"Primitive" Cinema—A Frame-up? or
The Trick's on Us

by Tom Gunning

Frank Norris's 1899 novel *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco* contains a sequence absent from the novel's definitive film version, Erich von Stroheim's *Greed*. Stroheim updated *McTeague* to the then contemporary 1920s and therefore omitted Norris's topical reference to "the crowning scientific achievement of the nineteenth century, the kinetoscope."[1] The kinetoscope occupies the next to last place on the bill of the vaudeville program which Mac and Trina (along with Trina's mother, Mrs. Sieppe, and her brother, little Owgooste) attend to celebrate their engagement. Norris describes the effect of this featured attraction:

> The kinetoscope fairly took their breaths away. "What will they do next?" observed Trina in amazement. "Ain't that wonderful, Mac?" McTeague was awestruck.
> "Look at that horse move his head," he cried excitedly, quite carried away. "Look at the cable car coming—and the man going across the street. See here comes a truck. Well, I never in all my life. What would Marcus say to this?"
> "It's all a drick!" exclaimed Mrs. Sieppe with sudden conviction. "I ain't no fool; dot's nothun but a drick."
> "Well, of course, Mamma," exclaimed Trina; "it's—" But Mrs. Sieppe put her head in the air. "I'm too old to be fooled," she persisted. "It's a drick." Nothing more could be got out of her than this.[2]

Although a piece of fiction, this nearly contemporaneous account of the reception of the cinematic image contains rich material for understanding the horizon of expectations in which films originally appeared. Mrs. Sieppe's reaction is presented as the pigheaded response of a recent, barely assimilated immigrant (the act on this vaudeville bill to which she responds most favorably is a group of yodelers "Joost like der old country"),[3] which exasperates her more informed, modern, and American daughter. But what Norris presents as a naive response to the projected moving image directly opposes our now dominant conception of the naive viewings of the first movies. According to current myths of early projections, the first audiences for Lumière's *Arrival of the Train at Ciotat* rushed from the auditorium for fear of being demolished by the oncoming engine. Far from confusing the film image with reality, Mrs. Sieppe dismisses it as mere trickery.

The conflict in Norris's clash of cultural and generational responses does

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not lie in whether the kinetoscope is a trick: Trina takes this as a matter of course. Trina and Mac accept the trick as a scientific wonder ("Wasn't—wasn't that magic lantern wonderful, where the figures moved? Wonderful—ah wonderful!" McTeague intones after the show).[4] Both the suspicious and the enthralled viewers immediately place the phenomenon within the context of visual illusions, the transforming tricks and magic lanterns that vaudeville at the turn of the century exhibited with increasing frequency.[5]

That even pure actuality footage such as Norris describes could summon up such associations calls into question another myth of early film history: the Manichean division between the films of Lumière (documentary; realism) and the films of Méliès (fiction; fantasy; stylization). Clearly, the fascination and even the realism of early films related more strongly to the traditions of magic theater (with its presentation of popular science as spectacle) than to later conceptions of documentary realism. Méliès himself recognized this at his first viewing of Lumière films, proclaiming the projection, "an extraordinary trick" ("Un truc extraordinaire").[6]

Placing the first projections of moving film images within the context of the tradition of visual illusions allows us to overcome the distorting view of the reception of early actuality films as simply achievements in cinematic realism. Likewise, a close examination of that genre of filmmaking that explicitly continued the tradition of visual illusions, the "trick film," allows us to call into question the very terms of our discussion of this early period, particularly the rubric "primitive" cinema and its connotations.

The notion of the first decade of film history as a "primitive" period has been hard to shake. Recent scholars have expressed reservations about the term and emphasized that they employ it in a nonpejorative sense.[7] The term *primitive* persists, I believe, partly out of inertia, but also because it cradles a number of connotations that stand in need of further examination and critique. The most regrettable connotations are those of an elementary or even childish mastery of form in contrast to a later complexity (and this viewpoint often shelters its apparent reversal in the image of a cinema of a lost purity and innocence). But the limitations of this view seem fairly obvious, and I believe it is disappearing.

