

**W**ith the essays contained in *Uncharted Territory*, the Netherlands Filmmuseum (NFM) provides a theoretical reevaluation and, indeed, reanimation, of an unknown aspect of early film history: the nonfiction film. Ever since the 1978 FIAF at Brighton, the now almost legendary starting point of modern early cinema studies, an exploration of the area of the nonfiction film was bound to follow, particularly as the reprints of the standard documentary histories largely continue to ignore the period between the Lumières and Flaherty. Now, with the availability of prints of early nonfiction film, both through preservation activities by archives and screenings on festivals, it is imperative that attention is turned to what once was the dominant genre in cinemas all over the world.

These essays are the outcome of questions that came up during workshops NFM organized in the past couple of years on early nonfiction film. Although we are only at the beginning of this exploration, the hope is that these essays are important steps to further study and a more detailed mapping of this fascinating topic. Contributors are: Tom Gunning, Martin Leiperdinger, Heide Schüppmann, Roland Cosandey, Mark-Paul Meyer, Hartmut Bitomsky, Jennifer Peterson, Thierry Lefebvre, Daan Hertogs, Nicholas Riley, and William Uricchio.

# Uncharted Territory

Essays on early nonfiction film



N E T H E R L A N D S F I L M M U S E U M



aim can no longer be the investigation of a narrative style that was concentrated in the single main feature of the evening's entertainment. This approach cannot explain the numerous different styles of address to be found in the smaller supporting features, and only obscures the complex balance of forces in an industry that was constantly changing and adapting. Film exhibition involves negotiation as well as communication, and the context of that negotiation is very wide, for projected moving pictures have to compete with numerous other attractions, and to fight for their share of limited leisure time and disposable income. Film historians will have to abandon their assumption that early cinemagoers devoted their time and money to understanding the intentions of the director of the main feature, for only then can they start to appreciate the complex relationships that bound the industry to its audience, and thus come to understand the full significance of the medium.

# WAYS OF SEEING:

*the new vision  
of early nonfiction film*

William Uricchio

One hundred years of cinema have profoundly affected our sense of the world. Long before the advent of computer-enhanced virtual realities, cinema together with other late nineteenth-century inventions such as the telephone and phonograph 'virtually' extended human perceptions to events and locations beyond their physical and temporal bounds. Film, like its sister communication technologies and the transformations in industrial production and transportation networks, both stimulated and facilitated a new experience of time, space, and culture. Although the cultural implications of this change would be realized and celebrated with the appearance of the concept of modernism, a less desirable result appeared on the pages of medical and sociological journals. The generation which underwent this reconstruction of experience - from the idiosyncrasies of local time to the rigors of universal time; from distance traversed by foot or steam and measured in days, the transgression of space by telephone and airplane and measured in time-zones - seemed particularly prone to a battery of new diseases. In the turn of the century, fragmentation, alienation, neurasthenia, overstimulation, even 'Newyork-itis' plagued the neural networks of those undergoing the reorientation from one cultural time/space to another.

In this essay, I will suggest some ways of reconsidering the impact of certain signifying practices associated with early nonfiction film. While cannot 'recover' or 'reconstruct' long lost or suppressed perceptual frameworks in an empirical manner, there remain many suggestive possibilities that I would like to activate, hoping in this way to account

1. See among other texts Georg Simmel's 1903 article 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', which sees emblematic of period perceptions of modernism's impact. See also Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1983).

some of the filmmaking strategies and trends so evident in early nonfiction production. The combined experiences of positive fascination and psychic trauma that make discussions and even definitions of the modern so contradictory spill over into discussions of such inherently modernist experiences as cinema; the challenge in the pages ahead is to reactivate susceptibility to dimensions of the modern, of the cinema, which over the intervening hundred years have been neglected.

Early film's contribution to the over-stimulation initially attributed to modernity was somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, it delivered a dizzying array of experiences to its viewers - glimpses of streets from unknown cities, interiors from unimagined life styles, and depictions of almost inconceivable events - shifting all the while among didactic, melodramatic, fantastic, and comic modes. In this sense, the impact of the individual film topic (even the cinema of attractions) may well have been superseded by the sheer impact of the composite exhibition event. But on the other hand, particularly in the area of nonfiction film, growing audience familiarity with the unique or exceptional was often claimed to have a counter-effect - boredom. In this sense the motion picture's intimate visual access to remote cultures, famous persons, and historical events managed simultaneously to enhance its subjects' aura (putting them in the news, making them 'bigger than life') while transforming the exotic or exalted into a repeatable commodity - an ordinary, even trivial, encounter.

