# 10 Media on Display: A Telegraphic History of Early American Cinema

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For Bill Brown

It would be difficult to imagine the earliest complex story films made in the United States without the telephone and the telegraph. I mean "difficult to imagine" in two senses: Literally speaking, these technologies play prominent roles in many early films, including D.W. Griffith's short film *The Lonedale Operator* (American Mutoscope and Biograph, 1911), about an imperiled female telegraph operator; and in terms of the history of narrative editing, the plots of films like *The Lonedale Operator* would have been difficult for contemporary audiences to disentangle had the telegraph not provided justification for Griffith's crosscutting between one place and another. Tom Gunning compares the narrative role of *The Lonedale Operator's* telegraph to that of the telephones in Edwin S. Porter's lost film *Heard over the Phone* (Edison, 1908) and Griffith's *The Lonely Villa* (AMB, 1909) in that both the telegraphed message and the telephone call "tutor" the spectator to understand crosscutting as "a simultaneous hook up between distant spaces." In *The Lonedale Operator*, the intrepid operator (Blanche Sweet) uses her father's telegraph to contact a neighboring railroad station with the news that two drifters have descended on her station to abscond with a valuable mailbag (and likely with her, as well). Her frenetic tapping motivates the transition to a new shot and a heretofore unseen space—a neighboring station—for an audience used to single-shot scenes. Telegraphy thus became a metaphor for the power of cinematic crosscutting to expand the narrative's geographical scope and hasten its happy resolution. As Gunning shows, the film's editing demonstrates the powers over time and space wielded by both telegraphy and film, and it mobilizes the former as a technological model for imagining the capabilities of the latter.[1]

Telegraph and telephone also functioned to bring spectators into the narrative in new ways during these pivotal years. In a key article on the development of narrative editing, Raymond Bellour uses *The Lonedale Operator* to demonstrate that crosscutting was

becoming synonymous with the very idea of cinematic narration by 1911. At the time, production companies were concerned to focus the spectator's attention squarely on the story and away from what were newly defined as distractions: shocks and spectacles of a violent, pornographic, or political nature that might disturb middle-class viewers and draw vocal reactions from audiences in poor and "ethnic" neighborhoods. With its unique power to delay the climax (will the engineer arrive in time to save the operator?) and ensure the audience's investment in the story, crosscutting was an attractive tool for reducing the amplitude of such shocks. For Bellour, Griffith's film predicts (if it does not fully articulate) the dominant mode of Hollywood cinema we now label *classicality*, which uses story-centered editing, varying camera distances, and other devices to focus our attention as seamlessly as possible on a unified ending and the values implied therein. In *The Lonedale Operator*, the reunion of operator and engineer boyfriend in a single shot after several minutes of crosscut suspense implicitly links narrative resolution to heterosexual union.[2]

But other values and other unions may also be at stake here, lodged in the literal and symbolic linkage of film to telegraphy, but visible only when those links are contextualized historically. Gunning demonstrates that at the thematic level, the use of telephones and telegraphs to generate suspense prompted audience identification by hinging that suspense on familiar utopian scenarios, and equally familiar anxieties, about electrical communication. If *The Lonedale Operator's* telegraph saves the day, the telephone in *Heard over the Phone* puts the protagonist in aural contact with his endangered loved one, then taunts him with his inability to reach her in time to save her from an intruder. *The Lonely Villa* remedies this distressing situation by concluding with its protagonist saving his wife and family in the nick of time, but not without first focusing on the frustrating immateriality of telephonic communication when thieves cut the very line that had enabled the husband to discover his family's endangerment.[3] The telephones of early narrative cinema often acted as screens for shared doubts about the social benefits of new technologies that banished old barriers of space and time, particularly when the protection of private spaces from public threats was at stake. By alternating views between public and private spaces like an all-seeing eye, the cinema figuratively borrowed the telephone's powers, rendering them visible and even spectacular; but it also foregrounded the vulnerability of both the private sphere and the technology that was supposed to provide domestic space with the ultimate lifeline.

If viewed primarily from the perspective of film's formal history or the turn-of-the-century discourse on the "terrors of technology," the telegraphs of early cinema seem practically interchangeable with its telephones. After all, the protagonist of *The Lonedale Operator* blocks the door of her office just as the wife and children block the parlor door in *The Lonely Villa*, coding the railway station as a space of similarly imperiled domesticity, or more specifically, endangered female virtue. But while Gunning is clearly correct to compare the technical and discursive functions of the two media in early films, telegraphy was always a much more public medium than the telephone. This important distinction suggests that even very similar cinematic exploitations of the two machines rehearsed quite different social problems associated with turn-of-the-century telecommunication. Our recently enriched knowledge of precinematic screen practice and the conventions of urban-industrial visual culture deserves to be matched by historically sensitive accounts of the electrical media discourses within which early films were produced and exhibited.[4] Although the telegraph had first been implemented in the United States in 1844 and was getting along in years by the time projected cinema entered the American scene in 1895–1897, films produced between the first years of cinema and the emergence of full-fledged classical film style around 1917 exploit telegraphy as if it were a novel medium.[5] The persistence of this "ancient" technology of modernity as a specific kind of mechanical icon—a machine that doesn't break down, one that preserves not only threatened individuals like the Lonedale operator but also bourgeois social order (the valuable mail pouch the operator protects is also saved)—leads me to postulate that such "demonstrations" of the telegraph helped early cinema to position itself as a certain kind of new medium, one that would resemble telegraphy in its public mode of address as well as in its powers over time and space. As such, the telegraph also provided a powerful fantasy image of the cinema's ability to link spectators into audiences at the local and national levels, via shared information and collective ideals of a nation joined by electricity.[6] Unlike the telephone, which projected an aura of impotence even at its most benign, the telegraph in early cinema was less a symbol for subjection to technological modernity than a figure for negotiating the ever-shifting relationship between public interest and private good.

Different as cinema and telegraphy were as technologies, turn-of-the-century discourse conceived of them as links in a chain of progress that drew the world more tightly together. Indeed, as both a thrilling new gadget and a carrier of messages—news, spectacles, stories, emotional and visceral effects—the cinema aspired to a place among "instantaneous" electrical media like the telegraph and telephone in the public imagination, and this positioning played a determinate role in the experience of early cinema. I will elaborate three areas in which early film invited comparison with the telegraph:

technological presentation and spectacle; news reportage; and filmic representations of the telegraph that addressed the changing definitions of time and space promoted by new media. Taken together, these aspects of cinema-telegraph relations provide a lightning sketch of a new visual medium that was resolutely self-conscious about its status as a communications medium. Tracing telegraphic discourse through the early American cinema, in fact, sketches out the foundations of a counter-history of the emergence of classical cinema—one in which the pleasures of classicality were founded not simply on the transparency of storytelling, as is sometimes argued, but equally and specifically on the pleasures of watching the cinema *work,* communicating information and arranging that information into a meaningful story.

## Presentational Culture: Reality Made Strange

Tom Gunning has demonstrated that early cinema focused spectators' attention primarily on the technologies that produced moving pictures rather than the content of the images.[7] The Edison kinetograph and its rivals thus entered a presentational tradition of screened entertainments that was as old as the seventeenth century, yet thoroughly modern in its concern with mitigating the shocks of technological modernity, distilling those shocks into representations and claiming to present them scientifically.[8] Neil Harris refers to the nineteenth-century form of this tradition as the "operational aesthetic" of mass culture, in which new and unnerving sights were wrapped in the rhetoric of pedagogical demonstration.[9] New machines were great favorites among the objects thus presented, and demonstrators often displayed diverse machines in similar fashions, grouping different technologies together into a single show. The itinerant showman Lyman Howe began his career in 1883 by presenting his Miniature Automatic Coal Miner and Breaker to small crowds, then switched to the phonograph in 1890, and finally found his most successful niche when he added his homemade "animotiscope," a motion picture projector, to his phonograph concerts in 1896.[10]

Howe's shift from a miniature gear-and-girder show to displays of media machinery parallels Americans' increasing fascination with the array of electrical media available by the end of the century, each one more remarkable than the last, and all strengthening the promises of universal understanding and national unity that had been associated with the steam engine and the telegraph half a century earlier. Phonographic and telephonic "concerts" like Howe's were regular occurrences in the United States by the 1880s, providing the masses with an effective materialization of these promises. The concerts brought people together through technology, but did so the old-fashioned way—through shared curiosity, curiosity that led to social contact. And yet the media concert took place within the distinctly modern parameters of the distraction-seeking crowd and the spectacle of technological reproduction, a spectacle that could itself be replicated before other crowds elsewhere. These presentations offered an experience of democratization through technology that was explicitly hegemonic and consumerist, hailing the viewer-listener as a benefactor of new media's utopian potential and thereby cultivating more phonograph purchasers and telephone subscribers from among the amazed crowds. At the same time, however, these events were somewhat threatening to the elite class of "electrical experts" who provided the utopian electrical rhetoric upon which the concerts depended. Carolyn Marvin argues that public presentations of communications machinery were much more common in the United States than the experts tended to acknowledge.[11] Their silence on the subject of mass exhibition may have been a product of their concern to preserve their expertise from vulgarization, a concern that, as Marvin demonstrates, continually shows through in their derogatory tone toward the electrically uninitiated. Media spectacles offered a working understanding of these technologies to anyone who came to look and listen, and thus infringed upon the experts' source of authority, their (mystified) electrical knowledge.