However, a less pejorative variation of these connotations still persists, if only from a lack of an alternate way to view this early period of development. These connotations see the earliest period of cinema as a period of *lack* in relation to later evolution. This lack has most often been specified as a relative absence of editing, a nearly monolithic concept of the shot unsubordinated to any editing schema. Even those who maintain the uniqueness and value of early film within a nonlinear view of film history have a hard time avoiding a description of early cinema as a sort of degree zero in the evolution of montage.

It is not my purpose to deny the subordinate role of editing in early film. In fact it is precisely the role played by the single viewpoint embodied in the monolithic shot that I wish to define with more precision. There is no doubt that one of the defining aspects of early cinema (and an element of what has been

called the "non-continuous style of early film")[8] is the relative autonomy of the single shot. However, the meaning of this phenomenon is deceptively simple, and only apparently elementary. As I shall show, this regime of the single, uninterrupted shot, independent and unsubordinated to the demands of montage, is often an appearance rather than a reality, a mask for a complex but easily ignored labor, a distraction from the traces of a historically neglected practice. Or, as Mrs. Sieppe would put it, a trick. In fact, we could say that the single, monolithic shot functions as a trick that film audiences and historians have not seen through for decades.

The understanding of editing in early film as primitive intertwines with the myth of early film as a simple reproduction of the preexisting art of theater (minus the voice). According to this view, the single shot functions as a reproduction of the theatrical proscenium (the long shot framing) and the theatrical scene (the lengthy uninterrupted shot). This understanding oversimplifies the traditions from which early cinema derives. As a variety of researchers have recently shown, early film drew on traditions as various as the forms of popular entertainments appearing at the turn of the century, and not at all restricted to legitimate theater. The initial reception of film projections as one in a series of visual illusions alerts us to the particular importance of what Charles Musser terms the "tradition of screen entertainments" (the magic lantern and related projected illusions) and of the magical (rather than the dramatic) theater to a new understanding of early film.

Anyone who has seen more than a handful of early films recognizes the many violations of the stage tableau, proscenium arch framing, that are found in films before 1907. The "facial expression" genre in which characters mug at the camera in close-up or medium shot forms one dramatic example. But my point goes beyond simply establishing the varied sorts of framing found in early film. I assert that early film's tendency to rely upon the space within the frame rather than the possibilities of juxtaposition between shots involves a particular attitude toward filmic illusion, and one that is far from a Bazinian esthetic of nonmanipulation. In fact, the single shot contained (seemingly) by a single framing was manufactured by certain early filmmakers precisely as an illusion. And the maintenance of a single point of view relates more to a particular mode of audience address than to a passive or primitive approach to filmmaking.

The most commonly recognized technique of early trick films, what is frequently referred to as "stop motion substitution," provides a proving ground. This trick lies behind the magical transformations that find their locus classicus in the films of George Méliès, but exist, of course, in trick films of all nations and producers and frequently can be found in non-trick films as well. Based partly on Méliès's oversimplified and (intentionally, I believe) misleading description of his technique, this process has been explained as a stopping of the camera at a predetermined point, a profilmic rearrangement of actors or props, and then a resumption of the turning of the camera. This was certainly part of the process.

However, as John Frazer has pointed out,[9] and as Jacques Malthête has systematically demonstrated, the trick only began here.[10] Examination of the actual prints of Méliès films reveal that in every case, this stop motion technique was in fact revised through splicing. Variation in hand-cranked camera speed when stopping and starting, as well as refinements possible only at this stage, called for the actual cutting of the film at the beginning and end of the interrupted action and for the subsequent splicing of it together. Examination of positive prints of Méliès films led Jacques Malthête to declare that in Méliès there is never any trick of substitution that does not make use of splicing. For Malthête, Méliès is not simply a master of "trucage" but also an unacknowledged master of "collage,"[11] the altering of filmic reality through the act of cutting and splicing that we normally associate with the act of editing. This from a filmmaker so often criticized for underutilizing the possibilities of editing because of his attachment to theatrical practice.[12]

