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# INTRODUCTION



the founding myth of cinema, or  
the “train effect”



The cinematograph reigns in the  
city, reigns over the earth . . .  
More than the preaching's of wise  
men, the cinematograph has  
demonstrated to everyone what  
reality is.


Andrei Bely (1908)



# Learning objectives




- Comprehend the early history of cinema
- Conceptualize the role of cities in that history
- Grasp the terms modernity and postmodernity, and national cinema and transnational cinematic practices
- Understand approaches to analyzing cities and films




Paris is the site of the often-reproduced founding myth of cinema: “On December 28, 1895, cinema begins in the basement of the Grand Café, Boulevard des Capucines, Paris,”







Vicky Lebeau refers, of course,  
to the mythical first public  
demonstration of the *Cinematographer*  
by the brothers Lumiere who dazzled  
their audience by projecting moving  
pictures onto a screen.




The city is integral to this story of how cinema began. Lebeau records that at the time, journalists described the experience as “excitement bordering on terror,” and on occasion, she concludes, “the terror became panic”




According to Lebeau, this was particularly the case at the showing of the Lumieres' 50 seconds long, silent short film *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat station* (1895), which "is supposed to have had spectators rearing away from the screen , The dread of colliding with the rush of that enormous machine too much for those who succumbed to the hallucination of the image."




By conjoining icons of modernity – urbanity, speed, cinema, and the city – in one seminal moment, the often-cited myth reproduces the story that cinema tells of itself: when the lights go off, an illusion appears and seems so real that we forget we are watching moving pictures.




Yuri Tsivian labeled the reaction of panic to an approaching train on the early screen the “train effect”



Scholars have demonstrated, however, that the portrayal of entire audiences panicking in terror from seemingly approaching trains exaggerated exceptional individual occurrences of such reactions .




Reflected in cartoons, literature, and self reflexively in film itself, the play on representation and reality associated with celluloid train rides had already become a cliché at the turn of the century.




Nicholas Hiley believes that the idea of the panicking audience arose in the 1920s and 1930s, two decades after such stories began to circulate in public. These narrative revisions serve to inscribe the later audience as more sophisticated readers of the new medium of film.





Stephen Bottomore has concluded from historical film programs that short films depicting train rides were considered more spectacular than other short films of the period and crowned the end of early film showings “as a kind of sensation” . Theater-owners exploited and sensationalized extreme physical and emotional responses.




At Tony Pastor's theatre in New York an ambulance was on hand for the showing of James H. White's one-minute *The Black Diamond Express* (1896), which was accompanied by train sound effects, after it was reported that two female audience members had “screamed and fainted” at an earlier showing – though it later turned out they had only “nearly fainted”.

The many references to panic and terror that circulated in the print media, both in serious articles and in advertisements, also indicate the beginning of advertising and its reliance on sensationalism and thrill. Scholars therefore mine the founding myth of cinema for what it says about modernity, which includes changing perceptions of time and space and the creation of a modern audience coded as urban and sophisticated







# Early film history




While Russian artist Andrei Bely celebrates the Lumiere brothers' invention of the cinematograph as unprecedented and radically world-changing, Luis Lumiere himself believed that it was “an invention without future” .



Scholars emphasize the doubts of the early pioneers in film regarding the medium they had invented and advanced in order to counter the “dangers of imputing a teleology to cinema,” which would imply looking back at the history of film from our vantage point and presuming a linear development from its inception to the prevalence of visual culture in contemporary society.




The early history of cinema is more complex and contradictory than its founding myth suggests and cannot be reduced to a singular moment, a linear development, or even a single place, such as the city of Paris.




Audiences had long enjoyed the projection of images onto the screen at private gatherings and public fairs for entertainment and education, for example by means of the magic lantern, which was invented in the seventeenth century and lasted throughout the nineteenth century, until photography was integrated into its use.






There were other presentations of moving images that captured audiences.


Throughout the nineteenth century, the mechanical organization of still photographs in different pre-filmic cinematic attractions created the illusion of movement.