The telegraph held a privileged spot in this culture of democratically dispensed (even democratizing) electrical spectacle. The first American demonstrations of telegraphic equipment, which David E. Nye dates to 1838, "brought excited crowds to the first telegraph offices, which often provided seating for spectators."[12] Audiences saw the telegraph work with their own eyes, but were nevertheless astonished at the results. Following Leo Marx, Nye refers to this epistemological break as the technological sublime, a "collective[ly] experience[d]," industrial analog to the Romantic sublime that Kant posited to describe humanity's relationship to the dangerous and awe-inspiring in Nature: "Instantaneous communication was literally dislocating, violating the sense of the possible." What made this experience akin to the Kantian sublime was the wonder that human industry instilled in audiences, the realization that "man [sic] had directly 'subjugated' matter" with communications technologies.[13]

This realization contributed only part of the "dislocating" effect, however. The *collectivity* of the experience of humanity's new authority over time and space was an equally important theme of media displays, and particularly displays of the telegraph. In the last half of the nineteenth century, public telegraphy demonstrations abounded in world's fairs and expositions, and in modernity's paeans to the democratizing powers of industry,

as well as in more quotidian venues. Born of the need to create markets and entice future technical laborers, as well as to reduce anxiety over the rapid changes brought by the Industrial Revolution, technological expositions undertook to "explain, educate, and interest the people in the new artifacts."[14] Technology historian K. G. Beauchamp reports that telegraphy was on grand display as early as the London Great Exhibition of 1851. Its appearance there was spurred by intense interest in the transatlantic cable then under development (although the cable would not become a reality until 1858). The telegraph's status as a popular attraction rested in its theoretical ability to expand the community outward from the microcosmic crowd of a world's fair into the world itself. But in the context of popular exhibitions, the telegraph was also exploitable in another democratic register, that of mass culture spectacle for its own sake, and the antiauthoritarian vulgarity that accompanied it. Some displays intermingled the rhetoric of the technological sublime with conventions of mass amusement, turning the telegraph's formidable power over space and time into a noncondescending entertainment of a sort familiar to the leisured masses. A remarkable example of this promise is the "comic telegraph" displayed at the Great Exhibition, which consisted of an effigy of a man's head framed by a wooden box; the mouth of the dummy "moved meaninglessly" as small flags above the head were exchanged with each other by electrical remote control. Such "trumpery and trash" drew complaints from electrical experts and other critics of the exhibition who were perplexed by the large number of exhibits intended only to "evoke wonder from the visiting population" rather than introduce them to machines with public or private utility. Of course, not every telegraphic exhibit had to work so hard to entertain. Various telegraphic and telephonic devices, from printing telegraphs to copying telegraphs (facsimile machines that transmitted handwritten signatures) to live telephone concerts and wireless telegraphy drew delighted crowds at expositions and world's fairs at least through the St. Louis exposition of 1904, without such mass cultural trappings.[15] But the "comic telegraph" suggests a tradition of antiauthoritarian humor in media display that operated around, and in tandem with, the operational aesthetic. This "low" tradition undercut the inflated importance of telegraphic discourse and challenged its projections of universal understanding and communications access. The anonymous babbling head of the dummy could have been understood by different audience members as a typical person, an electrical expert, a telegraph official, a politician, or some other authority figure with a level of access to telegraphy not common in either Britain or America. Whoever he was supposed to be, the dummy mouthed the sound and fury of the new machine but signified nothing, perhaps implying to less enthusiastic spectators that telegraphic dis-

courses were hollow, the exciting messages sent over the "lightning lines" a showy front for a technology that merely meant business as usual for capitalism, class structure, and politics.

When projected cinema entered this world of technological amusements around 1895, it achieved a synergy between communication and amusement comparable to that suggested by the comic telegraph. For one thing, the cinema not only demonstrated the globe-encircling powers of new media; it *showed* them at work. Charles Musser and Carol Nelson establish the continuity between cinematic displays and presentations of other media in their discussion of Lyman Howe's switch from showing the phonograph to showing films: "As Howe had earlier done with the phonograph, the outside world was brought inside and audiences saw one distant place after another transported before their eyes, new significance given to the ordinary."[16] If the phonograph concert disembodied and recontextualized sounds made elsewhere and "elsewhen," telegraphic display had been showcasing such mediated "presence" in similarly uncanny fashion for some time. The cinema technically resembled phonography more than telegraphy in that its representations were prerecorded and apparently quite literal compared to the telegraph's encoded messages, but all three media offered audiences a distinct feeling of spatial and temporal dislocation.[17]

Telegraphy displays, I am suggesting, helped prepare the way for what Gunning calls the cinematic "aesthetic of astonishment" by making visual entertainment out of new technology's spatiotemporal powers. Gunning describes this aesthetic as a mode of presentation that never concealed illusionistic intent (in keeping with the operational aesthetic) and yet produced a sense of awe in the audience at the very fact of the trick.[18] No explanation could fully cushion spectators against the discomfort produced by films like the Lumières' infamous *L'Arrivée d'un train* (France, 1896), in which a train rushed toward the camera in three-quarter view to the consternation of its viewers, but this was a distinctly modern discomfort born of being positioned between a metaphysical sensibility regarding new technological phenomena (we might distill this sensibility into a sentence: "This feat being performed, this simulation, was simply not possible before") and a sophisticated, incredulous attitude toward the previously impossible that resulted from the operational aesthetic's pedagogical impulse. Beauchamp and Walter Benjamin both characterize industrial modernity in terms of the production of a spectatorial gaze that imparts to its subjects the sophistication that capitalism requires of them—sophistication as consumers, laborers, and members of the progressive community that will benefit from such technological marvels—while at the same time retaining the sense of wonder

crucial to making technologies and other commodities desirable in early consumer capitalism; one must be allowed to attribute near-magical qualities to commodities if one is to participate in the phantasmagoric pleasures of modernity. Benjamin writes that "the framework of the entertainment industry has not yet been formed" by 1798, the year of the first Parisian industrial exhibition, but "the popular festival supplies it."[19] This framework, as Benjamin indicates throughout his work on mass culture and technology, depends increasingly on entertainment media that carry the dialectic of consumerist regimentation and distracted fantasy into the everyday world outside the exposition gates.

The disjunctive, uncanny quality of the technological display has one more facet that links telegraphy to early cinema: a flavor of the occult. Gunning argues elsewhere that the notion of duplication was at least as important to the early reception of still photography as was the idea that such images were "capable of presenting facts in all their positivity and uniqueness," and that duplication lay at the center of spiritualist and occult fascination with photographs, serving as the very source of their uncanniness: They seemed to undermine identity on the one hand by producing copies of the unique individual, and cheat even death and nature on the other by allowing a perfect image to outlive its subject.[20] Early films, especially the works of magician Georges Méliès, continued to locate an affinity between (cinematic) photography and the metaphysical, both in the profilmic events they recorded and in the cinematic tricks they played with, and on, reality. In a revealing article, Richard J. Noakes argues that the occult played a similarly important role in the initial discourse about telegraphy, specifically regarding the sublime impossibility of closing the gaps of space and time. In Victorian England, Noakes writes, "both telegraphic and spiritualistic forms of communication proved troublesome" to rational modern subjects, and "promoters of either scheme could be accused of fraud, ignorance, and over-credulity." British railroad interests initially refused developer John Frederick Daniell's offer to wire the railway lines because his promises smacked of the occult.[21] In effect, to most bystanders it seemed as unlikely—or likely—that one could "duplicate" oneself electrically by communicating with other living beings via the disembodied "lightning lines" as it was that one could communicate with the dead.[22]

In both cinematic and telegraphic display, then, an unsettling new sense of presence was at stake, which Jeffrey Sconce characterizes as "a fantastic splitting of mind and body in the cultural imagination," a concept that found its first modern expression in telegraphy.[23] The operational aesthetic debunked the metaphysical aura floating about each medium, only to make even the most sophisticated audiences rub their eyes in pleasurable disbelief at this sublime technology. Since telegraphy and photography both emerged in the 1830s, it may be fair to suggest that the two jointly enabled an occult sensibility regarding media communication. When the most realistic of visual media was put into motion by the cinema, the historical relationship between photographic and telegraphic occultism was revivified: Moving pictures made a photographic spectacle out of the distinctly modern instantaneity and disturbing sense of presence that kept the telegraph a device worthy of public fascination even at century's close.

## Reporting the National News

The telegraph was expected from the beginning to excite its users and audiences with its aura of dislocated presence, but its most heavily promoted social promise was to unite those audiences via information. American lawmakers and telegraph executives, the main proponents of this promise, echoed democratic rhetoric about the railroad that dated back to Daniel Webster's occasional speeches of the 1830s and 1840s.[24] Webster's speeches posited a railway that automatically stitched the nation into a whole, loosening the bonds of American regionalism through steam-powered trade and travel. In similar fashion, champions of telegraphy extolled its power to "achieve and maintain national coherence."[25] In a prognostication typical for the time, George Prescott, the superintendent of electric telegraph lines for Western Union, wrote in the 1866 edition of his 1860 treatise on the telegraph that "its network shall spread through every village, bringing all parts of our republic into the closest and most intimate relations of friendship and interest."[26] In practice, however, access to the medium was hard to come by. Despite its initial use as "an instantaneous two-way medium" and predictions of private, individual utility made by no less an authority than Samuel Morse, the American telegraph was quickly developed and regulated (by champions of capitalism like Prescott himself) as a machine for doing business and little else. Everyone but the richest of electrical experts and businessmen paid often exorbitant rates to telegraph monopolies like Western Union for the privilege of sending brief, semiprivate messages.[27]

One powerful way in which the telegraph *did* seem able to fulfill its democratic promise, even under these economic conditions, was in its ability to transmit the news to an eager public. Telegraphic news missives usually reached the public in the form of newspaper stories transmitted by Western Union and/or packaged by the New York Associated Press (later the AP), which was formed in 1848 to distribute telegraphed news stories to a cartel of member newspapers.[28] By informing people of events that took place hundreds or thousands of miles away, telegraphic news services lent an electrical spark of

excitement to the process of nationalizing American culture. Readers who digested these stories as quickly as the newspapers printed them could feel personally engaged with events of national importance almost as quickly as they occurred.