This discovery of a previously unperceived process of film cutting raises enormous problems of definition for the film historian. Does a film like *The Terrible Turkish Executioner*, which previously seemed to contain only a single shot with numerous substitution tricks due to stop motion, now demand description as a film made up of multiple shots? Is Méliès not only a master of collage, but also, in fact, the father of montage? Although this could be subject to debate, I believe it would be equally distorting to see Méliès's trick splice as the equivalent of cuts that perform basic spatial and temporal articulations. As André Gaudreault has said in an essay that revises our view of Méliès: "The point is not to turn Méliès into the predecessor of Griffith or Eisenstein nor to turn him into the father of montage. Rather the point is to recognise that in his work and in many of the other films of the era there exists a type of editing which is all too often occulted by the privileged status that film historians regularly grant to the later form of narrative editing."[13]

What should astonish film historians here is the process of production, the painstaking technical labor this "splice of substitution" involves, one that includes careful attention to the minutiae of "matching" continuity and creates a particular mode of address to the spectator.

Such care taken with the problems of creating a seamless illusion of transformation should finally dispel any conception of early filmmakers as primitive in relation to their technology (if anyone who has read Méliès's even incomplete description of the technical concerns surrounding the production of trick films was not already convinced).[14] But, further, it shows that early filmmakers were concerned with issues that traditionally they are thought to have ignored: those of precise continuity of action over a splice. The splices in Méliès films are managed in order to maintain the flow and rhythm of action that a mere stopping of the camera could not provide. While later classical editing can be referred to as "invisible editing" only metaphorically, such "substitution splices" are nearly literally invisible, having passed for the last eight decades for the most part without notice.

Does this mean that the concept of early film editing as "noncontinuous" needs to be abandoned? Although I feel the term still indicates something of early film's alterity from later practice, it does need modification. Even if this early form of continuity editing (or splicing) does show a striking prefiguration of later ideals of matching action, it nonetheless serves a very different purpose, and the alterity of early cinema remains evident within it. As is often the case, the insights of Noël Burch provide important guidance. Burch refers to the lack of editing in early film in terms of "the *autarky* and *unicity* of each frame."[15] The clarification here is the use of the term *frame*, rather than shot. Burch does not refer, of course, to the frame as a unit of celluloid, but to the framing of the shot. A consideration of Méliès's use of the "substitution splice" shows that what is maintained is both a continuity of action *and* (in contrast to later continuity editing) a continuity of framing. It is the absolute duplication of framing over the splice which, along with the continuity of action, allows the interruption to be all but imperceptible to the viewer.

Burch has not elaborated his understanding of the unicity of the frame in exactly this way. However, his discussion of the 1902 Pathé trick film *The Ingenious Soubrette* clearly regards the continuity of framing as more important than the singleness of a shot in early cinema. This film consists of three shots that seem to frame identically the same set of a bourgeois parlor in which a maid hangs paintings on the wall. However, the second shot, which appears to reproduce faithfully the framing of the first, is in fact an overhead view of a set constructed so that the maid (ingeniously, indeed) seems to simply slide up the wall as she hangs the pictures. The film's third and final shot returns to the initial camera placement. The apparently identical framing of all three shots masks the switches in camera placement so that the film appears to be one continuous uninterrupted shot and thus creates the illusion of the maid's seeming conquest of the laws of gravity. Burch observes that "The overwhelming dominance of frontality and unicity of viewpoint in the Primitive Era must have made such tricks totally effective illusions...."[16]

The continuity that is preserved and fostered in early cinema, then, is one of viewpoint, of framing (to make explicit a point Burch leaves implicit). This concern for a unified viewpoint of the action (an act of enframing that does not vary even as the action within it is synthetically constructed by a series of concealed splices) differs sharply from the classical continuity system based on dramatic and psychological analysis and fragmentation. In the classical system, a variety of viewing angles and distances are related to a larger spatial whole, and these relations are regulated by the rules of continuity editing. While the continuity system maintains a consistent spatial orientation for the viewer, the variations between shots allow a dramatic and spatial articulation of the action. In contrast, the approach of early film privileges the single viewpoint and its posture of displaying something to the audience. The substitution splice is based on maintaining the apparent continuity of this single viewpoint rather than a dramatic articulation of a story though varied shots.