The zoetrope, for example, evoked the perception of motion when photos of consecutive movements were pasted inside a wheel and spun around. The panorama, which surrounded the spectator with projected images, developed into the padorama, the moving panorama.




For example, in 1834 a padorama enabled spectators seated in carriages to visually enjoy parts of the Manchester – Liverpool railway, experiencing the pleasure of the simulated train ride long before film was invented. Clarke and Doel believe that by the end of the 1880s “animated photography was not only widely anticipated, but effectively accomplished”




The invention and consumption of still and moving images was accompanied by an interest in the technological reproduction of sound. Thomas Edison invented the kinetograph to accompany the phonograph he had constructed in 1877, one year after Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone.




Yet it was not until 1927 that sound-film was invented. Before that, films were accompanied by a pianist who improvised a score according to different themes, such as a chase or a romantic scene. In the grand film palaces that were built in cities in the period 1910–30, designers created space for an orchestra, and films were accompanied by an original score.



In 1895 the Lumiere brothers patented the cinematograph, which importantly combined camera and projector, and demonstrated it to professional colleagues prior to the aforementioned public screening in the Grand Café. As Bottomore points out, “the cinema in these times was often seen as something bordering on the magical”




These turn-of-the-century films, which were very short by today's standards, were shown in amusement parks and at traveling variety shows in combination with magic-lantern projections of still pictures or other pre-filmic attractions like the zoetrope or the kinetoscope




They were shot with a static camera and were not edited. They captured moving objects and created entertaining vignettes, endowing dignitaries and current events with historic importance.







The often-repeated story of the “train effect” does justice neither to early audiences, nor to the creativity and inventiveness of the film pioneers and the diversity of early film. The very first short pieces by the Lumiere brothers were meant to demonstrate the new medium of film and showed innocuous slices of reality that demonstrated movement.




Their titles reflect their documentary nature: *Exiting the Factory* (1895), *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station*, and *Launching of a Boat* (1900). Not until a few years later did films set out to capture more dramatic movement. For example, *Explosion of a Motor Car* (1900) and *How It Feels to Be Run Over* (1900), by Britain's Cecil Hepworth, and *The Paris–Monte Carlo Run in Two Hours* (1905).




At the same time there was a move from realism to the fantastic, as in Robert William Paul's animated film *The ? Motorist* (1906), in England, in which a car runs over a policeman, then up the side of a building, and finally takes off into space.



These developments reflected film's ability to depict speed and movement and captured the concurrent phenomenon of traffic, which made it necessary to adjust one's behavior and cognitive reactions in the city.




While many early films about cars, trains, and other moving objects reflected a modern theme, others were more closely related to existing literary genres such as travelogues, comedies, and literary adaptations. Paul's *A Tour through Spain and Portugal* (n.d.), *Come Along, Do!* (1898), and *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1897) are representative examples respectively.



Early animated films  
such as Paul's *The Haunted Curiosity  
Shop* (1901) captured the magical  
possibilities of film, while in America the  
“visual newspaper” style” developed,  
as in Edwin S. Porter's 1901 films  
*Kansas Saloon Smashers*, about  
women prohibitionists, and *Terrible  
Teddy, The Grizzly King*, about  
Roosevelt .




F. W. Murnau. *The Last Laugh* (1924):  
Modern traffic




Italy, Luigi Maggi's *The Count of Montecristo* (1908) was an example of a fiction narrative. This remarkable international and thematic diversity was paradoxically enabled by the lack of established conventions and economic structures.






Scholars of the genre film – “familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations” – see its beginnings during the same period . They emphasize the American Western, beginning with Porter’s *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), and the gangster film, beginning with D. W. Griffith’s *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912).




Turn-of-the-century film emerged out of the dynamics of two fields: popular entertainment and technological invention. The Lumiere brothers were sons of a successful French photographic manufacturer; Robert William Paul was a maker of scientific instruments in England; and Oskar Messter was the son of an optical manufacturer in Germany.