But telegraphed news did not confine itself to the papers; it also went on public display to deliver stories as they unfolded, preparing the way for cinema's own renditions of the news. Telegraphy-fueled "performances" of news dramatically staged events of public interest in real time, introducing a pointedly narrative element to the aesthetic of telegraphic display. During the Civil War, war reports were regularly transmitted via telegraph and posted for public consumption, a practice that proved the existence of a nation-wide demand for the speedy and universal delivery of news. On the eve of the 1896 presidential election, just as urban vaudeville houses and other theaters in the United States began to exhibit moving pictures, telegraphed and telephoned poll returns were displayed to waiting crowds via written cards, search lights, and stereopticon slides. Other spectacular "telegraphic" displays delivered content more in keeping with their mass-cultural mode of address. Between 1884 and 1894, at least three American concerns used telegraphy to receive play-by-play information about baseball games, which was then presented to assembled fans by way of creative devices like model baseball diamonds covered with nametags and playing pieces that could be moved to represent plays.[29] In each of these cases, the emphasis of the spectacle rested not on the attraction of the technology alone, but on the unfolding of a series of real events occurring elsewhere; in other words, the point of the display is the representation of a suspenseful narrative, the baseball game. Mark Twain's short story "Mrs. McWilliams and the Lightning" (1880) humorously ties together the political, spectacular, and textual threads of such telegraphic reportage by recounting a long and worrying lightning storm that turned out to be no lightning storm at all, but cannon fire in response to an important telegraphic message: "Garfield's nominated—and that's what's the matter!" Twain manages to criticize modern rationality, telegraphy, amusement-style "reporting," and future president Garfield himself in the space of six pages, but the "lightning" of the title singles out the telegraph for special scrutiny ("lightning lines" being a popular nickname for the telegraph). Perhaps Twain is equating all of the above developments with being struck by lightning, and holding the telegraph responsible for facilitating long-distance disturbances of the private and regional peace.[30]

Like the electrical media shows that Twain satirizes, filmed realities or actualities (usually single-shot films of people performing everyday activities or quasi-documentaries of famous or exotic places) offered both an impression of presence and a certain textual

pleasure to their spectators. In their search for commercial material, filmmakers like Edwin S. Porter began to stage current events for their films by 1901 and helped create a demand for timely films of a more quotidian variety than the spectacular (and often staged) actualities made during the Spanish-American War and "Cuban crisis" a few years earlier. Porter and George S. Fleming's *Kansas Saloon Smashers* (1901), for example, turned the news into both spectacle and text by reenacting—and sometimes parodying—recent news stories (in this case, Carrie Nation's destruction of saloons in the name of temperance).[31] The concept of cinema as a "visual newspaper," as Robert C. Allen calls it, tied the new medium to newspaper conventions of visualization such as front-page engravings or political cartoons, and also to the rapid delivery of stories everyone was talking about, imbuing the cinema with an immediacy similar to that which telegraphy had made possible in the press.[32]

In at least one suggestive case, telegraphic news and cinema overtly overlapped during performances. In 1896, a Broadway theater interspersed slides reporting national election returns with a series of Vitascope films. The crowd that had gathered to watch the returns cheered the latter loudly,[33] in spite of the fact that the views may have had nothing to do with the election (though Biograph films of McKinley did circulate during the 1896 campaign). Placing the "reports" produced by these two media together at a tense moment like election night probably reinforced the sense of disembodied presence associated with each medium. In particular, the brand-new medium that sparked photographs to life would seem to have gained a further infusion of instantaneity and urgency from being placed next to telegraphed reports. Jonathan Auerbach shows that audiences who saw Biograph's *McKinley at Home—Canton Ohio* (Bitzer, 1896) at different stages of the campaign read different meanings into the candidate's on-screen actions, in particular his reading of a telegram. No matter when the film was shown, it seemed to portray the candidate's response to a specific current event, whether an upturn in McKinley's support or a report of his victory. Auerbach calls this phenomenon "news with no content—or whose content varies according to the moment of its screening." Auerbach's essay suggests how closely related the notion of films as "realities" was to a concept of cinema as *live*, an implication further supported by occasional convergences with the telegraph: "By deliberately incorporating into its drama a prior medium of mass communication, the telegram, . . . [*McKinley at Home*] self-consciously signals its own power to deliver electrifying messages across time and space."[34]

Following Gunning's argument about the incredulity of early audiences, I do not claim that viewers believed that what they saw on the screen was capable of interacting with

them or that they mistook the projected "events" for events that were taking place in real time. I do think it possible, however, that technologically sophisticated viewers, charged with excitement about electrical instantaneity and intrigued by cinema's uniquely visual position among new media, could gladly and self-consciously suspend their disbelief and react to certain views as if the events portrayed were happening at the moment of exhi-bition, via a pretelevision version of closed-circuit viewing (in fact, devices for "see[ing] by telegraph" were already predicted by 1889).[35] Newsworthy events like a Chinese man being taken into police custody in San Francisco, the aftermath of the 1900 Galveston flood, and the Russo-Japanese peace conference of 1905 traveled all over the country by film, becoming the closest thing to "seeing by telegraph" available to early film spectators, who found this function entertaining if not indispensable. Musser even credits the Span-ish-American War with saving moving pictures after their novelty had begun to wear off.[36] If only in their imaginations, early cinema's audiences found a constant stream of opportunities to take advantage of the promise of national unity offered by both the fa-miliar wire services and the new medium of film.

But did the news delivered by this utopian medium succeed in unifying its viewers? And to what degree did visual "transmissions" of the news live up to the democratic prom-ises of communications technologies? Before attempting an answer, we should recognize that these are two distinct questions that turn-of-the-century progressive rhetoric tended to conflate by equating shared knowledge with national solidarity. Telegraphy had sym-bolized the inevitability of nationwide communication and understanding for decades be-fore the advent of film, but the claim that the telegraph would "unify" the nation rested solely in its delivery of the same news stories throughout the country. The telegraph it-self opened no literal opportunity for individuals to respond to or debate the stories re-ported. The privatization of the American telegraph network led quickly to Western Union's so-called natural monopoly, a situation communications insiders characterized as "democratic" in contrast to Europe's state-owned, state–regulated networks. As George Prescott put it in 1866, "[Telegraphy] is alike open to all, and telegraphic despatches [sic] are 'household words' among the poorer as well as the wealthier citizens." In fact, how-ever, private control helped guarantee a "monopolistic control of knowledge" along with economic control over the network: "Whereas the mailbag could carry numerous com-munications simultaneously, the telegraph transmitted only a single copy of one message at a time. The telegraph line thus promoted equality of knowledge across space, at the price of a monopoly for certain messages in time."[37] These "certain messages" were the news stories that Western Union and the AP delivered to hundreds of newspapers na-

tionwide. No matter how biased the stories were, they carried the prestige of telegraphic instantaneity and objectivity, and were generally the only versions of the stories available on a nationwide basis. National unity, the end to interregional squabbling that the train, the telegraph, the telephone, and the cinema were all expected to bring, was a myth of industrial-age transport and communication that disguised the enforcement of political consent as a means to full participation in democracy.

The potential for cinema to exploit its own "objective" character for political purposes was just as great. Even the amusing and overtly biased films of "lightning artists" sketch-ing political figures to their own specifications[38] carried the palpable authority of photo-graphic realism. To make matters more complex, filmed information flowed more decisively in one direction than even that of telegraphy, offering not even the theoretical possibility of responding to the filmmakers through the medium. The concomitance of these factors might lead us to conclude that the masses were serially fooled by war or elec-tion films into buying politicians, and politics, that they didn't want and may have ill-served them. Auerbach appears to espouse this view when he compares the effects of what he calls "highly calculated" early films of news events to the insidious effects of news monopolies on news reporting, arguing that news as reported by films like *McKinley at Home* would "have left some but not a lot of room for its viewers to reclaim meaning on their own terms."[39]

The fact that news reportage in early cinema discursively allied itself with the author-itarian "positivism" of the telegraph, however, does not mean that the films *succeeded* at producing the consent they may have been intended to produce. The historical ambigui-ties surrounding *McKinley at Home,* its different meanings for spectators at different times and even the multiple titles used by both Biograph and exhibitors when promoting the film, all suggest how difficult it was for early filmmakers to assign unambiguous signifi-cance to such films. For one thing, any film constructed to induce certain responses would have had to contend with the same unpredictable exhibition practices met by fic-tion and trick films. Exhibitors had the freedom to place the McKinley film in an unflat-tering position on the program, or to deflate its effect through ironic commentary or music.[40] Where Auerbach sees absorbed spectators identifying with their political cham-pion, I see audiences for whom the discursive centrality of this film was far from clear, appearing as it inevitably did among many other short films that were rarely political in theme, judging from descriptions given by contemporary press accounts (reprinted in Kemp R. Niver's collection *Biograph Bulletins*).[41] One account describes even McKinley's supporters as "fun-loving" in their waves to the president and playful demands for a

speech. Other reviews make little distinction between McKinley's image and all the other cinematic views on the program, some breathtaking (the Empire State Express rushing toward the camera), others amusing ("the drinking scene from 'Rip Van Winkle'")—they were all, in a word, "astonishing."[42]