This last point, the paradoxical tempering of 'wonder' with a sense of detachment, of 'exoticism' with a dose of the mundane, provides a clue as to one way such experiences were incorporated and even muted, a process increasingly evident in the years after World War I. If some critics between the years 1880 and 1910 positioned technologies such as the telephone, automobile, and motion picture as often disruptive stimuli in the civilizing process, a subsequent generation of critics would point out the very different role of these technologies in the construction of culture.<sup>2</sup> In the post World War I years, as the cultural immune system developed, observers like Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer would complain about modernity's complicity with 'distraction' - a flattened distance from the overabundance of stimulants, an inability to distinguish between the simulacrum and the 'real.' This latter perception obviously resonates with

2. On the issue of new technology and initial impressions of over-stimulation and disruption, see chapter one of Wolfgang Sachs, *For the love of the automobile: looking back into the history of our desires* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) and Carolyn Marvin, *When old technologies were new: thinking about communications in the late 19th century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

current debates over the defining marks of the modern and post-modern. But I mention it here both to note the long reign of a basic way of understanding the medium (embedded in our current understanding of modernity as abstraction, alienation, and distraction), and especially to emphasize the very different and perhaps now lost perceptual sentiments of the preceding years (stimulation, simultaneity, the relativization of time and space).<sup>3</sup> These developments are important to remember, because even though we remain positioned within their trajectory, we have lost the ability to experience the initial power of these images.

There remain, of course, some senses in which we share perspective with those of our forefathers. One sense regards fascination with the *content* of nonfiction film images, indeed, the very way we look at such images - something that remains a dominant concern in our contemporary perceptual frameworks. The 'what is in the image?' of nonfiction films can certainly reveal the topoi of turn-of-the-century interests and preoccupations as well as the texture of daily life before encrusted by decades of development. Such a referential vision is perhaps understandable among historians, long accustomed to evaluating the image for evidence of past events, but it is rather more surprising to find among film scholars, where an interest in the medium's form and expressive capacity has a long tradition. Remarkably, at least judging by 1) the appraisal and relative neglect early nonfiction films have received at the hands of cinema scholars (for instance, their easy dismissal as stylistically 'naive'); 2) the highly referential use made of the images as they are considered as cultural artifacts; and 3) the marked difference in analytic approach that we take when considering early fiction films and early nonfiction films, it seems that we still look at these films as some approximation of a 'window on the world.' We grant the nonfiction image a kind of autonomy, looking through the 'window' of the screen to what is represented - the fashions, the streets, the industrial processes. Of our sporadic interest in the nature of the window itself, of the process of seeing and fixing vision. Paradoxically, this concern with seeing (as evident in theories of signification and reception) has played a central part in 'film studies' consideration of fiction films over the past few decades.

3. These are obviously complex and often contested issues. The interested reader might consult sources such as Kern and Kuchebuch for a sense of modernism as sensory overload, and Benjamin, Kracauer, and other perceptives like Simmel and Baudelaire for the sense of modernism as abstraction, fragmentation, and disorientation that would follow in the late 1910s and after. A less theorized but nevertheless powerful reminder of the issues may be found in the repeated complaint of cinema's deleterious effects on children: nervousness, sweaty hands, and disrupted sleep appear in the litany of charges directed against cinema before World

Before moving on to suggest some new entry points to early nonfiction, it is worth mentioning a second sense in which we share something of the perspective of the past. This sense has more to do with a shared sensation than with shared utility. The sensation centres on a notion of 'simultaneity' - a notion frequently promised and asserted on television (CNN), one ritualized through vicarious participation in World Cup finals and the latest large-scale disaster, and one manifest in perhaps unexpected ways even in the turn-of-the-century cinema. Although our contemporary engagement with the simultaneous tends to be located with the medium of television, the sensation nevertheless seems to relate to perceptions that the film medium may have activated in its early years. The point is a speculative but I hope productive one, and one we shall return to after considering possible ways of seeing selected early nonfiction films.