In contrast to this dramatic analysis, early film's unity of framing and viewpoint defines the primary act of filmmaking as one of display, of showing, of showmanship. To borrow a term from André Gaudreault's narratological treatment of cinema (and to revise its meaning a bit),[17] the filmmaker of early cinema appears as a *monstrator*, one who shows, a showman. But this act of showmanship within a unity of framing differs considerably from the theatricality with which it has been identified, first by Georges Sadoul and subsequently by Jean Mitry,[18] and even by Burch. Pierre Jenn in his recent work on Méliès has launched a particularly strong attack against this conception of Méliès's "theatricality," developing points first raised by André Gaudreault. Jenn points out that rather than constructing a passive theatricality, this unity of viewpoint plays an essential role in concealing the process of the trick. Unity of point of view gives the illusion of a theatrical unity of time, when, in fact, the substitution splice creates a specifically cinematic synthesis of time. The framing of Méliès's composition, taken by historians as a sign of his "primitive" theatricality, reveals itself as a consciously constructed illusion designed to distract attention from the actual cinematic process at work.[19] And, at least for some film historians, it has succeeded.

The importance of framing and unity of viewpoint in early film need not be identified with the proscenium arch. Although the frontality of the theatrical tableau may have presented one model of framing for early filmmakers, they drew both inspiration and subject matter from several other sources. The screen itself as the unchanging site of projected images in the magic lantern tradition is an important one, as David Francis, among others, has pointed out.[20] The variety of processes used in trick slides and dissolving views, in which one element of a slide might change while the setting remained the same, offers a clear parallel to the effect of the substitution splice. Likewise, the role of the frame in steroscope cards, comic strips, and postcards may have exerted as much influence as the proscenium arch on early filmmakers. Further, although the staging and framing in a Méliès film often (although not always, as Jenn points out)[21] recalls theatrical practice, a similar concern for unity of viewpoint can be found in patently nontheatrical films as well, from the "facial expression" films to the radically nontheatrical framings of the English Brighton School filmmakers.

One of the most astounding of these early British films, *How It Feels to Be Run Over* (Cecil Hepworth, 1900), shows the essential role a single viewpoint played in the structure of certain early British films by humorously invoking the direct address it offers the spectator. This single-shot film shows a buggy passing the camera, followed by an automobile. The auto's driver seems suddenly blinded by the buggy's dust and veers directly at the camera, threatening a collision with this fixed viewpoint of camera/spectator. This collision apparently occurs, as the front of the car engulfs the field of vision and the film cuts to a section of black leader to represent this total disaster. Words then appear scratched on the leader, reading: "Oh Dear Mother Will Be Pleased."

Such framing and motion contrasts sharply with the frontality and distance that typify the theatrical tableau. However, in spite of its nontheatrical movement,

the film employs a fixed framing for its trick effect, a viewpoint maintained until it is literally untenable, pushing the unity of point of view in early film to a reductio ad absurdum that bares the device. Many other films of early cinema (e.g., Williamson's *The Big Swallow* or the many railway films of the "phantom rides" or Hales Tours sort) play in similar ways with unity of point of view within a nontheatrical framing. It is the framing itself, its marking of the act of display, that remains primary. The spectator is directly addressed, even confronted, by these plays with framing. In the same way, the trick film maintains its unchanging frame in order to display directly its magical transformations to the audience.

We are dealing, then, with an approach to cinema that stresses film's ability to present a view, a tendency André Gaudreault and I have referred to as the "cinema of attractions."[22] This cinema differs from later narrative cinema through its fascination with the thrill of display rather than the construction of a story. Burch, I believe, obscures the evolution of film style when he defines the "linch pin" of the later Institutional Mode of Representation (his term, which basically corresponds to what I have been calling the classical system of continuity) as "spectatorial identification with an ubiquitous camera."[23] Spectatorial identification with the viewpoint of the camera is a linch pin of early cinema as well, as *How It Feels* dramatically demonstrates. For Burch, this film and others like it "act out" the process of centering a spectator within a diegesis through camera identification, thereby establishing the central strategies of the Institutional Mode of Representation, strategies that Burch finds more central than the development of narrative.[24]

