**Colin Williamson**
**Sample Prompts for Undergraduate Seminar "Creative Projects in Film History"**


"PHOTO-ESSAY" PROMPT

**Prompt:** Draft a 2-3 page, single-spaced "photo essay" (roughly 600-700 words) using the Eadweard Muybridge plate(s) you selected for this course. Photo essays typically tell a story in combined image-text format. Approach this as a thought exercise in which you develop some questions about your image(s) and offer some historical context using the readings on Muybridge that we have covered (Gunning, Solnit, Braun). Here are some specifics:

- **You must include your primary image(s) and at least 3 other images**. The additional images can be pieces of your primary image(s)—e.g., cutting out one frame of the plate—or they can be images that help you develop an idea about your central image(s).

- **You must integrate material from at least 2 of your assigned readings**. Use our sources to develop some context for your image(s)—e.g., Who/what is in the photograph? When, where, and how was the photograph produced? What is the photograph's relationship with Muybridge's larger project?

**Your general tasks are to put the plate(s) you selected in a historical context and to begin developing research questions about your plate(s) that you can explore this semester**. Rather than developing a concise argument, push yourself to be exploratory and draw on useful ideas and quotes from the readings to develop questions and ideas. You can be creative and experimental in your writing, but overall try to keep it simple.

**See the sample photo essay excerpt on the next page.**

SAMPLE PHOTO ESSAY FORMAT

"Organic Machine: Muybridge's Galloping Horse"
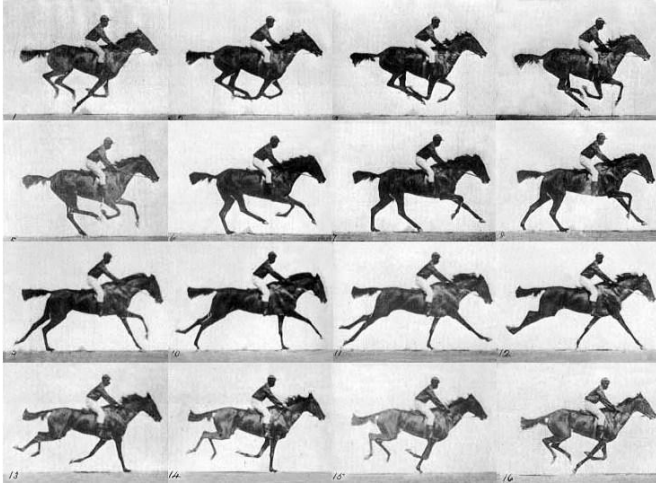


The image is now a familiar one: a horse suspended, at once still and moving, chasing the edge of a frame that it will never cross. When Muybridge photographed the horse in 1878, the sight was decidedly unfamiliar, not because the horse appears to float weightlessly, although that is wonderful in itself, but because the mechanical vision that made the sight possible unlocked a secret dimension of movement in time, what Walter Benjamin called the "optical unconscious" of life in the modern world ("Work of Art," 237). The horse, we might say, captured the instant that the camera made the familiar world a strange and newly unfamiliar place.

Perhaps more than Muybridge, this horse has shaped the mythology that shrouds the origins of the cinema. As the myths go, the cinema was invented because of a bet and some dubious skepticism by a man named Stanford about whether the hooves do indeed collectively come off the ground, leaving the horse untethered for an instant. The hooves do, obviously and quite gracefully. While Stanford's wager has been largely debunked, there remains something strange lurking behind the horse—a one "Sallie Gardner"—frozen in time. Why a horse? Is it significant that, of all the subjects Muybridge could have chosen to photograph "first," he chose a horse? When the Lumière Brothers filmed trains arriving at



stations in the 1890s, they did so in part because the train was an emblem of modernity, of a radically changing world moved and changed by machines, that resonated with the cinematograph, a machine that set the world in motion. Was the horse similarly emblematic, perhaps of an older, more familiar, organic way of life that was suspended, a world that, as Rebecca Solnit explains, "seemed ever more alienated by technological change" (*River*, 23)?



It cannot be a coincidence that toward the end of the nineteenth century, the horse figured prominently in conversations about the changing landscape of modern life. Muybridge's horse is reflected darkly, for example, in this 1897 illustration in the *New York World* capturing the literal and figurative collision between a pastoral way of life and a modern way of life being shaped by new technologies…

<center>"ITERATION" PROMPT</center>

**Prompt:** In "Resurrecting the Technological Past," Erkki Huhtamo explains that "media archaeological artists" produce pieces of media art that "could be even seen as a form of spatialized, conversational 'historical writing,' as a way of maintaining a dialogue with the technological past" (np). Such artworks challenge linear conceptions of history and privilege the idea of circularity. The idea is that, rather than being replaced and left behind, the past periodically returns and gets renewed in different forms.

**Your task is to "renew" your Muybridge plate in a creative way that is informed by Huhtamo's discussion of how media artists are bringing together art and media archaeology**. You can turn your plate into an animated GIF, reproduce it as a philosophical toy or a hand-drawn animation, recreate it using new actors and digital photography, add a soundtrack to it, among other things. The form and scope of this creative project is up to you, but it should adhere to the following:

- **You must use and/or refer directly to the photographic plate with which you have been working this semester**

- **You must create something that sheds "new" light on Muybridge's plate. For example, if you create a GIF, you are working with a digital format that, if uploaded to the internet, could theoretically run forever on its own—a significant variation on Muybridge's animations, which had to be run by hand. You could also update Muybridge's photo with a contemporary version of or commentary on its theme. You can be creative with this, but think of making something that plays with the dialogue between the "old and the new," even if only on the level of technique.**

**Evaluation:** Your exercise will be evaluated primarily in terms of conceptualization rather than technical merit or simplicity/complexity based on the criteria above. Focus on working with our core theoretical ideas.

**Resources:** Most ideas can be done using your personal computer, but you also have access to to the university's computer labs. If you would like assistance with figuring out how to execute your project, please see Professor Williamson. We will also dedicate some class "lab" periods to working on these.