Cinema entered the field of cultural vision caught between the representational strategies of the nineteenth century and the broader experiential stimuli of the twentieth century. An inheritor of a nineteenth-century sense of pictorial space (the beginning of the slippery slope back to the camera obscura), cinema nevertheless served as one of the main public sites for a new way of seeing. One of the more interesting sites in which this tension played itself out was that of the codes for 'realist' representation. Cinema drew upon the traditions of realist depiction consolidated by photography earlier in the nineteenth century (traditions derived from the rules of Albertian perspective, and in turn pushed into an apparent third dimension by the stereograph), and extended them into an illusory fourth dimension of duration and movement. Yet cinema's power to enhance the contours of nineteenth-century visual realism through ever more precise spatio-temporal analysis paradoxically served as the agency for that vision's deconstruction: micro-cinematography, motion analysis, even the protraction of 'ordinary' lens distortions, all served to subvert the very reality they conveyed, deforming surface appearance by coming ever closer to it. This paradox, or perhaps better, this duality, lies at the heart of cinema's representational instability. To be sure, this notion of instability is historically specific, standing at the juncture of self-effacing (nineteenth-century, transparent) and self-referential (modernist, reflexive) modes of depiction. And although this is something that in our viewing present we have largely resolved, it remains an instability fundamental to any attempt to comprehend early film images in something like their period context.

If we look to these films with the eyes of an archaeologist, their mapping of vision, of a way of seeing, takes on a changed meaning. Such a perspective might help to articulate and position a now lost sense of

these films. Something like an 'archaeology of vision' might be pursued through several issues: modalities of seeing, the cultural and intellectual spaces inhabited by the films, and the period's construction of sensation and simultaneity.

### Modalities of seeing

The genealogy of the motion picture camera owes much to scientific inquiry and the desire both to record and to dissect visually those phenomena invisible to the unaided human eye. In this regard, the linguistic linkage of the term 'objective' or lens with the same word used to describe a vision independent of the subject suggests the longevity and underlying epistemology of this quest.<sup>4</sup> But as noted, notwithstanding a tension between the historical conventions of 'realism,' and notwithstanding the issue of the 'objective,' the deforming potentials of 'super-realism' have also lurked behind this effort. In this sense, unadorned human vision offers perhaps a more stable (if less tangible and more subjective) referent than representational convention.<sup>5</sup> The camera's departure from the confines of human vision took many forms (and indeed, provided the base for cinema's rapid shift to illusionistic preoccupations): the ability to represent the past, to show images that unadorned eyes cannot see, and to share in spatial and temporal dimensions that exceed those normally available to human subjects.

The most obvious of these is intrinsic to our experience of time and the referential character of (imagistic) cinema - that is, cinema's ability to hold some aspect of the past. A landscape never twice inhabited, the past of personages, events, and the most ephemeral of presences marks a space of such distinction and yet such ubiquity that it paradoxically seems almost taken for granted. In this sense, the cinematically-effected presence of the past so familiar to us today may well stand as a period sensation that is difficult to recover. André Bazin's meditation on the ontology of the photographic image is perhaps a late expression of this basic sensation, but the notion of reanimation, of a somehow tangible link with the past that superseded the abilities of the static image, may well have been powerful. Somewhat more sensational images of the inaccessible appeared rather more graphically in the public imagination: journeys to exotic

4. Jonathan Crary, among others, has explored the implications of this development. See *Techniques of the Observer: on vision and modernity in the nineteenth century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992).

5. I do not mean to argue for an essentialist definition of human vision so much as to suggest that the extremes of micro-photography and motion analysis lie outside that vision's normative form, whatever its range.

geographic locations, surgical explorations of the human body, roentgen penetrations of surface appearance, and micro-cinematographic entry into the world of insects and microbes.