Cecil Hepworth, on the other hand, came from the entertainment business, notably from magic-lantern shows, and toured with a mixed slide-and-film presentation before he created a film laboratory and a studio in 1896.


Charles Pathé was a “traveling showman” before coming to control “nearly a quarter of the world’s film trade” with the French company Pathé Freres.




Ferdinand Zecca, the director of Pathé Freres, came from the “Paris ‘singing café’” tradition, while the Russian Evgeni Bauer was a graduate of the Moscow Art College. Alice Guy Blanché entered the industry on yet a third path, joining the French company Gaumont as a secretary before she began to direct and supervise the production of films.




During this phase there was no professional differentiation between director, producer, projector, and distributor. Paul, for instance, was exhibitor, supplier, and producer; the Lumiere brothers acted as directors, producers, and distributors; and Blanché was secretary and production supervisor, and later founded a production company in the United States



American Charles Urban worked as an international distributor and film producer, but in the early 1920s directed science fiction. Even though figures from this period later became known as specialists, it is important to remember that they often did not start out as such. Even D.W. Griffith, though known primarily for directing films most of his life, began as an actor and writer.



Despite these important innovations, cinema did not follow a straight path to success. Many of the early film pioneers dropped out or failed after roughly a decade of forcefully and successfully advancing the new medium.




The Lumiere company stopped production in 1903, Edison left the film business in 1918, Paul returned to instrument-making in 1919, Blanché stopped working as a director after returning from emigration to the United States in 1922, and Hepworth was declared bankrupt in 1924.






# **Early film in cities and cities in early film**




Contrary to the founding myth of cinema, Paris was not the only city important in the development of film around the turn of the century. Artistic and technological exchange also took place between London, Berlin, Moscow, and New York, and all of them nourished the early development of film.




Thus, the growth of cinema was intimately tied to the growth of cities, and the cities were also associated with the development of movie theaters as urban sites of entertainment and distraction. Films alternated with live performances in music halls and vaudeville theaters, and there were “touring film shows” called “peep-shows,” before movie theaters became stationary.




But capital for production was to be found in cities, and more profit could be made by locating movie houses there because the urban population had ever more expendable income and leisure time.



Cinema influenced the façades and topography of cities. So-called arcade “parlours” were one venue for regular film screenings; they carried “peep-show machines,” which were viewed individually, and which offered a different viewing experience from the collective one of projected films.



It was the projected pictures that necessitated buildings designed specifically for showing films, which started around 1905. Called “Nickelodeons,” they had fewer than 200 seats to avoid theater taxes and were aimed at the lower classes and immigrants. Some years later cinema sought to appeal to the middle class by changing the content of films and constructing lavish theaters.




In Paris, Moscow, and Berlin such theaters, which included orchestras and extravagant interior and exterior designs, became the new palaces of modern entertainment for the urban leisure class.


Even though Paris was not the only city associated with the early development of film, it was practically and symbolically an important site. Urban reconstruction turned Paris into an emblem of modernity when it was reconceptualized and redeveloped under the auspices of Baron Georges-Eugene Haussmann, who famously transformed the city from an organically grown town to a planned metropolis in the mid-nineteenth century.









The kind of cityscape that Haussmann envisioned and executed characterizes Paris even today, including that signifier of modernity, the Eiffel Tower, which represents the world city par excellence. Even films of the French New Wave, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, use the Haussmannian cityscape to capture an authentic experience of Parisian urbanity.




Haussmann created a vertically organized city, in which the underground world of sewer systems and later subways embodied a hidden modernity which found its way into films about cities.




This vertical organization took on symbolic and metaphoric significance for films beyond those set in Paris, as we will see in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), Carol Reed's *The Third Man* (1949), and Richard Donner's *Superman* (1978), which map ideological values and/or class structure onto the urban structure of upper and lower worlds.




Urban sites – such as the street, the skyline, the bar – were important markers of cities in early cinema. The city street was a particularly privileged setting for action in early cinema. Many city films integrated shots of city streets as a recurring motif without advancing the narrative.




