The Future of the Cinematograph, written in 1899, Mrs J. E. Whitby outlined this democratic notion:

To students unable to attend the lectures of the cleverest and ablest professors, as well as those whom fate compels to reside at some distance from the centres of education, the cinematograph in its new function will come as an incalculable boon; for it will be possible by its aid to repeat the illustrative action of the greatest authority on any given subject, and by means of an accompanying lecture to repeat the lesson not only as many times as may be required, but in as many different places. This will enable the poor as well as the rich, the country as well as the town mouse, to enjoy the same high advantages. (Whitby 1900)

Many other educational schemes were mooted including the training of omnibus drivers (Anon. 1913b), and in 1913 the London County Council began a series of experimental film screenings of educational films for children largely depicting living and working conditions in other countries (Anon. 1913c).

The commercial cinema developed in Britain simultaneously with another technological phenomenon, the Röntgen or X-ray, in January 1896. For a brief period both vied with each other as a form of popular entertainment on the music hall stage and fairground booth. Whilst the cinema allowed people to see themselves in motion, the X-ray seemed to allow even more: it allowed them to look inside their own bodies. The novelty of the X-ray as a form of entertainment soon receded and its function as a medical and scientific tool rapidly outstripped its attraction as a scientific novelty. It was subsequently employed in combination with the cine-camera to produce X-ray films which served a serious scientific purpose, but also attracted popular attention (see Crangle 1998). Thus the cinema began a process of popularising science and re-presenting it as education and entertainment.

Various specialist companies began manufacturing popular science titles, employing the latest technologies, such as time-lapse and early colour processes. One in particular, The Charles Urban Trading Company, pioneered the introduction of scientific films with the popular Unseen World Series in 1903. The advertising material promised to reveal 'nature's closest secrets'. These popular science and nature films developed rapidly in the 1900s with the work of film-makers such as Cherry Kearton, whose films of exploration, mountaineering and big game hunting included Theodore Roosevelt's African expedition of 1908. But perhaps more than any other film of this type, Herbert Ponting's films of the ill-fated Scott Antarctic expedition of 1911 produced some of the most stunning and alien images the British public had seen.

**Worlds within worlds: news and globalisation**

Travel and exploration films were symptomatic of the role cinema was playing in diminishing the geographic, scientific and cultural boundaries of the late Victorian and Edwardian world. Cinema was central to the process of globalisation, of making the world a smaller place. The mass of the world's industrial populations had only recently been taken for granted the process of self-representation that cheap photography had facilitated. The hierarchical characteristics of visual representation, particularly those predicated on class, gender and ethnicity were transferred from the conventions of photographic practice into cinematographic forms, just as pre-photographic traditions had been assimilated into photographic practice. Yet somehow the sheer scale and nature of consumption altered their potential to engage a new mass audience. The photograph was primarily consumed by the individual within a domestic context; cinema presaged mass, public representation.
As we have already shown, the genre of ‘factory gate’ films relied on the delight of seeing oneself not only represented but moving on screen, and not only situated the spectator within another space but also, by implication, within the other worlds increasingly represented in that particular space: on the cinema screen. The stasis of the photographic carte and the photograph album was replaced by the living world of the screen. People could observe their own lives and circumstances and draw direct comparisons with circumstances they saw depicted elsewhere. A tension between the ‘real’ and the ‘imagined’ often drew unfavourable comparisons and blurred the distinctions between film’s power as a realistic document and fictional medium. This was particularly evident in relation to the documentary or news film. The growth of the print press and a news culture in the late nineteenth century allowed film-makers to rapidly assume a leading role in the presentation of ‘living newspapers’. The print press had only very recently been able to illustrate their publications with photographic images using the new half-tone process and adult literacy rates, even in industrial centres, were still very low. Whilst the earliest actuality films operated and were often presented as a pseudo-news service specific cinema news companies were soon established and began producing what became known as the newsreel. The first official news cinema in Britain was called the Daily Bioscope and opened in London on 23 May 1906. It was followed by the first British newsreel company, the Topical Budget in 1911 (see McKean 1992). However, as we will now see, the reliability and status of the news as it was represented on-screen was often called into question.

Case study: ‘sham cinematograph films’

The central question as to whether audiences implicitly accepted cinematic representations of news and actuality subjects as ‘real’ presents historians of early cinema with a complex problem of interpretation for which direct evidence is largely absent. Attempting to understand how audiences received cinema, and how they interacted with its disparate subjects, is a demanding field of study. However, we can begin to propose models of audience reception derived from specific micro-historical studies of individual performances or performance contexts. One such context which throws questions of realism and verisimilitude to the fore was the representation of conflict. The specific technological and human problems of producing films from distant and dangerous sites of war often precluded the acquisition of actuality footage from the battlefield. One has only to read W. K. L. Dickson’s account of filming during the early stages of the Boer War to appreciate the circumstances which increasingly prompted film-makers to manufacture fake footage.