In many of these cases, the sensation of 'what' was seen was paralleled by 'how' it was seen. Micro-photography in films like DE VLEEGEN<sup>6</sup> or DE DYTIQUE<sup>7</sup> rendered monstrous the otherwise insignificant, just as aerial cinematography articulated an almost unimaginable transgression of the laws of nature. But even less sensational vantage points seem to have been a source of fascination. The persistence of long tracking shots taken from train or boat windows into the 1920s suggests that the effect of what we might call 'perspectival compression' between foreground and background itself might have been of interest. The experience of moving through deep, three-dimensional space tends to be perceived through shifts in vision from focal point to focal point. These film images, by contrast, compressed the visible range onto one plane and, especially through movement, offered a glimpse at the limits of our own vision, evoking a sense of reflexivity. Only when we see the effect (an effect far more difficult to construct from still images) do we realize that it eludes our unadorned vision. The recurrence of 'phantom train rides', whether with a front mounted camera (allowing the viewer to penetrate space) or side-mounted camera (allowing the viewer to experience the passing landscape as a layering of depth), points to the fascination with the collapsing of the pictorial and perceptual into a single perceptual sensation. But if certain compositions and movements offered a way of seeing that underscored the limits of normal vision, these same images also offered a liberating effect. Those images which visually extended new transport technologies - trains, cable cars, automobiles, airplanes - gave their viewers a taste of disembodied mobility or transgression of the laws of physics unlike any 'lived' experience (in this regard, it is worth remembering that the bicycle, and with it, the sensation of gliding through space independent of animal locomotion, was not widely available until the turn of the century).

The construction of time, cinema's real site of ontological (and phenomenological) distinction, also offered powerful new ways of seeing (beyond the feat of seeing into the past). Whether through undercranking or overcranking, stop motion, or repetition, the camera mechanically enabled a new vision. With these techniques, one could witness 'the impossible' - flowers blooming (HET MOOISTE OEF DE NATUUR<sup>8</sup>), flies

reproducing (DE VLEEGEN), or intricate muscle movements (LICHAMELIIJ, OEFENINGEN, BESCHOUWD DOOR HET LANGZAAMWERKEND APPARAAT P.F.<sup>9</sup>). Again, the vantage point itself, whether spatially or temporally constructed, offered a way of seeing, a radicalization of vision that must have had great power, particularly at a moment of representational instability. Cinema's shifting 'field-ground' relationship between 'realism' and the 'super-real' (the conceptually 'real' but perceptually outside the bounds of realist representation) coincided rather neatly with the breakdown of Newtonian physics and the emergent discourses of relativity and reflexivity. Whether in physics (Einstein), sociology (Simmel), or painting (cubo-futurism, taking form, and with it, a reordering of experience. Dziga Vertov was perhaps most explicit about the ideological tensions and implications of the potential role of the cinematic apparatus in this development, probing the line between illusionism and (dialectical materialist) realism through his written and filmed texts. Although inscribed within an ideological stance which celebrated the analytic potential of the camera-eye from a decidedly post-war modernist (and marxist) perspective, Vertov's efforts may also be seen as an exploitation of the preceding representational instability and a refinement of those filmic strategies which explored the analytic capacities of the camera. For the most part however, despite the *de facto* affiliation to the modernist project, nonfiction film images up to the early 1920s were more often explicitly linked to the didactic discourses of the nineteenth century than to the perceptual discourses of the modernist project which they in fact exemplified.

#### Cultural and intellectual space

The advent of this new way of seeing also had hatbangers, sets of anticipations and practices which helped to contextualize filmic representation. In this sense, well before 1895 a visual system such as photography showed many of the sights which cinema would animate... at least in terms of static representation, much of the same terrain covered by the cinema (from depictions of past personages to microbes) had already been in circulation. Photographic images (both in print and glass slide form) were already extensively institutionalized - catalogues for the support of medical and natural science and ethnographic education provided lists of available images. And photography played a role in the

6. DE VLEEGEN / THE FLIES / LES MOUCHES, France (Eclipse-Urbanoir) 1913. NFM print.

7. DE DYTIQUE / THE WATER-BEETLE / LE DYTIQUE, France (Eclair) 1912. NFM print.

8. HET SCHOONSTE OEF DE NATUUR / NATURE'S FINEST / ? France (Gaumont) [1912]. NFM print.

9. LICHAMELUE OEFENINGEN, BESCHOUWD DOOR HET LANGZAAMWERKEND APPARAAT P.F. / PHYSICAL EXERCISES

OBSERVED THROUGH THE SLOW MOTION CAMERA P.F. / EDUCATION PHYSIQUE ÉTUDE AU VALENTISSEUR, France (Pat- [1915]. NFM print.

scientific analysis of materials, in legal documentation and evidence, and of course as witness and referent for the news (although until the last decade of the century, it served more as a source for engravers to work from than as imagery that was literally mass circulated). If one looks at the stereograph collections sold as popular entertainment and education at the time of cinema's appearance, one sees a strong resemblance to the nonfiction typologies and film catalogues that would follow. Indeed, series stereograph descriptions often suggest movement and progression through space in a way that cinema would fulfil.<sup>10</sup>