Again, such scenes connect diverse films from different periods and national cinemas, including Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927), François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* (1959), Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Accatone* (1961), John Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), Perry Henzell's *The Harder They Come* (1972), Ali Özgentürk's *The Horse* (1982), Wong Kar-wei's *Happy Together* (1997), and R'anan Alexandrowicz's *James' Journey to Jerusalem* (2003).



All of these films from Germany, France, the United States, Jamaica, Turkey, Taiwan, and Israel are characterized by repeated shots of city streets – in Berlin, Paris, New York, Kingston, Istanbul, Tel Aviv – and in each one the street becomes an important site to circumscribe urban space and to negotiate characters' subjectivity.



We will see that the street is often coded as a site of danger and sexual encounter, which in Weimar cinema was routinely embodied by the figure of the streetwalker, the female prostitute. The streets and the screens of the metropolis promised erotic possibilities that linked the city and cinema in the collective imagination.




An emblematic example that prefigures the reworking and rewriting of these early motifs throughout the twentieth century is Edison's *What Happened on 23rd Street, New York City* (1901), later echoed when the wind above a subway grating blows Marilyn Monroe's skirt up to her waist in Billy Wilder's *The Seven-Year Itch* (1955).







# Modernity




Though as we have seen the so-called train effect disavows the complex roots and inconsistent developmental trajectory of early cinema, scholars have returned to this founding myth as key to its relationship to modernity, which was experienced as a shock in the West.




The on-rushing train did not simply produce the negative experience of fear but the particularly modern entertainment form of the thrill, embodied elsewhere in the recently appearing attractions of the amusement parks (such as the roller coaster), which combined sensations of acceleration and falling with a security guaranteed by modern industrial technology




Tom Gunning suggests examining the train effect for “its metaphorical significance and irrational appeal” (2006:19), because the moving train embodied the changing perception of time and space in modernity – space as urban versus rural and time as modern versus premodern.




Films manipulate space and time, whereas trains collapse space and require the concept of universal time. Until the advent of railroads, time had been local, often differing from village to village, but with the invention of the train it had to become consistent across space.



Time and space were becoming increasingly abstract, a feature they shared with other aspects of modernity and film provided a venue for working through these concepts and their far-reaching consequences.




So it is not surprising that moving trains are important in films that are emblematic of modernity, such as Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927), that mark important historical moments, as in Wolfgang Staudte's *The Murderers Are among Us* (1946), and that take on an allegorical historical function, as in Lars van Trier's *Zentropa* (1991).




Thus, early films often featured the figure of the country bumpkin – “the rube” of American vaudeville – who enters the city and is unable to read its clues appropriately, finally becoming the object of a crime or reacting foolishly to a film. Such stories posited an imaginary film audience that, unlike such characters, was urbane enough to negotiate cities and cinema successfully.






The trope of the approaching train on celluloid became a playfully rhetorical figure, which separated the urbane, film-going public from the terrorized country bumpkin incapable of comprehending the new medium.




“1901 film by Robert Paul, in which a bumpkin tries to look ‘behind’ the screen on which he has seen an approaching train, and succeeds in pulling the sheet down,” contrasting this with a “British story from 1904 entitled ‘The Cinematograph Train’,” in which young Bobbie sees a train rushing towards him in a cinematograph show and steps onto the platform and into the train and rides off.




# The nation and national cinema




Paradoxically, the early history of cinema was strongly anchored in national contexts, even while it was characterized by international exchange. Only now, with globalization, are films commonly funded by more than one nation and distributed around the globe.



Nations played important roles in the development of very early cinema even though one could not yet call it “national cinema.”



Because of their technological innovation, the French studios Gaumont and Pathé were early leaders, and because silent film could be understood across linguistic barriers, Gaumont could open branches in London, Berlin, Moscow and New York .




