

Promise of Cinema, Utrecht University

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NB

This was a somewhat peculiar course format. The topic “Promise of Cinema” was taught in two of the four ten-week blocks of the Utrecht academic year. I addressed graduate students who were enrolled in our Research MA (comparable to an Mphil programme) “Media, Arts, and Performance”, but open also to students from other RMA programmes and graduate exchange students. As few of the students had been studying early cinema before, the challenge was to give them a crash-course-introduction (which I did in class) and have them choose a topic early on. The major part of the course meetings consisted of discussions of their individual projects and progress. Below are two mails with instructions and material that was available online (which I had first used during the pandemic).

Dear students,

You are enrolled in Histories, Archaeologies, Archives, which will be dedicated in this block to “The promise of cinema”. We will explore ideas about cinema as an emerging medium in the early years of the 20th century (up to the First World War) and look at the expectations, fears and hopes that were connected to animated photography as a new media technology.

Weekly meetings for this course will take place on Wednesday morning, 11.15-12.45 at Janskerkhof 15A, 204.

Please find links to some materials below. If you have time, do have a look at them. Maybe you can already identify an area or topic you are interested in. Also, I will send a list of suggested viewings in a second mail. I hope all the links still work.

Best regards and see you next week Wednesday,
Frank

CORE MATERIALS

Francesco Casetti (ed.) collection of early film theoretical writings in

Italy: <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/31267>

The Promise of Cinema, English translations of German Texts, some original German texts, lots of other materials and links: <http://www.thepromiseofcinema.com>

Die Zeit des Bildes ist angebrochen, website Zürich University, with some French materials and some German translations of French texts.

<https://www.film.uzh.ch/de/research/publications/einzel/zeit-des-bildes.html>

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL

Other online resources:

Klaus Kreimeier's website with many films from the early period: <https://traumundexzess.com/>

Luke McKernans former blog where you can find all sorts of entries on early and silent cinema: <https://thebioscope.net>

Digital Media History Library, with many digitised journals (a wonderful resource): <http://mediahistoryproject.org>

Domitor, the international organisation for the study of early cinema: <https://domitor.org>
Under "Research" you will find the "Journals Project" that lists digitised film journals from the early and silent period (and beyond), many of which are not part of the Media History Digital Library.

Women Film Pioneers Project: <https://wfpp.columbia.edu>

Here you can also find several interesting overview essays, biographical portraits of many women who were active in the early film industry as well as links to a variety of resources.

Some secondary literature on early cinema.

Open Access books:

Ivo Blom on Jean Desmet, a Dutch distributor in the 1910s:

<https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/35113>

Nanna Verhoeff on early Westerns: <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/35150>

Wanda Strauven (ed.) Cinema of Attractions Reloaded:

<https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/35197>

Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, Early cinema in China, Taiwan, Hongkong:

<https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/23991>

Thomas Elsaesser (ed.) texts on early German cinema:

<https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/35080>

Ben Brewster / Lea Jacobs: Theater to Film (on film acting in early cinema and the 1910s)

https://is.muni.cz/el/1421/jaro2013/FAV248/um/Brewster_et_Jacobs_-_Theatre_to_Cinema.pdf

Roberta Pearson, Eloquent Gestures (on acting in Griffith

films) <https://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft5t1nb3jp&brand=ucpress>

David Bordwell:

Article on Louis Feuillade, a French filmmaker from the 1910s:

http://www.davidbordwell.net/articles/Bordwell_Velvet%20Light%20Trap_no37_spring1996_10.pdf

Article on Nordisk tableau aesthetics: <http://www.davidbordwell.net/essays/nordisk.php>

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Viewing Suggestions

I was thinking that those of you who have little experience with early cinema might appreciate some guidance in making choices what to view. Obviously, you are welcome to explore much more on your own. I have not selected any of the feature-length film which were produced in the early 1910s, but among those there of course many interesting examples of filmmaking.

So here are some suggestions with links that are categorized in some ways that may help you framing these examples. First, I list types of non-fiction films, then I list some from the fiction film canon, but also from typical genres.

NB There will be music accompanying these films, none of which is original as musical accompaniment was played live during the projection, but with a few rare exceptions there was no fixed score. Sometimes there may even be very modern compositions that are nothing like the historical music played during a projection.

So take some time for viewing (many of the films are relatively short) and have fun.
Best regards,
Frank

Non-fiction:

> Lumière Brothers

Lumière, Entrée du cinématographe, London

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Gi3Mdjnv_4

(self-advertising, street scene, look at where the camera is positioned in order to have a continuous flow of movement)

Lumière, Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat

<https://catalogue-lumiere.com/arrivee-train-a-la-ciotat/>

A classic (here in a 4K scan), and a myth. Read also the text accompanying the film (scroll down for English).

Lumière Jardin du Luxembourg

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iXVB7umb1Qk>

Watch out for the moment when a little boy is blocking the view of the camera.