Even the most acutely partisan responses to McKinley were ultimately out of the producer's control, as Auerbach's own examples demonstrate. He describes a woman who "insisted upon making a speech" when watching the film as an empty vessel channeling the "mute" candidate on the screen into the theater,[43] but whatever her relationship to McKinley's message, she was also taking advantage of the nonhierarchical relationship between screen, spectator, and audience that characterized cinematic exhibition at the time. Early film demonstrations offered viewers something that the telegraph by 1896 only granted in nostalgic fantasy: a public platform for response, not to the film producers or to the people appearing in the pictures, but to other patrons who viewed the "news" events (real or reconstructed) on the screen. Given the distracting, carnivalesque circumstances of cinema's first years, it is extremely unlikely that viewers would, or could, have become so absorbed in McKinley at Home that they fantasized themselves "at home" with McKinley, as Auerbach claims. If anything, the film's presentation of McKinley at home makes a point of publicizing the domestic sphere, both for McKinley and for the audiences, rather than domesticating a public experience of the candidate. Vaudeville theaters and other early venues like New York's Eden Musée or Koster and Bial's were scarcely like "home" for their patrons. In fact, an important attraction of moving picture shows was that they brought their viewers out of the home, away from paternalistic and gendered restrictions on behavior, and into contact with the neighborhood and the possibilities that public amusements offered for liaisons, conversations, and distraction from labor and familial duties.[44]

What must be recalled, in the case of telegraphic and cinematic news alike, is the fact that neither technology nor its socioeconomic institutionalization can completely determine the meaning of the images or messages transmitted. Indeed, not only films but also telegraphed news stories were suspected of bias almost from the beginning. Despite central "processing" of the information it communicated, the telegraph, in Harold Innes's words, actually "accelerated the process of political fragmentation in the United States" because it was owned by private interests which used the network to reinforce local authority over such politically charged issues as banking and labor.[45] Reportage of the same news to all corners of the country—especially federal policy disputes—sparked varied feelings depending on the region and on which newspaper packaged the story for which readership. And, perhaps most important considering the discursive conflation of teleg-

raphy with open political discourse, telegraphic news permanently transformed the American political scene by opening up federal debates, formerly kept private by elected officials in Washington, to "national public opinion." The telegraph thus rendered impossible the politician's trick old of speaking in a "different voice" to different regions, an underhanded but common maneuver that had actually helped to preserve the Union before the Civil War.[46] Telegraphic news transmission troubled unselfconscious national unity by making regional positions regarding slavery, states' rights, and other divisive issues impossible to ignore. Central control exerted over news reportage, then, was no match for regional and cultural differences.

As news "networks" providing what in practice became "news with no content," to return to Auerbach's helpful phrase, telegraphy and cinema jointly expanded the interpretive powers of their audiences into political territory. Reviewing visual newspaper films within the contexts of mass-cultural presentation and telegraphic news reporting reduces the temptation to overstate the power of the "objective" text. Newspapers and films alike often acknowledged their own editorial functions, presenting them as correctives to the equally biased practices that influenced AP reports, while those films that were not explicitly biased were subject to interpretation by exhibitors. These interpretations were in turn scrutinized by viewers who quickly learned, under the solicitations of early consumer capitalism and the emergence of a nationalized political scene, that their opinions counted for something. Previously distinctive groups of voters and readers were becoming the mass-mediated, mass-consuming public to whom manufacturers, and increasingly politicians, had to appeal if they expected to stay in business. Instead of narrowing and unifying responses to the news, the telegraph helped provide the conditions for the emergence of an audience that could identify itself as "national" in what it consumed, but still reserved the right to consume the texts of mass culture on its own, local terms.

### Presentation / Narration: Projections of the Telegraph in Early Film

I return now to representations of telegraphy in early cinema, but this time with a sense of the complementary discourses of these technologies, and particularly the routes to national community offered by each—the electrical-political dimension, in other words, of the geographical leaps motivated by the appearance of the telegraph in The Lonedale Operator. We can learn much about the attraction of telegraphy by comparing telegraph films to telephone films, but a distinction needs to be made between the cultural meanings of the telephone and the telegraph in order to enter the films' spectatorial context. The telephone was a newer medium with even greater utopian potential, and greater

astonishment value, than the telegraph. First successfully demonstrated in 1876, often in staged "concerts," it communicated individual voices directly to the listener, bypassing (it seemed) the technical and economic "necessities" of leaving transmission and reception up to trained encoders and receivers. In practice, however, the telephone divided the economic classes in ways that were even more obvious in quotidian life than the strict line between businesses and citizenry drawn by the telegraph industry. Private users could get direct access to phones, but no matter how ubiquitous public telephones were at the turn of the century, having a private phone in one's home was an economic privilege, not a right. Whereas telegraphs were at least housed in public offices, telephones were privately leased by the economic elite, and rapidly became a mark of middle-class distinction. Indeed, the Bell company reinforced this distinction by attempting to regulate the use of phones by nonsubscribers through various penalty schemes—a strategy actively resisted by "emerging networks of telephone sociability" in which subscribers regularly allowed neighbors to borrow the phone.[47]

An early American gag film, *The Telephone* (Edison, 1898), rehearses working-class ambivalence about this pricey private medium. A man stands in front of a hand-crank telephone marked with a sign: "Don't Travel! Use Telephone! You can get anything you want." He then takes what appears to be a glass of beer out of the telephone cabinet, and the film ends. This crude but effective gag characterizes early cinema's fascination with electrical media quite well, for it exploits the device as a technological spectacle, and at the same time uses it to spark a comic strip-style narrative, here a knowing joke at the expense of American technological utopianism. Fantasies ran rampant at the time that the telephone would eliminate the need for travel, allowing the bourgeois citizen to command the bounty of mass-production capitalism from the comfort of home, or at least a private booth (it's impossible to tell which is represented by the blank sets of this film, though we might assume from the presence of the advertising sign that this is a saloon, a public place).

*The Telephone,* however, acknowledges the contradictions in this promise in multiple registers, in keeping with the "ambivalence" of address and meaning that set early cinema apart from classical narrative cinema.[48] The magical materialization of the beer mocks the overstatements of electrical media optimism, for the working-class audiences of early films would have been as likely to see a real telephone deliver them beer as to see it deliver on its promises of national unity or the eradication of class difference. Even if part of the population could cordon itself off and use only the telephone to venture into public (as in the media fantasies cataloged by Marvin), that part would still depend on a service class to cater to its needs. I suggest that the humor of this gag fundamentally depends on the bitter recognition that in 1898, this telephone fantasy is just that, a fantasy: an unrealizable dream that the telephone could offer anyone of any class an elite position protected from even awareness of labor. But the film retains a utopian glint by visualizing the medium's bounty as a *beer.* The mug of beer aligns the film firmly with a male working class that cherished beer as an icon of that vital locus of urban social exchange, the saloon.[49] The private medium showcased by *The Telephone* delivers not merely a beer, but an avatar of publicness at its most disorderly and unsanctioned. The medium delivering this ironic visual message about the telephone thereby sends a somewhat different message about itself: Film does not offer its patrons false technological promises or upperclass conveniences, but jokes at the expense of both—a sign of recognition of, and solidarity with, viewers unlikely to have phones installed in their parlors.

The telegraph in early cinema, on the other hand, seems more clearly cast as a "people's" medium, not because individuals controlled it in the world outside the theater (the opposite was the case, as I have discussed, although telephones had only dented the private market by 1895), but because its real social functions were more obviously public in nature. The telegraph had been developed into a technology for "high-speed, one-way communications" sent in the order received (with business and news agencies given top priority), rather than a private or even a point-to-point medium.[50] Perhaps for this reason, the stories generated about it in early films tended to involve social authorities with access to the technology (railroad operators, firemen and policemen), and events the consequences of which reached beyond the concerns of individual households (disasters, crimes, and other events with public impact). In spite of its status as a monopolized technology, the telegraph in early cinema plays the part of the public medium's public medium—a device similar to cinema in its everyday relationship to the masses as masses, and thus a technology onto which the cinema projected images of its own evolving relationship to its spectators.

Two of Porter's pioneering story films involve telegraphs playing public roles of this sort: *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) and *The Life of an American Fireman* (1902–1903). *The Great Train Robbery* centers on the telegraph first to communicate the depths of the criminal gang's audacity when they bind and gag a railroad telegraph operator, then to help motivate the climax of the film by showing the operator "telegraph[ing] for assistance by manipulating the key with his chin," as recounted in the 1904 Edison catalog.[51] Intriguingly, the telegraphed missive apparently has little effect, and the operator has to rouse the posse in person. Since the long shot of the telegraph office does not privilege the

device, the telegraphic chin business alone would have been insufficient motivation for the appearance of the cowboys; rather, its function seems primarily demonstrative and symbolic. The telegraph adds to the social urgency of the robbery by buttressing the film's theme of the cause-effect relationship between reportage of events and the restoration of social order, even if the telegraph does not literally perform such a function in the plot. The telegraph operator's incapacitation symbolizes not just personal crisis but social chaos; suitably, then, his return to duty is the film's first step toward the robbers' incarceration and the return to social order.