But without an understanding of the way that the classical mode of film-making subordinates cinematic techniques to the task of narration, we lose our grasp on the fundamentally integrating role that the narrative plays. Coherence of story and storytelling allows the classical mode to fashion a unity from a proliferation of viewpoints and shots, through identification of the camera with an act of narration. The classical film can absorb sudden ubiquitous switches in viewpoint into an act of storytelling, creating a cinema whose role is less to display than to articulate a story. The continuity of classical cinema is based on the coherence of story, and the spectator's identification with the camera is mediated through an engagement with the unfolding of the story.[25]

In early film, spectator relations are direct and relatively unmediated by concern with the story. As Jean Mitry has said, speaking of Méliès, "It is not the spectator who was introduced into the space of the film, but rather the space which comes forward to present itself to the spectator within a uniformity of theatrical framing."[26] However, as we have seen, this unity of framing should not be identified with theatricality. Rather, a more primal fascination with the act of display grounds the theatrical tableau, the medium shot of such facial expression films as Edison's *May Irwin Kiss*, the mobile vantage point of the "phantom railway rides," and the magical transformations contained within a single framing but created by substitution splices.

If the enunciator of early film is less a narrator than a monstrator, we must recognize the monstrator's mark in the act of framing. The frame presents the action displayed to the spectator. It is the unity of this framed viewpoint that addresses the spectator specifically and directly, and this is the continuity the filmmakers wished to preserve. However, such framing is far from a passive act, and not at all due to either a primitive lack of expertise or a purist's desire to avoid manipulation. Early films are enframed rather than emplotted, and what is contained by their framing is often a result of a complex and detailed labor, one which, in the tradition of nineteenth-century illusionism, labors to efface its traces just as surely as did the later classical style.

Here again we encounter the strange intertwining of the traditions of realistic illusionism and the magic theater. In maintaining a single point of view through concealed substitution splices, Méliès (and other early filmmakers) were drawing undoubtedly on the tradition and methods of behind-the-scenes manipulation found in the late-nineteenth-century magic theater. The detailed description that Méliès offered of the mechanisms and methods for producing visual illusions at his Théâtre Robert-Houdin (and which have recently been reprinted in both the Malthête-Méliès anthology and Jenn's book) show how much these stage illusions were based on controlling the audience's view of the action either through lighting or mechanical devices. The magic theater of the turn of the century was a technically sophisticated laboratory for the production of visual effects using recent technology to control the spectator's perception.[27] It is this aspect of Méliès's theatrical inheritance that demands more attention from film historians, rather than a simple reference to the primitive use of proscenium framing.

For Méliès, this theater was a theater of illusions rather than a theater of illusionism. But in the evolution of late-nineteenth-century theater there is a subterranean connection between these two apparently different approaches. David Belasco, for instance, could begin his career as a master of the Pepper's Ghost Illusion, yet reach his height of fame as the man who managed the perfect recreation of Child's Restarant on stage, complete with the smell of real pancakes cooking on the griddle.[28] We might wonder with Mrs. Sieppe whether managing the illusion of reality does not fundamentally correspond with the trick that produces an apparently supernatural event.

We confront here the essential paradox of the history of early film—and one to which Burch consistently calls our attention. It is simultaneously different from later practices—an alternate cinema—and yet profoundly related to the cinema that followed it. This relation must be approached by avoiding the biological or progress-laden metaphors that a term like "primitive" supplies. The substitution splice reveals a filmmaking practice strongly concerned with continuity, but conceives of this continuity in a radically different manner than the cinema that follows. Such a move from a cinema of attractions to one of storytelling involves a change in basic spectator address that must be recognized if the logic of film history is to be traced in all its complexity.