There are many more Lumière films you can watch online. I chose these three because they all say something about the strategy of filming. Look how the camera is positioned and the scenes are framed.

> Phantom rides

Phantom rides, i.e. the camera put on a moving train or other vehicle were an important early non-fiction genre, very 'attractional' to audiences. Here are several examples you can watch:

<https://traumundexzess.com/2012/11/28/title-15258236/>

> Travelogues

Many early non-fiction films portray countries, regions, cities etc. Here are two about the Netherlands. The opening shot of the "Winter in Holland" film is completely staged, as you will see. And you'll notice that we don't get this kind of winters any more....

<https://traumundexzess.com/2019/04/29/impressions-of-the-netherlands/>

And here are two more Dutch views, in colour. (We can talk about colour, if you like to, in one of our meetings).

<https://traumundexzess.com/2015/12/07/colours-true-to-nature/>

Finally, one by an Italian company, one of the rare examples of a film from that period showing aspects of Dutch modern life.

<https://traumundexzess.com/2018/08/17/holland-through-italian-eyes/>

> Films about work and production

Another important non-fiction genre were films about work and production. They often follow something like a narrative pattern. Here it is the 'a day in a life' trope (including staged scenes at the beginning and the end).

<https://traumundexzess.com/2015/02/07/frueher-dokumentarfilm-20067827/>

And here is a Russian Film on a fish factory following the production process as a kind of narrative.

<https://traumundexzess.com/2017/02/26/a-russian-french-documentary-1908/>

> Events

Many films were made on topical events (some were reconstructions, that is staged films, but here I stick to actualities). As here the filming was very much dependent on the local circumstances, it is interesting to look how the cameras are positioned and how the duration of the actual event is translated into the films (look at the first scenes of people getting into the coaches in the first film about King George).

Here two films documenting suffragettes' actions:

<https://traumundexzess.com/2014/11/07/suffragetten-19681103/>

And here two on King George's visit to Paris in 1914.

<https://traumundexzess.com/2016/11/14/1914-george-v-in-paris/>

> Science

These films are rather on science popularization, but there were also films made on/for scientific research, but those were generally not shown publicly but rather used for teaching or demonstration purposes.

Here is one using microscopic images (but embedded in a narrative sequence of a man eating):

<https://traumundexzess.com/2018/06/30/shot-through-a-microscope/>

And here are some examples from a series made by the French company Éclair:

<https://traumundexzess.com/2019/08/21/eclair-scientia/>

Fiction

> Early 'classics' (considered 'must-know')

1902 Georges Méliès, Voyage dans la lune

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9m830jhUi3E>

(If you click on the read more button, you will find a description of the film, which is quite useful, as otherwise it is not easy to follow the narrative. There is also a - much debated - colour version that you can find on the traumundexzess site)

1902/03 Edwin S. Porter, Life of an American Fireman

1903 Edwin S. Porter, The Great Train Robbery

Two canonical films. The Fireman film caused a debate because there was a print showing the rescue of a woman and a child in an alternating editing. Later it turned out that an

archivist had edited the film in the 1930s. So what spectators saw in 1903 was indeed an 'action replay', similar to what we now know from sports on tv. One could say, that Porter showed the scene twice to offer two different views on the same attractional scene.

Great Train Robbery is famous for the close shot of the bandit 'shooting at the audience', which according to the catalogue exhibitors could also edit in at the beginning of the film.

<https://traumundexzess.com/2012/12/05/edwin-s-porter-blockbuster-edison-15283712/>

1906-1907 Alice Guy, several films

Here are some of the films directed by Alice Guy, who was one of the producers/directors of the Gaumont company.

<https://traumundexzess.com/2015/07/05/slapsticks-by-alice-guy-20638683/>

1908 Louis Feuillade, Une dame vraiment bien

This is the film at the bottom. A typical comedy from that period, because it consists of a series of accidents - one in every shot - caused here simply by a lady passing, literally turning men's heads. Feuillade is another important director of Gaumont, famous in the 1910s for his serials Fantômas and Les Vampires.

<https://traumundexzess.com/2013/01/21/franzoesische-serien-stars-15451619/>

(Obviously, you can also look on the other comedies on this post.)

1909 David Wark Griffith, The Lonely Villa

1912 David Wark Griffith, An Unseen Enemy

There are several more Griffith films on these posts and all are worth watching, but these two will give you a sense on how Griffith's filmmaking evolved over these three years. Both films have similar plots - women threatened by armed burglars in isolated houses - and feature last minute rescues with cross-cutting. But as you'll see, in 1912 Griffith extends the rescue considerably, building up suspense.

The Lonely Villa <https://traumundexzess.com/2013/02/20/cross-cutting-griffith-15552167/>

An Unseen Enemy (third film on this

post) <https://traumundexzess.com/2013/02/22/unseen-enemy-r-david-w-griffith-k-billy-bitzer-d-15557713/>

1910 Urban Gad, Afgrunden

This is the film that made Asta Nielsen a star, while it was her first screen appearance.