But while photographic materials helped to demarcate familiar categories of images, many other non-photographic graphic intertexts often evoked their power through the sensational positioning of the viewer. Among the most explicit instances, devices such as the diorama, panorama, and maecorama evoked a sense of presence and event either by movement within the image or by permitting limited movement of the subject *vis à vis* the image. But even static media such as travel posters offered sensation through 'impossible' views, for example high-angle images of trains on trestles spanning huge ravines; the discourse on these images and newspaper engravings suggest that the dramatization of space eluded the still photograph, and that the engraver or artist's task was to 'activate' their object.<sup>11</sup> Dynamization of space in static media was also provided by the viewing context, particularly through travel lectures. Indeed, the functions of popular entertainment, didacticism, and promotion were packaged together by the travel lecturer<sup>12</sup> - illustrating talks about remote peoples and places with images sometimes startling as much for what they showed as for the discursively positioned issue of 'how' they were taken. Nonfiction film would of course take advantage of such 'packaging' techniques, but the inherent dynamism of movements, which also called attention to the viewing position, would seem to have made these film images in some ways more perceptually self-sufficient than their static counterparts.

The moving image, of course, was the cinema's main source of distinction from competing representation systems, and the articulation of that movement with an essentially photographic form consequently had a different impact than the more familiar photographic/visual dimension. It

10. For more on this relationship, see my 'Il patrimonio rappresentativo dei documentari', in *Bianco e Nero*, 49 #4 (1988), pp.56-78.

11. See Paul Virilio, *The vision machine* (London: British Film Institute, 1994).

12. Charles Musser with Carol Nelson, *High-class moving pictures: Lyman H. Howe and the forgotten era of traveling exhibition, 1880-1920* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992)

brought the static 'to life' and it offered access to a world that, while previously contemplated, had never before been witnessed. Bergson, Simmel, Einstein, and others in their different ways articulated an understanding of time as flux, as an elastic, relativist experience, paralleling in some senses what was already cinematically available with undercranking and overcranking. But if time could speed up or slow down (in very different ways, the subject of films such as *ONESIME ALS HORLOGEMAKER*<sup>13</sup> and René Clair's *PARIS QUI DORT*), it also underscored the difficulty with representation - how 'real' was the reality under the scrutiny of the new analytic perspective?

The point is that many aspects of cinema's 'novelty' had in fact been culturally deployed or theorized in advance of the medium's appearance. These previous deployments offer frameworks with which early producers and audiences may well have been familiar, frameworks which help to establish a horizon of expectation with regard to evaluating period practice. They offer a compendium of those perceptual and intertextual frameworks so much a part of early nonfiction film's reception: a visual system caught between the relative stability of nineteenth-century modes of depiction (axial perspectives, proscenium compositions, a safe distance from the subject) and *in situ* engagement with the subject, vistas that challenged by calling attention to the construction of the image, by interrogating the construction of the taken-for-granted, of the everyday world. At the same time, one can imagine that the formal realization of what was only suggested in alternate media and theory, when it appeared as something of a shock.

Although this intertextual realm has played a familiar role in the genealogy of cinema, it has also left out another set of resonant discourses which seem to me even more central in the consideration of at least some early nonfiction production. In this regard, perhaps the most important icon of the 'new' vision was the 1900 World Exhibition in Paris. A compendium of the new, the exposition provides an elaborated intertextual frame for appreciating the dissonant and competing spatiotemporal representational systems available as cinema took its place. Thomas Kuchenbuch's portrait of the exposition needs no retelling<sup>14</sup>, the fascination of the exhibit in part stems from the way in which mechanical visual systems (the cineorama with its 360° synchronized moving images of a balloon flight) competed with electronic systems (Vladimir Poulsen's grand prize-winning magnetic sound recorder, or

13. *ONESIME ALS HORLOGEMAKER* / *ONESIME WATCHMAKER*, France (Graumon) 1912. NFM.

14. Thomas Kuchenbuch, *Die Welt um 1900: Unterhaltungs- und Technikkultur* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 1992)

use of the Eiffel Tower to send the first 'around the world' radio time signal). Although these electronic systems in a sense 'anticipated' developments with which we are today quite familiar, they also spoke to the period's interest in speed and simultaneity.