In *The Life of an American Fireman,* Porter shoulders the telegraph with much more central visual and narrational functions, and materializes its social promises more emphatically. The second shot of the film is an insert of a fire alarm telegraph, clearly marked as such, being pulled by a hand reaching into the shot from offscreen (figure 10.1). Here Porter showcases the telegraph for its sensationalistic value, continuing the tradition of telegraphic display in a new medium; the alarm device was still novel enough by 1903 to provoke curiosity and stimulate discussion.[52] We could easily mistake this shot for a precocious use of an electrical medium to implement something like classical narration, since the alarm motivates the expansion of story space into the fire station, where the firemen rouse themselves to answer the call. However, I suggest instead that the startling cuts from the fireman's dream vignette in the opening shot (figure 10.2), to the alarm, and finally to the fire station have perhaps less in common with similar series in *The Lonedale Operator* than with the serial presentations of baseball plays in telegraphed game displays. Baseball displays allowed audiences to assemble a simple narrative—the game—out of the series of plays received and presented by the operator, but because the medium's power over space and time took center stage, the causal chain within the game between play A and play B competed for attention with the causal chain between the telegraph's operation and the presentation of its message. In similar fashion, *The Life of an American Fireman* creates a causal link between event A (the alarm being pulled) and event B (the firemen responding to the alarm by getting ready) while foregrounding media transmission as an equally exciting narrative, but this time the kinetograph is the medium whose power demands the most attention. Displaying the telegraph prominently as a conceptual touchstone, Porter delivers images of the alarm technology doing its stuff, then moves into a spectacle of urban disaster and movement that only cinema could offer to an audience at a technology demonstration, a visual recreation of the live "Fighting the Flames" show that astonished thousands at the Paris Exposition of 1900 (and arrived at Coney Island the year after Porter's film was released).[53] *The Life of an American Fireman*
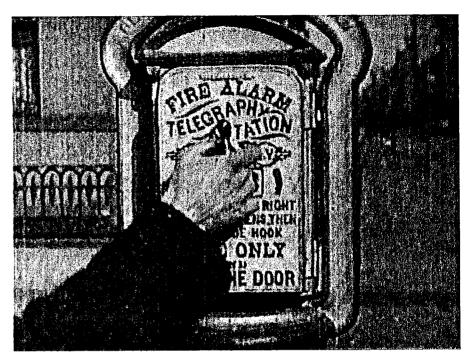


Figure 10.1   *Life of an American Fireman* still.

effectively positions the cinema in the telegraph's old place in electrical display culture, a technology that gathers viewers together to ogle its spatiotemporal prowess.

The discourse of the telegraph and kinetograph as communalizing forces intersects with another theme that *The Life of an American Fireman* shares with *The Great Train Robbery,* that of the connection between private sentiment and public action. The film begins with an image of a fireman in repose (see figure 10.2), possibly dreaming of his wife and child as they appear in a matte "bubble" next to his head (the film leaves the identity of the woman and child ambiguous, even deliberately so, as the Edison Company's speculative description of *Life* further attests).[54] Porter refuses to individualize him any further, however; the title casts him simply as an "American." After the close-up of the alarm, the fireman must move outward from his private reverie and into public duty, a move the new telegraphic alarm promoted and enforced in American cities, and equally a move that the *shot* of the alarm motivates in this film. The shot changes from fireman at rest to tele-
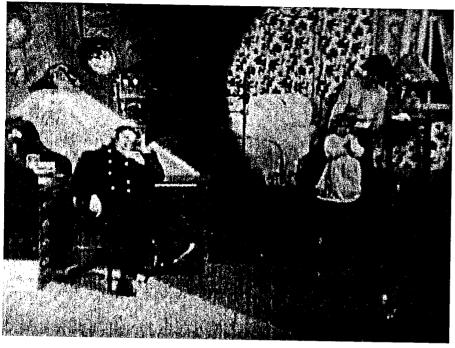
Figure 10.2   *Life of an American Fireman* still.

graphic alarm to firemen in action builds on the technological analogy between telegraph and cinema by placing the spectators in a relationship to the film that parallels the fireman's relationship to the alarm: Both machines not only transmit information about one space into another space, but also bring private subjects out into the open, turning them from singular figures with individual dreams to participants in an idealized "American" experience, broadly defined as everyday heroism for the fireman, and sensationalistic technological amusement for the audience. In its implications of the cinema's power to collectivize and nationalize the otherwise anonymous masses, *The Life of an American Fireman* borrows fantasies of democracy through telegraphy that were more than half a century old.

I must stress, however, that the film's discourse of nationalization is more a shape left to be filled out by subjects and practices than a doctrine determining the nature of a po-

litical subjectivity. *Life* begins with a reassuring image of middle-class values sitting at the helm of public safety as the fireman dreams of domestic tranquility, but even as it returns to this theme when the fireman rescues a mother and daughter (perhaps the same figures portrayed in the fireman's daydream), it does so amid terrific narrative ambiguity, and only after a race to the rescue which emphasizes the thrills of spectacle and speed for their own sake.[55] Here the cinema symbolically delivers on a promise that the Associated Press made to its readers but never quite kept: the promise of "raw" news, the unbiased reportage of events. The film's putative themes of public duty and technological discipline are presented so ambiguously that its second shot would likely have had a much less positive meaning for actual firemen than for the average thrill-seeking film viewer. To firemen across the country, and particularly in cities like New York and Philadelphia, the alarm telegraph signified the destruction of the municipal fire department system and the grassroots political force it represented. City firemen, who were "frequently the fomenters of urban riots . . . viewed technological innovation as threatening to their numbers and hence to their existence," and resisted full deployment of telegraphic alarms for decades before finally succumbing to the downsizing, efficiency, and professionalization that the alarm system represented; as late as 1902, a census report found that firemen were the "bitterest enemies" of the alarms.[56]

Even though all the events presented by Porter's film are fictions staged for the camera, the ambiguities of relationships among characters, the impersonality of the long shots showing the race of the horse-drawn fire trucks, and the infamous closing sequence which shows the fire rescue in its entirety from two different locations in two separate long takes, all left audiences ample room to interpret the story content and the temporality of the events shown.[57] Certain viewers might even have taken the telegraph to task for helping put the volunteer out of work in the name of social order and efficiency, and taken offense at the very existence of this film. As Musser points out, firefighting films took the power to represent firemen and their tasks out of the hands of the volunteers who willingly posed for films like *The Life of an American Fireman*, the same volunteers who were losing their prominent positions thanks to the increasingly bureaucratic and centralized mode of American capitalism and social organization that cinema simultaneously depended upon and symbolized.[58] Porter's film is not a news report, but it produces at the structural level a mandate that audiences arrive at their own interpretations, whether consenting or dissenting, of what transpires on the screen—the ideal position of the news consumer in a democratic society.

## Conclusion: Conversations with Protoclassical Cinema

The historical examples I have enumerated here only scratch the surface of the telegraph's relationship to early film. Archival material yet to be uncovered on the topic may force radical revisions of my hypotheses. But the three approaches to this relationship that I have begun to map seem the most promising entryways into the study of early cinema as an intermedia phenomenon. The importance of telegraph-cinema research, and of the study of cinema's relationships to electrical media in general, resides in the insights it can offer into two especially tough historical questions. First, what was the temporal experience of early cinema like, compared to the experience of simultaneity between message and receiver experienced by users of electrical media?[59] And second, what effects, if any, did the discursive resonance between electrical communication and cinematic communication have on the development of classical narrative, and specifically on the changing relationship between audiences and screen that resulted as cinema stopped delivering "news" and concentrated almost exclusively on delivering stories?

These questions relate to each other closely in that they both ask about early cinema's *presence* to its viewers, by which I mean both how "live" the images seemed and the degree to which films were frankly presentational and reflexive. The dominant logic of film studies today leans toward the following position on this historical conundrum: If early film courted an impression of astonishing electrical instantaneity and possibilities for communication, then classical narrative films curtailed that impression in the process of eliminating the most obvious vestiges of the cinema of attractions. Following this logic, the self-referential tendencies of telegraphy and other electrical media, particularly evident in demonstrations and in the news services' aggrandizing self-consciousness about the telegraph's prowess, would make the telegraph a bad model for thinking about the cinema's cultural place once the early "cinema of attractions" began to wane. The industry had discovered by 1908 that the road to greater profits and middle-class acceptance lay in story films, which focused attention on representation and away from the apparatus. William Uricchio has suggested that early film viewers would have made a strict distinction between electrical media liveness and cinematic liveness from the beginning, understanding the former as a temporal category (referring to simultaneity between an action or message and its distant reception) and the latter as strictly a category of representation (the semblance of life offered by "moving" pictures).[60] If this were the case, early cinema would appear to have contained the seed of its future as strictly a medium of representation in its very status as a recording mechanism rather than a point-to-point transmitter.

But, to return to the point I made in the introduction about past approaches to electrical media and film, we need to look more closely at the social, economic, and historical positionings of media before we assume anything about what their technological capabilities signified to their users. The telegraph still carried an aura of instantaneity at the turn of the century, but that aura was tempered by the fact that only a tiny proportion of Americans enjoyed direct access to it. This uneven mixture of temporal and representational discourses—what ultimately mattered about telegraphic missives were the news stories or personal (though hardly private) messages they related, but their urgency would nonetheless have been greatly diminished without the discourse of instantaneity—makes the telegraph a kind of fraternal twin to the early cinema, especially if we consider the latter's uncanny relationship to viewers, its tendency to play with their understanding of where, and when, they sat in relation to the shocking and distracting screen images.

The most surprising thing that this parallel suggests, however, is that the illusionist form of "presence" conjured by classical film narration continued to draw on the same concept of cinematic communication as an overt and self-reflexive *act* that characterized the mode of address of living newspaper films and simulated "realities" like *The Life of an American Fireman*. In other words, the technological aspect of film and of its emerging classical mode of storytelling was not treated as an embarrassing reference to cinema's boisterous past—a scandal that the fig leaves of character and plot were engineered to obscure—but a focus of viewer interest and pleasure. I'd like to conclude by suggesting that we use telegraphic-cinematic discourse to help us rethink the transition to classical narrative form as a transition between variant definitions of *realism* that depend in part on telegraphy's own paradoxical position as both a spectacle in itself and a transmitter of distant messages or narratives: realism as a function of the spectator's confrontation with the photographic image (the "attractions" model); and realism as a function of cinematic "speech," an idea I will explain below.