Notes

1. Frank Norris, *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco* (New York: Signet, 1964), 79. The kinetoscope, of course, was the original name for Edison's peep show device. However, because Norris's reference is to projected images, he is undoubtedly referring to Edison's Projecting Kinetoscope, which was placed on the market in February 1897 (see Charles Musser, *Thomas A. Edison Papers: A Guide to Motion Picture Catalogues by American Producers and Distributors, 1894-1908* [Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America, 1985], 8).
2. Norris, *McTeague*, 85-86.
3. Ibid., 85.
4. Ibid., 87.
5. See Robert C. Allen, *Vaudeville and Film, 1895-1915: A Study in Media Interaction* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), 57-64, 311.
6. Anne-Marie Quévrain and Marie-George Charconnet-Méliès, "Méliès et Freud: Un avenir pour les marchands d'illusions?" in *Méliès et la naissance du spectacle cinématographique*, ed. Madeleine Malthête-Méliès (Paris: Klincksieck, 1984), 235.
7. See Kristin Thompson, in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 158.
8. Tom Gunning, "The Noncontinuous Style of Early Film" in *Cinema 1900/1906: An Analytical Study*, ed. Roger Holman (Brussels: FIAF, 1982).
9. See John Frazer, *Artificially Arranged Scenes: The Films of George Méliès* (Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1979), 74-75.
10. Jacques Malthête, "Méliès, technicien du collage" in *Méliès*, ed. Malthête-Méliès.
11. Ibid., 171.
12. See, for instance, Georges Sadoul, *Histoire générale du cinéma, tome II: Les pionniers du cinéma* (Paris: Denoël, 1948), 270.
13. André Gaudreault, "Theatricality, Narrativity and 'Trickality': Reevaluating the Cinema of George Méliès," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 15 (Fall 1987): 118. (This is an abridged and revised translation by Paul Attalah, Vivian Sobchack, and Tom Gunning of Gaudreault's " 'Théâtralité' et 'narrativité dans l'oeuvre de Georges Méliès" in *Méliès*, ed. Malthête-Méliès.)
14. See "Les Vues cinématographiques" in *Georges Méliès*, ed. Georges Sadoul (Paris: Seghers, 1961).
15. Noël Burch, "Primitivism and the Avant-Gardes: A Dialectical Approach" in *Narrative-Apparatus-Ideology*, ed. Phil Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 486.
16. Burch, "Primitivism," 500.
17. André Gaudreault, "Récit scriptural, récit théâtral, récit filmique: prolegomenes à une théorie narratologique du cinéma" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Université de Paris III, 1985).
18. See, for instance, Jean Mitry, "Le montage dans les films de Méliès" in *Méliès*, ed., Malthête-Méliès.
19. Pierre Jenn, *Georges Méliès cinéaste* (Paris: Albatros, 1984), 26-29.
20. David Francis, "Films à trucs (1896-1901)" in *Les Premiers ans du cinema français*, ed. Pierre Guibbert (Perpignon: Institut Jean Vigo, 1985), 144.
21. Jenn, *Georges Méliès*, passim. However, the strong influence of theatrical technique on Méliès should not be entirely discounted, as Jacques Malthête reminds us in "Organisation de l'espace scénique méliésien" in *Les premiers ans*, ed. Guibbert.
22. In "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," *Wide Angle* 8, no. 3/4 (1986): 63-70. Also Gunning and Gaudreault, "Early Film

as a Challenge to Film History" (paper delivered at the Cerisy Conference on Film History, 1985).

23. Burch, "Primitivism," 491.
24. See Burch, "How We Got into Pictures: Notes Accompanying *Correction Please*," *AfterImage*, no. 8/9 (Spring 1981): 24-38; and "Narrative/Diegesis—Thresholds, Limits," *Screen* 23 (July-August 1982): 16-33.
25. I therefore state my agreement with Ben Brewster's article "A Scene at the 'Movies,' " *Screen* 23 (July-August 1982): 4-15, with which Burch's article in the same issue argues. Brewster asserts the importance of narrative point of view over simple camera identification in forming the classical style.
26. Jean Mitry "Le montage," 151 (my translation).
27. See particularly Georges Méliès, "Un grand succés du Théâtre Robert-Houdin" in Jenn, *Georges Méliès*, 161-68.
28. See, Lies-Lone Marker, *David Belasco: Naturalism in the American Theater* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 24-25, 61-62.