

Cinema of attractions

[Entertainment](#), [Movie](#)



The cinema of attraction. ' A matter of making images seen. ' This is what Fernand Leger was writing in 1902 about the new art, trying to describe the possible changes in cinema, by emphasizing the fact that imitating the movements of nature is not necessarily the best way of defining cinema's essence. This is only one of the writings concerning this topic which influenced Tom Gunning in characterizing the cinematic period before 1906 as that of the ' cinema of attractions'.

In this essay I am going to talk about the cinema of attractions and its main characteristics with examples from several early films, with an emphasis on ' Un homme de tetes' (Georges Melies, 1898) and L'arrivee d'un train a la Ciotat (Auguste and Louis Lumiere, 1895). History of the cinema of attractions

The term of ' cinema of attractions' was introduced into the study of film by Tom Gunning and Andre Gaudreault in 1985, describing a filmmaking technique used for early films, until 1906, in which the main interest is in the spectacle and the audience's visual experience rather than in the narrative side. The cinema of attractions employed delights like colors, costumes, commentary, sometimes even grotesque features, like freaks or indigenous people. In the simplest terms, it was a cinema based on entertainment, shock and sensations, the ability of showing something.

The main difference between this style and the cinema in later years is the focus: the cinema of attractions is trying to take the spectators on an unique trip to an extraordinary place, by inviting them to look, get involved and be amazed by these perfect illusions, rather than telling a story, while the narrative cinema focuses on humanpsychology, continuity of the plot and <https://assignbuster.com/cinema-of-attractions/>

characters. The term ‘attract’ is defined by the English dictionary as ‘to draw by appealing to the emotions or senses, by stimulating interest, or by exciting admiration; allure; invite’.

In cinema, Eisenstein was one of the first people to use ‘attraction’ as a way of describing his techniques, which had either a physical or psychological unexpected impact on the audience, due to its direct address towards it, sometimes causing an emotional shock, through aggressivity and due to the unpredictability of the moment. Attractions of the early cinema. The first film that I am going to analyze is directed by the Lumiere brothers, which interpret cinema as the transcription of real unstaged life, opposing to Melies who saw cinema as invention, artifice, illusion, fantasy.

Around this 50 seconds film there are different myths, some of which say that in the first showing of the movie, a lot of the spectators screamed, thinking that the train is going to hit them, and some of them even left the room, because of the illusion of the train moving towards them. This myth is why nowadays people tend to think of the early audience as naive, but at the same time, they forget to take in consideration other aspects, like the transformation which is occurring in front of their eyes, the idea of change and also the historical and social background.

The primary object of most early films seems to be the personal space, which is invaded on a certain level. By triggering stressor fear, or choosing real-life danger objects like trains and other vehicles, the personal space is invaded and bodily reactions are being triggered, which is the main purpose of the cinema of attractions, by engaging the viewer in the exhibition. In 1986, Maxim Gorky writes a review of the Lumiere programme, and he uses <https://assignbuster.com/cinema-of-attractions/>

words like ‘ straight at you’, ‘ shield’, ‘ will reach you’, which, once again, shows the physical reaction that people had. Nevertheless, one must not confuse this with a complete illusion.

People did not actually believe that the train will physically hurt them, but they were allowing themselves to enjoy the thrill of the cinematic magic. If we were to take a clear example of the details which change this perspective of a credulous audience, the exhibition of The Black Diamond Express is one of the strongest ones, as the movie had a presenter, described as a ‘ terrorist mood setter’ which introduced the audience in a dramatic atmosphere, by describing the images of a locomotive rushing into the camera as an unique moment in history, in which it will come towards them with its dreadful ‘ iron throat’.

This puts the danger that people believed to be in, in a new light, showing that their emotions and anxiety were influenced by the atmosphere created, together with the novelty of this type of entertainment. This type of delay, the suspension, the wait for an already announced unusual thing to be happening accentuate its impact over the image perceived by the crowd. Locomotives, trains and generally moving objects were preferred by directors, as they easily created a sensation of fear, which could also represent a sensual reaction, as we saw earlier, viewers running out of the movie theater.

This experience could nowadays be compared to that of a roller coaster, described by Gunning as ‘ sensations of acceleration and falling with a security guaranteed by the modern industrial technology’, which in my opinion precisely describes people’s experience from 100 years ago as well,

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as they were well aware of the fact that it was just an illusion, but that didn't mean they were refusing to be drawn in the experience, especially considering its innovation.

Another aspect of the cinema of attraction is confrontation, which holds the viewer and makes it impossible for him to lose himself into absorption, like before in other arts like painting or sculpture: 'attractions address the viewer directly, soliciting attention and curiosity through acts of display'. [1] This type of art asks for an immediate response from the audience, as the images are moving, evolving- a living screen. 'Unlike psychological narrative, the cinema of attractions does not allow for elaborate development, only a limited amount of delay is really possible'. TG, p122) It is exactly this newness that makes it exciting, as it instantly produces a show with a high impact, offering sensational thrills through powerful images in motion, without the traditional narrative structure. In this type of cinema, the spectator identifies himself with the camera more than a character and his confrontation with the film is rather unmediated by the story. Hence, seeing this exhibitionist style as a precursor for the later narrative structures would show a misunderstanding of its value. Another iconic film for the cinema of attractions is *Un homme de têtes*, 1895.

I have chosen to discuss this film because of its director, which most of the time is put in contrast with the Lumiere brothers, because of their different styles. The first one uses editing and multi shots, while the Lumiere brothers show nature caught on camera, in a single shot. Still, both styles have the same essence, that of the act of display, the pleasure of the spectacle. One aspect that one can definitely notice in Melies' film is the presence of a

showman/monstrator whose role is to present the film to the audience, a mediator between the crowd and the experience itself.

As Gunning states, ' The showman rather than the film themselves gives the program an overarching structure, and the key role of the exhibition showman underscores the act of monstration than founds the cinema of attractions. '(TG, p. 122) As an example, Melies, who was a performer himself, during the movie which lasts less than two minutes, gesticulates with his hands towards himself and the heads, in a way directing the public's attention to the main points, the heads, which are part of his magic trick. This, once again, puts the spectator in an external position, making him aware of the act of looking.

This does not distance him, but, on the contrary, makes him part of the whole show, emphasizing the realism and the interactivity of the cinema. The tricks found in his films represent the typical burst of attraction, when there is a transformation of an object into something else: ' In its double nature, its transformation of still image into moving illusions, it expresses an attitude in which astonishment and knowledge perform a vertiginous dance, and pleasure derives from the energy released by the play between the shock caused by this illusion of danger and delight in its pure illusion'. (TG, p. 29) One more time, it is emphasized that the audience knew how to make the difference between reality and illusion, and that movement is what cinematography promised, while still experiencing sensational thrills and feeding their hunger of consuming the world through images. From the examples above, we can see Tom Gunning's idea of cinema of attraction come to life, and the way in which it dominated the first decade of early

cinema, through the first silent movies and their exhibitionist characteristics. Their ability to show something without a narrative structure has fulfilled the audience's visual curiosity of thrills, danger and magic, while drawing them in the film, creating strong bodily sensation. Therefore, cinema of attractions is a primary response to people's wish of seeing a spectacle apart than storytelling, in which their body is engaged rather than the mind through a succession of instants. Claudia Mangeac 1623 words

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9. L'arrivee d'un train a la Ciotat (Auguste and Louis Lumiere, 1895). ----- [1] Tom Gunning, ' An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator' (pg. 121)