The title given by the Edison company to the shot of actor Justus Barnes firing his pistol at the camera in *The Great Train Robbery*, "Realism," helps clarify how the cinema of attractions circa 1903 equated realism with the viscerality of film's effects, an equation also implied by the presentational and episodic nature of the rest of the film.[61] But in 1908, as the cinema of attractions was being replaced by one that emphasized dramatic illusions, an article in the trade periodical *Moving Picture World* asserted a much different definition of realism. The anonymous columnist recounted an "amusing incident in a New York

theater" in which several spectators "involuntarily exclaimed, 'Don't drink that'" when a character seemed about to sip a poisoned drink (the film's title is not mentioned, but the suspenseful poisoning scene described here strongly suggests early Griffith). The reporter marveled:

> Surely manufacturers could not go farther than this in film realism. When they can induce those in their audience to warn characters not to do something they have accomplished what is most desirable. They have made the pictures speak. And the incident illustrates the close attention that is paid to a larger proportion of the films thrown on the screen. Even though they are mute the audience is as still as though the actors were actually speaking.[62]

The *Moving Picture World* reporter had a right to be excited about this development. One kind of cinematic "speech" that the journal had previously disparaged, that is, uncontrolled audience response, now seemed to be giving way to a different kind of conversation, one between screen and viewer that meshed neatly with the industry's interests because it privileged the screen as "speaker." Driven by pressure from reformers who complained of rowdy and unsavory exhibition spaces and by the economic imperative to gain greater control over exhibition for film producers, the Motion Picture Patents Company (headed by Edison and Biograph) began between 1907 and 1908 to seek alternatives to such extrafilmic narrational devices as live lecturers and even intertitles on the grounds that they distracted spectators from the stories unfolding on the screen.[63] But the reporter's comment does not entirely give up *discours* in the name of *histoire,* for while it casts narrative attentiveness and even absorption as desirable spectatorial habits, it lauds the speech-effect of the unnamed film specifically for the overtly interactive relationship it forges between screen and audience. As the reporter describes it, this new "realism" depended on the introduction of three kinds of speech into the viewing space: 1. the characters in the film speaking to each other; 2. the image speaking to the audience; and 3. the audience speaking back to the image as a sign of its involvement in the story. Though no longer speaking to other members of the crowd like the impromptu speechmaker at the McKinley film a decade earlier, the spectator (as viewed by the reporter) treats the film as a vehicle for information exchange rather than a representation pure and simple and asserts her own presence in the theater by responding with a message of her own. The film "talks" via images, and the ideal spectator proves her engagement by talking back.

The *Moving Picture World* reporter offers a surprising perspective on the emergence of classicality that suggests a slender thread of continuity between classical cinema and its distracting precursor, a lineage to which telegraphic discourse offers a possible key. Film images of telegraphs during the protoclassical era (1908–1917) rehearse both versions of realism I have described in that they continue to confront the audience with cinema's technological nature, while inviting narrative interest via the communications model the reporter suggests. Several examples in particular demonstrate the overlap between realist paradigms: the first chapter of the Mollie King serial *The Mystery of the Double Cross* (Pathé, 1917, d. William Parke), and the one- and two-reelers *The Telegraph Operators* (Éclair, 1915?), *The Dude Operator* (Edison, 1917, d. Saul Harrison), and *One Kind of Wireless* (Edison, 1917, d. Harrison).

The "Iron Claw" chapter of *Mystery of the Double Cross* contains a typical spectacle shot of a new kind of telegraph, the shipboard wireless set, in which the complicated-looking (authentic?) machinery takes up the left third of a medium shot of its operator. Though filmed in close-up, the telegraph's role is not substantially different from the one played by a similar set in Wallace McCutcheon's 1908 Biograph film *Caught by Wireless,* where the machinery grabs all the attention in the single tableau shot in which it appears. The last three examples, however, are more unusual. Although they promise telegraphy in their titles, the films themselves focus less on telegraphy than on the acts of encoding and decoding various kinds of messages. They do this by envisioning "code" in various ways: by following shots of the telegraph with intertitles whose letters appear one at a time (*The Dude Operator);* by showing trapped lovers, both skilled operators, tapping messages to each other on a window (*The Telegraph Operators);* and by semaphore and flashing lights, used by a "boy" operator to avert a railroad disaster (*One Kind of Wireless*). The effacement of the titular medium altogether in the latter two "telegraph" films might be an indicator of how closely the cinema identified itself with telegraphy even at this late date, when producers were increasingly underplaying the cinema as a technology and emphasizing story and character. By phasing out telegraphs, *The Telegraph Operators* and *One Kind of Wireless* metaphorically stress the "naturalness" of cinematic storytelling, while nevertheless remaining reliant on the *idea* of the telegraph for narrative interest, and thus extending the telegraphic subtext of early films into the mid-teens. The screen image, these movies tell us, is just as capable of sending specific, complex messages as is the telegraph, because this image also relies on encoding to get its point across. The impact of the dramas these films spin relies in part upon the dialectical relationship they claim between cinema and telegraph, as each film rehearses the older medium's insistence that witnessing the act of transmission is the ultimate guarantee of unbiased contact between sender—in this case the film producers and their narrative proxies, the characters—

and receiver. For the present, I will call the telegraphic tone of these films *communicative realism*—a form of reflexivity that defines cinematic realism in terms of the "live" process of decoding cinematic messages, that is, the active work of spectatorship.

Rather than think of the films I've just described as "stuck" somewhere between the cinema of attractions and classical cinema, I want to suggest that communicative realism is integral to a baseline definition of protoclassical cinema, whose mightiest proponents continually promoted cinema as a very self-conscious form of speech: the "universal language" of the photoplay. In 1917, the year that *One Kind of Wireless* was produced, early film theorist Vachel Lindsay delivered an address at Columbia University (reported by Epes W. Sargent in *Moving Picture World*) in which he amended the definition of film as a unique art form that he had first outlined in *The Art of the Moving Picture* (1915). Lindsay's speech reemphasized his book's argument that film should never attempt to appeal to the ear, like drama, but only to the eye.[64] At the same time, however, the concept of speech dominated Lindsay's

> new definition of the photoplay, [which he declared] to be *a conversation between two places,* using for his illustration the balcony scene from the Bushman-Bayne production of Romeo and Juliet in which the flashes alternate between Romeo and the balcony where Juliet is sitting. Perhaps the idea may be better suggested by saying that photoplay demands a story that is never held long in a single location as opposed to the limitation of the stage settings of the spoken drama.[65]

Like the 1908 *Moving Picture World* anecdote, Lindsay's address stresses representation over presentationality as the essence of cinematic communication, mobilizing the term "conversation" mainly as a metaphor for how editing connects characters within the film. At the same time, however, he casts the location changes caused by shot–reverse shot editing as the epitome of cinematic speech, not a device that effaces itself in the service of naturalism but a technical feat to be appreciated as such (in a similar vein, Griffith's editing had been touted by reviewers of *The Birth of a Nation* two years before as proof that the cinema was becoming a unique form of art).

Lindsay's use of interspatial conversation as the leading metaphor for his definition of film reminds us that in 1917 the cinema was still presenting *itself* and its powers over space and time nearly as much as it presented stories, and not without aspects of its electrical media legacy in tow. By describing the smooth continuity of narrative editing as a "conversation" taking place between "flashes" (shots), Linsday and Sargent summon the intermedia specters of both the telephone (point-to-point conversation) and the telegraph

(with its transfer of messages in a flash, over the lightning lines) to help identify the newfound powers of this apparently noninteractive, photographic medium.[66] The telegraphic atmosphere surrounding films like *One Kind of Wireless* might be more important to Lindsay's definition of cinema than the telephone, however, because unlike the telephone, which delivered speech directly, telegraph and cinema transmitted messages in stages. Morse code had to be translated by an expert, and most dialogue in films had to be visualized in the form of intertitles, or inferred by the viewer who knew how to read visual codes such as pantomime, crosscutting, the close-up, and other devices which meant something quite different in their classical context than they had only a few years earlier. The "universal language" of cinema championed by Griffith, Lindsay, and many others in the 1910s—the new hieroglyphics, a picture language that would be instantly grasped by all—was nevertheless understood as a code that had to be self-consciously invented, taught, and learned before it could become naturalized.[67]

The focus on decoding in *One Kind of Wireless* and *The Telegraph Operators* visualizes Lindsay's theory of film as conversation by creating a parallel between the visual messages sent *in* the film and the visual messages sent *by* the film. Sargent's summary of Lindsay's speech leaves it a little ambiguous which two "places" Lindsay sees "conversing" in *Romeo and Juliet:* the places shown in shots A and B, or the imaginary space of the photoplay and the theater space. What makes the later telegraph films transitional in the history of the story film is that they remain overtly interested in the process of their own articulation (and invite the spectator's interest as well), while still honoring the industry's desire for representational transparency by motivating crosscuts in a more or less unobtrusive fashion. By 1917, industry and critics defined cinematic "realism" as the reduction of self-conscious spectacle, not its blatant recognition. And yet the acts of communication represented in films like *The Telegraph Operators* seem to be motivated by an aesthetic of telegraphic display more than a classical ideal of invisible storytelling. The intertitles carrying the literal message are utterly redundant and unnecessary to the narration; we cannot help but infer the message from the context, but the decoded message appears in the titles anyway. In the case of the two Edison films, the letters are revealed one at a time like individual Morse code signals unfurling in time before the well-trained operator. By displaying coded messages and translating them at the climactic moments, these scenes construct a makeshift analog to the self-referential authority of telegraphed news, supplementing the dramatic urgency with the familiar thrill of getting a news story hot from the wire.