### Sensation and simultaneity

Thus far, the extra-ordinary has been emphasized - the impossible viewpoint or location, the micro-cinematography of time or space. Located within an emerging and contradictory modernist discourse, and situated within a fabric of preceding and competing textual practices, I have tried to suggest that early nonfiction film evoked a range of experiences which we can only partially account for. Our vision has been shaped particularly by certain post-World War I visions of modernity, and our selection of relevant intertexts is located within a larger project which has certain historical assumptions about the nature of cinema. But if we look more carefully at period discourses, we can locate some developments, such as the just mentioned concern with simultaneity, which seem to play little or no role in our understanding of the period. And, concomitantly, we can find certain patterns of film production which remain difficult to understand, since they seem outside of most reasonable explanatory paradigms. Let's begin with the films - films which seem so profoundly mundane that their very recurrence is striking. Some of these, shots taken from a train or boat as the landscape passes by, as previously noted, are deceptively simple in the sense that they seem to fascinate by calling attention to the tension between what we know to be the case and what our optical system permits us to experience. That is, they might be accounted for in terms of perceptual sensation. Moreover, the production of many such films can be accounted for by the market demand of the illustrated travel lecture circuit and Hale's Tours, thus offering an added market incentive.

But an even more unassuming production, one that so far as I know lacked a distinct market, is epitomized by the 'rocks and waves' film, but includes as well films of sunsets, or of waterfalls. The elegantly simple 'rocks and waves' films were typically constituted by one or more static shots showing the action of ocean waves crashing upon rocks. Sometimes rock-formations of unusual structure dominated the shot, but by and large, the ordinariness of these films is striking. Besides constituting the sole subject for a film, this type of imagery also recurs (as a kind of punctuation or excursus) in nonfiction films on other subjects, travelogues for instance, the 'tour' stopping for a mesmerizing gaze at the action of the waves. These films typically contain no human subject (or if included,

only to establish scale, and usually in silhouette), and often exclude an identifying mark of civilization, emphasizing instead nature. Moreover they tend to remain formally rather simple, serving more as 'living postcards' than as articulated explorations of a particular location. Or has a sense that the expositional outweighs the analytic, and that intervention (of the filmmaker, of the marks of civilization) is kept to a minimum. And these are precisely the reasons that the persistence of production of these films is so striking. Thanks both to the 'timeless' character of the images depicted, the (so far as I can tell) ordinary nature of the locations, and the simple, self-effacing formal character of the filming, these films would seem to be nearly interchangeable. I don't to rule out alternate explanatory frameworks for these films (including possible persistence of the 'living postcard' film, and the possible interest in specific locations or spaces which is today difficult to motivate), but would like to situate these images within a late nineteenth-century concern for 'liveness' (and a specific variant thereof, simultaneity) that tend to displace to a much later date.

The invention of the telephone in 1876 was quickly followed by imaginary inventions which connected its 'liveness' with the visuals of photography, anticipating something like television. The major history of television's development - Abramson and Barnouw, for example's chronicle certain nineteenth-century 'anticipations' of their subject. In such anticipations might usefully be re-read as relating to moving pictures generally, in turn opening up expectations which cinema obviously favored but could not necessarily fulfill. If such an argument is pursued (and I think there are good grounds for it<sup>15</sup>), the now displaced anticipation may well have *then* had powerful implications for a moving picture medium that lacked simultaneity. That is, perhaps we can look behind much celebrated 'wonder' of cinema to find a sense of disappointment or compromise that may have accompanied the medium's introduction. Attempts to compensate, to introduce a simultaneity effect, may well to account for the 'rocks and waves' films in question.

The 1877 description of the 'telectroscope' in *L'Année scientifique et industrielle* or the now famous *Punch* cartoon which appeared in 1878 showed a girl in Ceylon speaking with her parents in London via a large screen 'television' testified to a *pre-cinematic* vision not only of movi-

15. Albert Abramson, *The history of television, 1880-1941* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1987); Eric Barnouw, *Tube of plenty: the evolution of American television* (New York: Oxford University Press,