Then Gaumont came under the control of MGM in 1924, indicating the end of French dominance in cinema and the beginning of American economic hegemony over the film industry, which continued throughout the twentieth century. Meanwhile, after the First World War Germany became the new force in Europe


Although the story of cinema is embedded in different national contexts, the terms “national cinema” and “nation” are understood and defined variously by scholars. For some, nations are entities that exist prior to cultural expression and then are articulated through culture, while others propose that “nations are constructed in a process of myth-making linked to the needs of the modern, industrial state”








Cinema has developed from national cinemas to transnational cinematic practices as a result of globalization, which has reduced the power of the nation state. Increasingly filmmakers are trained abroad, receive multi-national funding, and make films for a world market, and increasingly narratives involve characters that travel across borders.




In the early development of cinema national capitals, such as London, Paris, Berlin, and Moscow were at the forefront of the development of the new technology. Only the American film industry created a place at a distance from the nation's capital that became established as the capital of filmmaking – Hollywood.




# Hollywood and the studio system




The studio industry and independent filmmaking are two poles in the organization of filmmaking. American cinema has come to stand for the studio system – though it includes both studio and independent cinema – and European cinema has come to stand for independent cinema – though most European national cinemas also rely on studio production.




Film production can fall into either category or integrate both in a mixed form. The development and solidification of the studio system coincided with the feature narrative form as we know it today, around 1912–13.



The vertically integrated studio system, which refers to simultaneous control over production, distribution, and exhibition, began in France in 1910 with the three production companies Gaumont, Pathé, and Éclair




Nevertheless, it is primarily associated with Hollywood and traditionally dated around 1920. In the Hollywood studio system a production head supervises the production, which is characterized by a division of labor and mass production of films, which are shot out of sequence.




In 1917 Adolph Zukor vertically integrated the studio system when he bought the distribution company Paramount Film Corporation and connected it to his own production company, Famous Players–Lasky Corporation, which led to his control over production and distribution.






In the 1920s the five major studios – Paramount, Fox Film Corporation, Metro– Goldwyn–Mayer, Warner Brothers, and RKO – became fully vertically integrated, while Universal Pictures, United Artists, and Columbia, in contrast, did not own theaters but used the majors' theaters.




From the 1920s to the 1930s studios monopolized the film industry, increasingly organizing production in different departments relying on specialists. From 1930 to 1948, Hollywood's studio system dominated the field with different studios, each of which created its own look by having its own stars, scriptwriters, directors, and designers.




Closely associated with the studio system are genre films, in which the content is organized according to recognizable types which are defined by conventions, like the Western, the musical, and the melodrama. These genres, however, are not static; because they reflect audience expectations, they can change over time and they can be combined.




# **Globalization and transnational cinema**




By making borders increasingly permeable to capital and commodities, globalization is a force that has substantially increased the global exchange of goods, including cultural products.



Taking stock of transnational cinema, Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden describe the difficulty of assigning “a fixed national identity to much cinema,” noting that the “stable connection between a film’s place of production and/or setting and the nationality of its makers and performers” does not exist anymore



Transnational cinema includes Hollywood's domination of global markets, other transnationally distributed films such as those from the Hong Kong film industry, collaborations between former colonial countries and European countries, which fund many African, Caribbean, and African-American films, and European co-productions.




As will become clear, the cosmopolitan and metropolitan city is of transnational importance in the development of globalization in a paradoxical way: on the one hand, the megalopolis as detached from the nation state is increasingly important while, on the other, the importance of cities as sites for labor decreases with globalization.






# Postmodernity




There are competing definitions of modernity and postmodernity. The coherence of modernity relies on its tie to modernist art, architecture, urban planning, and design; most scholars define postmodernity as a reaction and contrast to modernity.

Fredric Jameson sees the postmodern” most clearly in relation to cities on the one hand and war on the other, suggesting that the term is also supremely applicable to cinema which, like postmodernism, is very much tied up with representation. As with the advent of modernity in the early twentieth century, time and space have also undergone change in postmodernity.







Much of what Jameson describes as characteristic of individual postmodernist buildings also applies to the postmodern cinematic portrayal of architecture and cities, especially in films with dystopian visions of the future such as Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), Andy and Larry Wachowski's *The Matrix* (1999), and Alex Proyas's *Dark City* (1998).