The memory of the telegraph as a spectacle of communication seems to have been near enough in time to make these moments seem much less anomalous in 1917 than they do now, as we compare these films to the majority of mid-teens films, which appear to prefer unselfconscious story to self-conscious discourse. To conjure up the telegraph as these films of the 1910s do was to allegorize film's newly refined language of visual storytelling and turn it, paradoxically, into an attraction. If I am correct about the relative integrity of communicative realism as a moment in the development of classical cinema, then we are not so far from the operational aesthetic by 1917 after all, only as far as the public consumption of cinema was from the public consumption of the telegraph, and that distance was much shorter than we might have imagined. These films present their technological base and their textuality as factors that can peacefully coexist in the production of narrative entertainment. Indeed, the pleasure of watching early classical cinema may have depended in part on the feeling of being in on the act of constructing a new medium, learning a new technological language that had to be decoded by mobilizing not one but several kinds of inter- and extratextual knowledge. Viewers who wanted to involve themselves in the lives and stories of their new screen idols still had to decode what the pictures transmitted from afar were trying to say, and that act of decoding was a kind of labor that only "experts" in the language of cinematic narrative, not to mention that of the emerging star system with its dependence on extratextual publicity and scandals, could perform.

By inviting spectators to complete the circuit of filmic meaning by using their expertise in decoding sequences of images, the cinema rehearsed the old telegraphic expectations of universal access to media, and linked spectatorship with a discourse of free public exchange that continued to make the telegraph a symbol of (the possibility of) national unity even this late in its history. Whereas the privately owned telegraph business deflated fantasies of unity by blocking universal access, the equally privatized but literally collectivizing cinema found its niche in the kinds of mass "demonstrations" that had initially been crucial to the telegraph's cultural meaning but which became secondary to its more instrumental social functions. Without romanticizing the counter-public possibilities of film's second and third decades, I think it can be claimed that the cinema of the 1910s was still cast as a space of technologically sponsored exchange, in which the concept of cinematic "speech" and its interpretation hinged on the possibility of viewers' active, vocal engagement with films and fellow spectators, although the terms of that engagement were becoming more restrictive.[68]

Indeed, an important clue to the historical availability of the term *conversation* to describe shot-reverse shot editing may lie in the conceptual territory somewhere between

electrical communication as an allegory for editing (and vice-versa), and Lindsay's fervent request in *The Art of the Moving Picture* that spectators remain vocal participants in the cinematic experience, as if they were (shades of Bertolt Brecht!) watching a sports event:

> At the [theater] door let each person be handed the following card:—
> "You are encouraged to discuss the picture with the friend who accompanies you to this place. Conversation, of course, must be sufficiently subdued not to disturb the stranger who did not come with you to the theater. If you are so disposed, consider your answers to these questions: What [photo]play or part of a play given in this theatre did you like the most today? . . ."
> . . . The fan at the photoplay, as at the base-ball grounds, is neither a low-brow nor a high-brow. . . . In both places he has the privilege of comment while the game goes on.[69]

Lindsay tries to distinguish his scenario from the all-too-public atmosphere of the cinema of attractions, urging the reader to keep "strangers" strange and to conceive of the viewing public as a group only in the empirical sense. But his description of cinema-literate fans "roasting the umpire" (the exhibitor or producer, as the spectator wills) retains the distracted relationship to films that characterized the attractions mode, and, like Benjamin in his own extrapolation of Brecht's spectator-as-sports-fan ideal, casts the viewer as a technological expert possessing a distanced critical eye.[70]

In this sense, at least, spectators in 1917 could yet have experienced films as demonstrations of a communications medium under development, its aesthetic, social, and political futures still undecided and certainly still intertwined. Addressed as technological experts simply because they were watching films—an unusual occurrence at a time when technological consumption increasingly stressed the importance of functional knowledge over a deep understanding of how things worked, and left expertise in the hands of the engineers—early spectators sat in the presence of a visual "telegraph" that offered them an unusual opportunity to get in on the conversations of technological modernity.

### Acknowledgments

## Notes

1. Gunning, "*The Lonely Villa*," *The Griffith Project*, vol. 2, ed. Paolo Cherchi Usai (London: BFI/ Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, 1999), 143. See also Gunning, "Heard over the Phone: *The Lonely Villa* and the de Lorde Tradition of the Terrors of Technology," *Screen* 32 (1991): 186–187, and Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema: 1907–1915* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 64–71.

2. Raymond Bellour, "To Alternate/To Narrate," trans. Inge Pruks, *Early Cinema: Space/Frame/ Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser with Adam Barker (London: British Film Institute, 1990), 360–374.

3. Gunning, "Heard over the Phone," 186, 188–192, 193.

4. For the best sampling of theoretical and historical work on cinema's place in nineteenth-century visual culture, see *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, ed. Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

5. This essay concludes in 1917 in order to coincide with the year cited by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson as the year the "classical Hollywood cinema" began to stabilize, as a set of narrative-stylistic conventions and as a method of industrial production that achieved efficiency and intelligibility through these conventions. Bordwell et al., *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

6. If "the nation" is always both imagined and limited, as Benedict Anderson argues, then media like the telegraph and the cinema invite broader geographical participation in that shared fantasy while at the same time limiting participation to those who comprehend the lingua franca of the medium. By 1909, the cinema was expected to educate immigrants and thus invest them with an American identity precisely because its visual appeal seemed to circumvent the limits of language; but as I will relate in the conclusion, a discourse of visual symbolism kept notions of encoding and deciphering—and equally the notion of a community limited by shared knowledge—alive and well in discussions of cinema and politics. On national identity and print media, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 5–7 and 37–46.

7. See for example Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," *Early Cinema* 58; "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)credulous Spectator," *Film Theory and Criticism*, 5th ed., ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 818–832.

8. See Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), chapter 1 for an essential history of self-conscious "screen practices" from preindustrial Europe to nineteenth-century America. Hereafter I will refer to the book as *EC*.

9. Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973).

10. Charles Musser in collaboration with Carol Nelson, *High-Class Moving Pictures: Lyman H. Howe and the Forgotten Era of Traveling Exhibition, 1880–1920* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 15, 56, 51.

11. Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 211.

12. David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 62.

13. When Leo Marx first introduces the "technological sublime," he invests the concept with political as well as epistemological ambiguity: "Back of the stock epithets and the pious, oracular tone" used by early American writers to describe new technologies and their effects on an uncultured landscape, "there are emotions which cannot be dismissed as mere hokum: a plausible incredulity, wonder, elation, and pride; a generous, humane delight at the promise of so much energy so soon to be released. But this is not to deny the intellectual hollowness of the rhetoric. The stock response to the panorama of progress, as Mill observed, by-passes ideas; it is essentially a buoyant feeling generated without words or thought." Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 206–207. The abstractness and ambivalence of the technological sublime return in the form of representation in early films with telegraphic pretensions and themes. As I will suggest later, such ambiguous representations gave audiences an opportunity to draw their own conclusions about the significance of telegraphy and cinema for visions of a "unified" nation.

14. K. G. Beauchamp, *Exhibiting Electricity* (London: Institution of Electrical Engineers, 1997), 1.

15. See Beauchamp, 92, 120, 127, 178, 191, 207–208.

16. Musser and Nelson, 56.

17. For an extensive discussion of the intermedial positioning of sound recording and film, see James Lastra, *Sound Technology and the American Cinema: Perception, Representation, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000). It seems appropriate that one of the earliest Edison Kinetoscope arcade film loop viewers installed in France could be found at the telegraph office of the *Petit Parisien*, 20 boulevard Montmarte. See Deac Russell, "'The new thing with the long name and the old thing with the name that isn't much shorter': A Chronology of Cinema 1889–1896," *Film History* 7 (1995): 128.

18. Gunning, "An Aesthetic," 819–824.

19. Walter Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York, 1978), 152.

20. Gunning, "Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations: Spirit Photography, Magic Theater, Trick Films and Photography's Uncanny," *Fugitive Images: From Photography to Video*, ed. Patrice Petro (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1995), 45, 66.

21. Richard J. Noakes, "Telegraphy is an occult art: Cromwell Fleetwood Varley and the diffusion of electricity to the other world," *British Journal for the History of Science* 32 (1999): 423, 425.

For an extremely useful discussion of telegraphic occultism in the US, see Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), chapter 1.

22. Noakes, 422; see also Sconce, 21.

23. Sconce, 27.

24. See Leo Marx's discussion of Webster's railroad speeches of 1847, in which the orator extols the steam engine and the new railway lines for their democratic force: They allow national access to goods previously restricted to one region; they close gaps of time and distance among the regions; and they are claimed (symbolically) by all Americans as "theirs." Marx, *The Machine in the Garden,* 209–214.

25. Alan J. Marcus and Howard P. Segal, *Technology in America: A Brief History* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), 100.

26. George B. Prescott, *History Theory, and Practice of the Electric Telegraph,* 4th ed. (Boston, 1866), 215.

27. See Menahem Blondheim, *News Over the Wires: The Telegraph and the Flow of Public Information in America, 1844–1897* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 4 and 208–209 (note 13); Joel A. Tarr (with Thomas Finholt and David Goodman), "The City and the Telegraph: Urban Telecommunications in the Pre-Telephone Era," *Journal of Urban History* 14, no. 1 (1987): 50.

28. Richard B. Du Boff, "The Telegraph in Nineteenth-Century America: Technology and Monopoly," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26 (1984): 581.

29. Marvin, 221, 213–214.

30. Samuel Clemens, "Mrs. McWilliams and the Lightning" (1880), *The Complete Stories of Mark Twain,* ed. Charles Neider (New York: Bantam, 1990), 158.

31. Musser, *EC* 315–316; see also Musser's 1982 documentary film *Before the Nickelodeon,* which includes *Kansas Saloon Smashers* and a number of other "visual newspaper" films.