Public demand for cinematic representations of such conflicts was serviced by a competing market of media attractions, which combined to form dynamic nationalistic and patriotic narratives relating to the prosecution of war. The role of cinema within these mass narratives was complex, but central to that role was the diminishing of geographical boundaries and the potential for audiences to see their ‘boys’ in the field and to demonise their foe. Despite a willingness, evidenced in a multiplicity of advertisements, to present audiences with real footage ‘from the seat of war’, exhibitors rarely fulfilled their promises. Some, like the Biograph Company and Edison’s Waragraph, were offering an actuality-based news service and, in the case of the Waragraph, were using reviews to advertise the impact of their shows:

‘The Waragraph’ – The stern realities of war have been brought home in very vivid and thrilling fashion to the people of Newcastle-on-Tyne. The exhibitions given by means of the Edison Waragraph in the Olympia have attracted thousands of people, and the movements of the British troops in South Africa, depicted with so much realism, have been followed with breathless interest by the large audiences, whose enthusiasm could not be greater even were they witnessing the actual scenes instead of animated pictures. The pictures are so many and so various that anything like a description is impossible here; all we aim at doing is to advise those few people which have not yet seen them to take advantage of the opportunities afforded this last week of their visit. Most
of the pictures are descriptive of deeds of heroism, and tell with touching fidelity the price so many of our noble soldiers pay for their devotion to Queen and country; but other scenes there are which provide welcome comic relief, and arouse hearty laughter.

— Newcastle Chronicle (c.1901)

Audiences were generally limited to stock footage of locations, occasional films from the front which were largely devoid of any representation of the conflict itself, and a raft of fake combat films. Audiences were rarely fooled, but nor were they left with a sense of being cheated by exhibitors, as contemporary reviews reveal. There was a common perception that fake or sham films abounded, as this typical article reveals:

Sham War Cinematograph Films — A correspondent asks us how he is to know real from sham war films, seeing that several subjects are made up at home from life models? The subject lends itself so well to life model work that one has to a great extent to rely on common sense: for instance in one film we have heard about, there is a hand-to-hand encounter between Boers and British, all realistic in its way, but the effect is somewhat spoilt by reason of the fringe of an audience appearing in the picture occasionally. Thus, when one sees gentlemen with tall hats, accompanied by ladies, apparently looking on, common sense would at once pronounce the film of the sham order. The same may be said of films showing soldiers lying and firing from behind 'earthworks', composed of nicely arranged straw. (Anon. 1900a, p.3)

The conceit was even celebrated in a popular music hall song:

Then the dazzling Kinetograph and its brave undaunted staff
Who’ve rented a secluded park not far from gay Paree;
Their methods, though dramatic, are a little bit erratic,
For they can’t resist the joy of making British soldiers flee!
Their Khaki-covered camera is the latest thing,
As a fabrication-mill it is the greatest thing;
Two hundred lies a minute! Why, Kruger isn't in it
With this quite unanswerable film-beats-platest thing!
(Anon. 1900b: 300)

Despite the knowledge that what they were seeing was often a fake or reconstruction, audiences responded to these films as part of a much larger narrative of patriotic and nationalist sentiment. This allowed the medium the license to deceive, and yet confirm a mass ideological position in support of the war. Audiences engaged in a knowing complicity with film-makers and exhibitors and used these texts in a sophisticated manner which relied heavily on the broader political context within which they were viewed. The sophistication of audiences allowed film-makers to blend representations of 'real' people and situations with 'unreal' or fictional contexts. Audiences became adept at distinguishing between scenarios that had been elaborately staged for the benefit of the camera and films that depicted real events. Yet, the representations of the cinema which appeared in other media forms tended to portray it as an essentially realist medium. For example, it was often characterised as a medium ideally suited to uncovering the truth and to the detection and identification of individuals. Stories about people recognising missing relatives, or people pictured in compromising situations, became central to narratives representing cinema as an institution. The following extract from the World's Fair of 1909 is indicative of the prevalence of this type of story:

Tell-Tale Photograph: Wife's Deception Discovered at a Cinematograph Show — A man named Julian Bolistard presented himself at the police station of Petit-Montrouge on Monday to give himself up for the murder of his wife. He had shot her with a revolver as the result of a quarrel, which arose in a curious way. Bolistard had been to see a cinematograph display in the Rue dela Gaité, and among the pictures was one representing the Rheims aviation week. On the films he recognised his wife, making merry at the buffet. His wife, who was by his side, also recognised the tell-tale picture and fainted, whilst the wronged husband cried out his woes to the audience. He had believed his wife to be spending a holiday with some relations, while he was doing his military service. The performance was suspended, the lady taken to a chemist's and brought round. Then the couple went home, and the quarrel ensued. Fortunately for all concerned, the angry husband's aim was bad and he had not hit his wife at all. She had merely fainted again. He was set at liberty by the commissary on the understanding that the quarrel should be made up. (Anon. 1909a)