History is accorded a different role in cultural production in postmodernity than in modernity. Rather than a reference point for locating the action in a precise moment in time, however, history is turned into an archive from which films cite, often mixing and matching incongruous references.



For example, in postmodern films on war the narratives reference the Second World War but cannot be connected accurately to a specific time and place, for example in Marc Caro and Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Delicatessen* and Lars von Trier's *Zentropa* (both 1991).




Postmodernism therefore emerges from its own historical moment, even though it creates the illusion that it is beyond history by irreverently quoting from different historical periods, as well as cultures and styles.




# Urban and cinematic space and temporality






When films cinematically construct space to mark social class and cultural developments, they rely on the knowledge and recognition of the audience. Like cities, films engage in processes of production and reproduction of social relations in spatial configurations.




Henri Lefebvre conceptualizes “the relations between spatiality, society, and history in a fundamentally urban problematic,” and argues that the social relations of class, family, community, market, or state power “are specifically *spatialized*,” meaning that social relations are translated into “material and symbolic spatial relations”



# How to read a city?




The city has always been particularly important in understanding how social change manifests itself. And urban studies has begun to address films as cultural visions of what cities represent because as Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice point out cinema is “a peculiarly spatial form of culture”




John Rennie Short's *Urban Theory* implies that “modernity, capitalism and postmodernity” link the study of film and the study of cities, and in his overview of ways to read a city he particularly emphasizes the “operation of power and the struggle for power,” which organize the city and are reflected in it



# How to read a film?




An analysis of a filmic representation of a city begins most helpfully with observing how individual films represent the conditions of said city or neighborhoods in the specific historical moment, and then moves beyond seeing film as mere representation of social reality to focus on how the cinematic text constructs and comments on those conditions.




1. what film shares with drama: *mise-en-scène*, which consists of setting, acting, costume, and lighting;

2. cinematography – the actual manipulation of the film strip in the camera and in post-production;






3. editing, which creates continuity or discontinuity with regard to both space and time, and creates the speed and pace of a film, a scene, or a sequence – often a significant cultural consideration;



4. shots, the uninterrupted, continuous movements of film, which are connected to each other during the editing, such as an opening long shot of a well-known city skyline to establish the general setting, or sequences which juxtapose urban and rural, life and death, rich and poor, old and young, and so on;



5. sound, which came of age in 1927 but had been experimented with much earlier, and which can be divided into noise (sound effects); music, which can be diegetic (part of the story) or non-diegetic (sound track), on or off screen; and speech, which can be subjective (in a character's mind) or objective (so that the audience can hear it).



# Further reading

## *Early film history and modernity*

Ian Christie (1994) *The Last Machine: Early Cinema and the Birth of the Modern World*, London: BBC–BFI. A well-written and well-organized introduction to early cinema that makes a convincing argument about the relationship between cinema, the city, and modernity.



Thomas Elsaesser with Adam Barker  
(1990) *Early Cinema: Space – Frame – Narrative*, London: BFI. A collection of essays by authorities on early cinema organized according to the changes in space and time, the economics of the industry, and the development of editing.

## *National cinema*

Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie (eds) (2000) *Cinema & Nation*, London: Routledge. An edited collection that engages with different approaches to the concept of *national cinema* with examples from different national contexts and relying on different sociological, historical, and aesthetic approaches.

## *Transnational cinematic practices*



Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden (eds) (2006) *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader*, London: Routledge. This collection brings together previously published essays that have advanced the discussion on transnational cinema for an overview of the diverse and important approaches to the development from national to transnational cinema.





## ***Postmodernism***

David Harvey (1989) *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Malden, MA: Blackwell. Harvey explains postmodernism from the perspective of architecture and urban design.



## *Essential viewing*

*The Movies Begin* (1894–1913, DVD Box Set, Video King). Includes shorts by Edwin S. Porter, Thomas Edison, Louis Lumiere, George Méliès, Alice Guy Blaché, D.W. Griffith, and R.W. Paul.