16. I have sketched such an argument (part of a forthcoming book on early television) in 'Cinema als een nieuwe kijk op de geschiedenis van het bewegende beeld' in *Skrien*, 199 (1994-1995), pp. 64-87

images, but of an understanding of moving pictures in which simultaneity was assumed. Indeed, with a few exceptions, simultaneity seems an implicit part of the pre-cinematic conception of a moving picture medium. Parallel technological breakthroughs, such as Nipkow's 1884 disk (the heart of working television systems up to 1938) or Charles Francis Jenkins' Phantascope (two machines actually, a motion picture projector and a television system), show that such interests were not simply fantasy. The telephone's invention was quickly followed by the phonograph's (1877), a device also praised for its quality of 'liveness' despite its recorded nature. And the phonograph, too, was followed by plans for visual counterparts, this time departing from the need for simultaneity and emphasizing instead recordings, such as Wordsworth Donisthorpe's 1878 description in *Nature* for a sound moving picture device (8 frames per second on a flexible spooled ribbon, complete with phonographic accompaniment). Such developments (not to mention cinema's quick association with cognates for liveness: *bioscope*, *vitagraph*, *lebende Bilder*) complicate the period's discourse of 'liveness.' The oft repeated anecdote of the 'Lumière effect' (audience members confusing the filmed image of an arriving train with the real thing), in retrospect seems more than a bit suspect, since, despite a somewhat indiscriminate use of the term 'liveness', audiences were long accustomed to the difference between 'simultaneity' and 'recordings' (not to mention image and reality).<sup>17</sup>

The issue of late nineteenth-century interest in technologies of the simultaneous, in 'television' (a development whose long prehistory renders cinema as something like a long detour from what audiences *really* wanted) may offer a clue to the visual interest in films of the 'rocks and waves' variety. These images come as close as period cinema could to 'simulating' the simultaneous, providing screen images of an experience essentially identical to coincident profilmic reality. That is, a 'rocks and waves' film was as close as period audiences could come to watching 'television.' And it is in this context that we can perhaps look for a motivation for the sustained production of nonfiction films which seem not so much to record specific or unique events, as to serve as a conduit for ongoing, repeatable processes. This account is admittedly speculative, but as noted, there are at least contextual grounds for its consideration. And at least in the context of suggesting ways of seeing, the vision of the simultaneous had a reasonably long and articulated prehistory which these

17. By the time of cinema's appearance on US screens, for example, over one million telephones were in service in that country. For a fuller explication of the implications, see Uricchio (1988; 1994-95) and Marvin, *op. cit.*

otherwise anomalous films may have addressed. The ultimate failure of cinema to deliver or further articulate the simultaneous, the televisual may help to account for the shift in production from predominantly 'window on the world' or 'mirror of nature' nonfiction subjects to the 'canned drama' that would dominate within the first decade of our century.

The persistence of these otherwise anomalous images into the 1920s after cinema's full embrace of its recorded nature, of a temporal distance from the events filmed, is another issue. The repositioning of cinema towards narrative and towards the analytic systems increasingly systematized after 1907, seems to have been relatively swift compared to the persistence of certain marginal nonfiction production patterns. Such factors as the long distribution life of films with, at least in the Netherlands, 1912 films still in circulation in 1924, assured that multiple production generations or stylistic affinities coexisted in exhibition contexts.<sup>18</sup> The maintenance of older film forms next to new trends, like the attendant variegated audience, seems to have sustained a cinema of multiple appeals. In this regard, another underestimated dimension of cinema, particularly through the early 1920s, has to do precisely with distribution and exhibition practice, with cinema's potentially uneven and contradictory appeals to different styles and even conceptions of the medium.

We can never hope to see with the same eyes as audiences one hundred years ago, but we can at least position the discourses and modalities available to them if we are to appreciate the sensation of certain nonfiction films, and counter our current preoccupation with *what* is the nonfiction shot. Scholars such as Tom Gunning have developed the important notion of 'cinema of attractions' in the early cinema, by no means a familiar ground, and certainly relevant ground for the consideration of nonfiction. In this essay, I have tried to suggest some of the specific frameworks within which the sensation of seeing may have been achieved that is, cinema *as* attraction. While the issue of cinema's appeal to simultaneity has only been sketched, it may well hold some insights for our continued investigation into the discourse of time and experience in the early cinema.

This essay is a substantially re-worked version of my 'La nuova visione nei film non-fiction delle origini', which appeared in *Cinegrafica*, (1995), pp. 22-28.

18. For a developed example of period distribution and exhibition practice, see William Uricchio and Ester Rutten, 'Le film de non-fiction français et le marché néerlandais' in 1895, 18 (1995), pp. 223-2.