32. See Charles Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 162–63 (hereafter referred to as *BN*). Allen is quoted in Musser, *BN,* 162; see Robert C. Allen, "Contra the Chaser Theory," *Film Before Griffith,* ed. John Fell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 110.

33. Marvin, 221.

34. Jonathan Auerbach, "McKinley at Home: How Early American Cinema Made News, *American Quarterly* 51 (1999): 808–809.

35. Marvin reports fantasies circulating in the American and British presses by 1889 that promised we would "see by telegraph" as soon as Edison got around to inventing such a device. Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New,* 197, 260. See also Mark Twain's story "From the London Times,

1904," which casts (what else?) a wry glance at such fantasies by returning them to the social con text from which they were nearly always divorced.

36. Musser, *EC,* 241.

37. Prescott, v; Blondheim, 4.

38. Musser, *BN,* 69.

39. Auerbach, 813.

40. Discussing the political dimension of McKinley and William Jennings Bryan films of 189( Musser says of William Heise's film *Bryan Train Scene at Orange* (Edison, 1896) that it was not "re olutely anti-Democratic," but neither was it "necessarily meant to be pro-Bryan. Rather it coul be exhibited ambiguously and elicit both cheers and catcalls, generating an informal opinion po from an audience." Musser, *BN,* 69.

41. Miriam Hansen distinguishes between *audience* and *spectator* as historical categories of cinem viewership: The first refers to viewers as "member[s] of a particular social group," while the sec ond refers to the more ahistorical, universalizing, and isolated conception of the viewer that b( came the ideal for "social uplift" critics of early cinema and members of the film industry alik beginning roughly in 1908–1909. The burgeoning narrative cinema began to shed its rowdy fai ground trappings for good only when it abstracted the empirical, historical viewer into an om niscient subject position via the formal and stylistic paradigm of classical cinema. See Hanser *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Pres 1991), 84.

42. *New York World,* November 16, 1896, and *New Haven News,* November 23, 1896; rpt. in Nive *Biograph Bulletins 1896–1908,* ed. Bebe Bergsten (Los Angeles, 1971), 18.

43. Auerbach, 811.

44. See Hansen, *Babel and Babylon,* chapters 1–2. Given that Hansen argues that the combinatic of the ambiguity of "attractions" films and the locally determined conditions of their exhibitic *offered a structural possibility* for response and debate, Auerbach's assertion that his more dete ministic and one-sided argument is "dialectical" compared to Hansen's (and Gunning's) is pu zling. Hansen asserts an ambiguous opportunity for early cinema to become an alternative publ sphere for political discussion (see chapter 3) and shows how the institution of classical cinen limited this possibility at the level of the text. Auerbach, on the other hand, closes out this hi torical dialectic, in which self-conscious publicness pulls against an experience of "privatized," al sorbed viewing, in favor of a claim that the latter had already taken hold of viewers by 1896.

45. Blondheim, 174; Du Boff, 582, 583.

46. Blondheim, 193.

47. Marvin, 107. For information on Alexander Graham Bell's 1876 telephone concerts and th public accessibility of telephones by 1902 (more than 2 million phones in the United States, thr(

and a half percent of which were pay phones), see Sidney H. Aronson, "Bell's Electrical Toy: What's the Use? The Sociology of Early Telephone Usage," *The Social Impact of the Telephone,* ed. Ithiel de Sola Pool (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977), 20, 32.

48. See Noël Burch, "Porter, or Ambivalence," *Screen* 19, no. 4 (1978–1979): 91–105.

49. On the saloon as social hub of "workingmen's leisure," see Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 16–18.

50. Blondheim, 36.

51. André Gaudreault, "Detours in Film Narrative: The Development of Cross-Cutting," trans. Charles Musser and Martin Sopocy, *Early Cinema,* 139.

52. Tarr et al., "The City and the Telegraph," 59.

53. Firefighting was a popular topic in many forms of turn-of-the-century mass culture, regularly sensationalized and sentimentalized in fiction, poetry, newspapers, popular engravings, plays, magic lantern shows, and films. See Musser, *BN,* 218–221. On the showcasing of various rehearsed disasters at Coney and elsewhere, and their function as a stimulus shield for the subjects of modernity, see John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 71–72.

54. See Musser, *BN,* 216.

55. "The film [*The Life of an American Fireman*] opens with a montage often comprising ellipses so startling that one wonders how audiences could follow the story without a lecturer's help" (Burch, 103).

56. Tarr, 53, 59.

57. The scene is infamous because the print acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in 1944 differs dramatically from the Library of Congress copyright print. In the former, the climactic scene is crosscut so that narrative time unfolds continuously between the exterior and interior of the house. André Gaudreault convincingly argues that the crosscut version was reedited much later, and that the copyright version is probably close to the version distributed in 1903. See Gaudreault, "Detours in Film Narrative,"133, 146–147, and passim. The copyright print's version of the final event fits more nearly with the structure of the film as a whole, which privileges seriality over narrative causality.

58. Musser, *BN,* 222.

59. I am referring to the temporal relationships early audiences perceived between the profilmic event and the film of that event. For an examination of chronology and temporality as they operate *within* early narratives, see Gunning, "'Now You See It, Now You Don't': The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions," *Silent Film,* ed. Richard Abel (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 71–84.

60. Uricchio, "Television, Film and the Struggle for Media Identity," *Film History* 10 (1998): 119, 125.

61. Charles Musser argues that the "Realism" label placed on this shot indicates the relevance of "identification and emotional involvement with the drama" to the discourse of filmic realism even as early as 1903. My position obviously differs, but I am also suggesting that no single definition of realism overshadowed all the others at the time. Instead, "realism" appears to have been as heterogeneous and contradictory a category in early cinema as it was historically contingent. See Musser, "The Travel Genre in 1903–1914; Moving toward Fictional Narrative," *Early Cinema,* 130.

62. "Film Realism," *Moving Picture World* 3, no. 22 (November 28, 1908): 427.

63. For the key discussion of the industry's attempts to stabilize itself through production practices in 1908–1909, see Gunning, "Weaving a Narrative: Style and Economic Background in Griffith's 1908–1909 Biograph Films," *Early Cinema,* 336–340.

The use of intertitles in silent film has sometimes led scholars and students to assume that early cinema tagged its own silence as lack, acknowledging sound and especially speech as elements without which film was incomplete. In fact, however, the intertitle was considered a necessary evil—"evil" because it drew too much attention to itself. Eileen Bowser helps to debunk the myth of lack by outlining a debate that began around 1907 in the trade press about the relative value of intertitling to storytelling. The title allowed companies to confer complex story information that, at the time, could not be expressed clearly through any other means (editing being the most important possibility, one that Griffith would explore in new directions beginning the following year), and so served the industry's interests in cloaking its products in respectability and sophistication, and gaining greater control over the meanings of pictures. But the intertitle clashed with the industry and trade press's growing concern to make pictures "artistic" in their own right and, perhaps most surprisingly, its status as a visual interruption was thought to break the increasingly important illusion of reality (Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema,* 140).

64. Almost nothing annoyed Lindsay more about film in 1915 than the use of stray music, unsanctioned by the filmmakers, to accompany screenings. See Linsday, *The Art of the Moving Picture* (1915, rev. ed. 1922; New York: Liveright, 1970), chapter 14.

65. Epes W. Sargent, "Vachel Lindsay on the Photoplay," *Moving Picture World* 31, no. 10 (March 10, 1917): 1583 (my emphasis).

66. Although it may seem something of a stretch to align "flashes" with "lightning lines," early names for the film camera appear to be etymologically linked to idiomatic names for the telegraph. Musser reprints two separate stories from the *Newark Daily News* detailing the shooting of *Life of an American Fireman* that use peculiarly telegraphic words to name the kinetograph: "chain-lightning cameras" and "lightning cameras." Musser, *BN,* 212 and 213.

67. A good example of the natural/learned paradox lodged in the concept of film as universal language can be found in a 1910 *Moving Picture World* story by the Reverend William Henry Jackson, cited by Miriam Hansen: "The ear may comprehend but one language, the eye comprehends all languages; [many] races may sit side by side and together read in the universal language of

the eye the selfsame subject," Jackson writes, implying that moving pictures may be automatically comprehended worldwide. But he acknowledges the need for conscious development when he avers that "we are still in the A B C of a new field; the alphabet must become a language, the toy will become a worldwide utility." Hansen, "Universal Language and Democratic Culture: Myths of Origin in Early American Cinema," *Myth and Enlightenment in American Literature,* ed. Dieter Meindl and Friedrich W. Horlacher with Martin Christadler (Erlangen: Universitätsbund Erlangen-Nürnberg 1985), 328.

68.  This claim implies the extension of Hansen's argument about the counter-public structure of early film exhibition beyond *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance* (1916), films that each signaled the waning of the cinema of attractions in their own way (although as Hansen shows, the star system has kept the possibility of "excessive" viewing practices very much alive since then). For Hansen, the social and discursive heterogeneity of the nickelodeon enabled audiences, particularly immigrants, to recognize the perceptual and political fundamentals of their life experience: "The nickelodeon . . . opened up into a fantastic space, giving pleasure in the juxtaposition of diverse, often incompatible, and at times impossible sites or sights. . . . The aesthetics of disjunction not only contested the presumed homogeneity of dominant culture and society in the name of which immigrants were marginalized and alienated; more important, it lent the experience of disorientation and displacement the objectivity of collective expression." Hansen, *Babel and Babylon,* 108.

69.  Lindsay, 225, 227.

70.  "The film makes the cult value [of the work of art] recede into the background not only by putting the public in the position of the critic, but also by the fact that at the movies this position requires no attention. The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one." Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations,* ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 240–241.

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