**Fantasy, disengagement**

The cinema, initially characterised as a medium best suited to representing reality, was also a site of spectatorial disengagement. The audience was presented with a world of fantastic and often disconcerting attractions. Film had the power to picture the impossible and improbable. It could arrest, reverse, slow or accelerate time; objects could be made to vanish, fly or change. Cinema offered bizarre perspectives, for example the 360° panoramic view, and manipulated its audience through a wide variety of technical trickery. Film-makers were immediately concerned with exploiting these particular characteristics of cinema, in absorbing particular conventions from existing popular spectacles and developing new and more fantastic applications. The stage and screen were well used to the representation of the fantastic and unusual. The traditions of magic, illusion and deception were centuries old, yet the novelty of the moving cinema-screen image, and its initial absorption into a competing market of attractions, occasioned a variety of responses.

One of the earliest responses was the demonstration of the particular facility of the medium to alter perceptions of real time. Audiences were well used to the conceits of narrative time shifts within literature and theatre, but were unprepared for real-time transformations. Exhibitors delighted audiences by affecting temporal changes through altering the speed of their projectors, or reversing the film and thus reversing time.
The tradition of illusions and visual trickery was also well established in a variety of sophisticated contexts, and these were replicated by many early practitioners such as Georges Méliès, Ferdinand Zecca and R. W. Paul. Méliès in particular was responsible for the development of the cinematic tradition of the trick film. He was originally proprietor of the Robert Houdin Magic Theatre in Paris and pioneered the adaptation of traditional theatrical illusions for the cine camera. The stage tradition, which relied on the use of trapdoors, false sets, gauzes, mirrors, lantern and lighting effects, was aided by editing and superimposition techniques to create astonishing illusions such as *The Man With The India-Rubber Head* (1902) and his most famous film, *Voyage to the Moon* (1902). R. W. Paul also developed the production of trick films and demonstrated another type of response to the illusory potential of cinema, conceiving of an entertainment which mixed cinema with other media to create a virtual reality machine. Others, such as the magician David Devant, had seen the potential for including cinema within other entertainments, but Paul's ideas, expressed in a magazine interview, took on a whole new dimension:

He had been reading the weird romance, *The Time Machine*, and it had suggested an entertainment to him, of which animated photographs formed an essential part. In a room capable of accommodating some hundred people, he would arrange seats to which a slight motion could be given. He would plunge the apartment into Cimmerian darkness, and introduce a whistling wind. Although the audience actually moved but a few inches, the sensation would be of travelling through space. From time to time the journey would be combined with panoramic effects. Fantastic scenes of future ages would first be shown. Then the audience would set forth upon its homeward journey. The conductor would regretfully intimate that he had over-shot the mark, and travelled into the past – cue for another series of pictures. Mr Paul had for a long time been at work on this scheme, and had discussed it here and there. (Anon. 1896b)

Although Paul's time machine was never realised, other virtual entertainments were. Film-makers delighted in the presentation of seemingly impossible points of view. Cameras were taken up mountains, in hot air balloons, and attached to moving vehicles. Billy Blitzer strapped himself and his camera to the front of a speeding steam train to give the audience an engine-eye view. Film-makers originated what became known as the 'phantom ride' film, an enduring and often used genre. George Hale's 1904 entertainment at the St. Louis Fair, subsequently known as *Hale's Tours*, combined the cinematic and the dramatic. Audiences were seated within a replica railway carriage, complete with movement and smoke, and were presented with a cinematic tour of the world in the form of a global phantom ride projected in the windows of the carriage. Other entertainments, such as virtual big-game hunting, enjoyed brief popularity (Anon. 1909b). These attractions demonstrated not only the use of cinema as a means of disengagement from the audience's contemporary reality, but even began to offer a surrogate version of reality, making clear the potential of film as a kind of virtual reality apparatus.

**Conclusion**

In the years before 1914, the technology of moving pictures was adopted within multiple institutional contexts, ranging from political parties and pressure groups, to medical schools and religious societies. Its subsequent development as the premier entertainment medium of the first half of the twentieth century should not colour our historical understanding of a medium whose applications were the subject of extensive and often heated debate. Examining the primary uses of cinema allows us to interrogate the development of the medium, its evolution from scientific and entertainment novelty to dynamic worldwide institution within such a relatively short period of time. It also demonstrates the intertextual and intermediary nature of film, particularly in its ability to present a range of complex narratives to diverse, but increasingly visually literate, audiences.