<https://traumundexzess.com/2013/01/31/title-15486823/>

1913 Lois Weber/Phillips Smalley, Suspense

This is another, very sophisticated version on the 'lonely villa' theme and you can see how Weber/Smalley use very unusual camera positions. Weber is another important woman film pioneer.

<https://traumundexzess.com/2014/08/08/suspense-r-lois-weber-phillips-smalley-b-lois-weber-d-19082376/>

> Genres

Variety Acts

Many films reproduced variety acts but were not recordings of actual theatrical shows. Here is one example of an act by the Music Hall performer Little Tich

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MFB4oHajwGw>

And another one by Méliès mimicking an act in front of an audience but using trick techniques. A truly brilliant film.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxHVAT9ylA8>

Chase Films

Chase films are considered an important genre from the point of view of narrative, but as you will see, the attraction (the accidents in every shot) are clearly dominant. That was a really international genre.

Here a British example, The Unfortunate Policeman (second film on the post)

<https://traumundexzess.com/2012/12/29/chase-films-15365095/>

An Italian one

<https://traumundexzess.com/2013/01/04/panik-paranoia-15395623/>

And a French one, Le cheval emballé

<https://traumundexzess.com/2013/01/09/durchgehende-gaeule-15412084/>

Trick films

This was a very popular genre and rather emblematic for the cinema of attractions.

A very weird film is How It Feels to Be Run Over (1900), second film on this post

<https://traumundexzess.com/2012/12/24/fatale-fahrzeuge-i-15350275/>

Here are several by Segundo de Chomón who worked for Pathé frères. I would suggest you have a look at Le Roi des Dollars (1905) and El Hotel Electrico (1908), second film and last one on this post.

<https://traumundexzess.com/2014/06/20/segundo-de-chomon-18705449/>

Fairy Tales and Fantasy Films

Equally an important genre (many Méliès films fall into this category), which makes use of tricks as well. So the borders to the trick film genre are not very rigid.

Here is a British example, Alice in Wonderland (1903). You'll see that much of the narrative happens in the titles rather than being visually told, while the images stay often close to the illustrations of the book.

<https://traumundexzess.com/2014/10/05/alice-wonderland-19510443/>

And a French one, La Peine du Tailon (1906) in which cruelty to animals is punished.

<https://traumundexzess.com/2015/09/04/fantasy-and-horror/>

Historical Films

These are rather narration-oriented films, but often focusing on the well-known moments of a historical event. Historical films were often part of the efforts of the film industry to gain cultural recognition in a period where cinema itself was seen by many as a moral danger. An initiative to counter this was the French Film d'Art of which L'Assassinat du Duc de Guise (1908) was an emblematic production.

Here we actually do have an original score by Camille Saint Saëns (which was part of the effort to gain cultural recognition).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dx8jVEtTjXY>

Here is an Italian example, La presa di Roma (1905) on Garibaldi taking the city of Rome.

<https://traumundexzess.com/2015/04/27/risorgimento-20256449/>

You might also have a look at Anita Garibaldi (1911), third film on this post.

Drama/melodrama/social drama

Here, too, narration plays a larger role than in other early genres, without neglecting attractional moments.

A must-see in the Netherlands: Le Moulin maudit by Alfred Machin (1909)

<https://traumundexzess.com/2013/01/31/title-15486823/>

Any of these three Thanhouser productions, which belong to what is called the 'transitional period' where narrative becomes more dominant.:

<https://traumundexzess.com/2017/06/05/exploring-character-psychology/>

A bit later and by the end of 'our' period this somewhat longer Russian drama by Jevgenij Bauer, Daydreams, 1915, an adaptation of Bruges-la-mort by Georges Rodenbach

<https://traumundexzess.com/2015/03/07/jevgenij-bauer-20171218/>

Crime films

First two very early examples, Histoire d'un crime (1901) and Rescued by Rover (1905), first and third on the post:

<https://traumundexzess.com/2013/01/19/histoire-d-un-crime-r-ferdinand-zecca-p-pathe-f-15445000/>

Here are two early Sherlock Holmes films (1912), one made by a French, the other by an English company.

<https://traumundexzess.com/2015/06/01/sherlock-holmes-on-screen-20489918/>

Comedies

In early film shows, comedies were often used to close a programme. There are many on the Traum und Exzess website, and it is difficult to choose.

Here are several films of one of the numerous comedians who, like Chaplin later, created a character that appeared in a series of films under the same name, in this case Polidor.

<https://traumundexzess.com/2016/11/18/polidor-and-tontolini/>

Mabel Normand was a great American slapstick comedienne. This 1914 film is

<https://traumundexzess.com/2017/08/24/a-classic-idora-park-story/>

And let's end with a 1913 comedy that is about going to the cinema, but not necessarily to watch the films...

<https://traumundexzess.com/2015/08/03/spectators-watching-spectators/>