A Primitive Mode of Representation?

At this point in my examination, before turning to what is an essential aspect of the IMR, the unity-ubiquity of the spectator-subject, I must address the earliest period of cinema history from another direction. If it is true that after twenty or thirty years of cinema an Institutional Mode of Representation appeared, what then was the precise status of the period preceding its earliest manifestations? Was that 'simply' a transitional period whose peculiarities can be attributed to the contradictory forces pulling in various directions—the influence of popular spectacle and popular audiences on the one hand, bourgeois economic and symbolic aspirations on the other? Or was there a 'primitive mode of representation' in the same sense as there is an IMR, a stable system with its own inherent logic and durability?

My answer is clear. It was both these things at once.

There really was, I believe, a genuine PMR, detectable in very many films in certain characteristic features, capable of a certain development but unquestionably semantically poorer than the IMR. It is illustrated by some very remarkable films, from Zecca's **Histoire d'un crime** or Méliès's **Voyage dans la lune** to Gad's **Afgrunden** ('The Abyss' or 'Woman Always Pays', 1910) or Feuillade's **Fantômas** (1913-14). As early as 1906 it began to be slowly displaced, particularly under the influence of a conception of editing born in primitive films of a different, more 'experimental' sort which coexisted with the 'pure' system, often in the work of the same film-makers, often in the same film, and which was itself profoundly ambivalent. This was the case with a few rare French films,[1] several British ones, and above all a large number of Porter's films (**Life of an American Fireman, The Gay Shoe Clerk, The Great Train Robbery, A Subject for the Rogues' Gallery**, etc.) which upset the primitive equilibrium by introducing one or other procedure betraying characteristic aspirations to linearity, centring, etc. But these same films are still massively

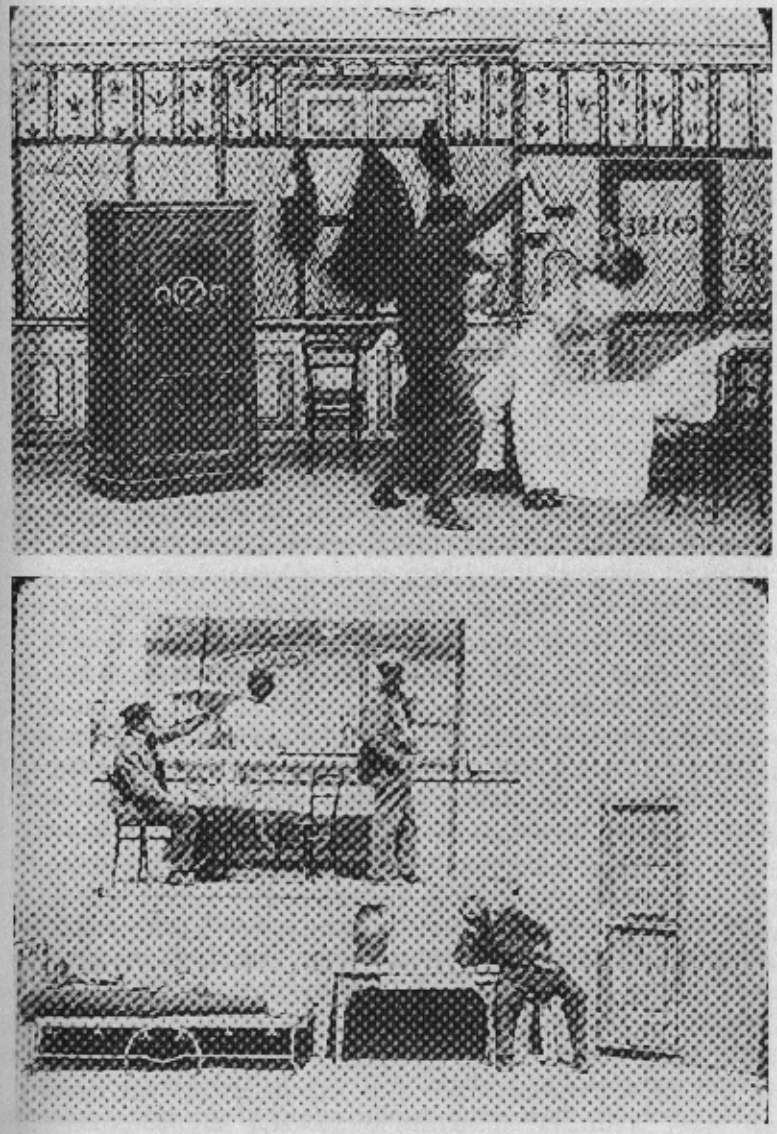

Fig. 22: **Histoire d'un crime.** This tableau showing the murder is an example of the influence of the illustrated tabloid front-page (e.g., *Le Petit Parisien*) on French films at the turn of the century. The tableau of the prisoner's dream is a curious early use of the 'balloon' technique to show the alcoholic antecedents of the crime. (The British would soon abandon this construction of the insert as a set in favour of a double-exposure technique—cf. **What the Curate Really Did.**)

implicated in the primitive system, a fact which often makes them seductive monsters, seductive, that is, when viewed from the standpoint of the institutional normality yet to be achieved, our normality.

What then constitutes this Primitive Mode of Representation? I have discussed some of its main features at length: autarchy of the tableau (even after the introduction of the syntagm of succession), horizontal and frontal camera placement, maintenance of long shot[2] and 'centrifugality'. These are features that can be detected in the text of a typical film, and they, the ambience of the theatres and the possible presence of a lecturer interact to produce what I have tried to define as the experience of *primitive externality*.

But there is another characteristic of the primitive film – really a whole cluster of characteristics – which I have hardly touched on as yet, although it will help us to understand an aspect of the IMR which has been so completely internalised that it is now very difficult to approach it directly. This is what I shall call *the non-closure of the PMR* (in contrast, in other words, to the closure of the IMR).

But I should make it clear that while this feature is found in various forms in a large number of films, many others, especially after 1900, already present a formal semblance of institutional closure. Hence insofar as this feature can be registered in certain films as narrative non-closure (in the sense defined below), it is not constitutive of the PMR in general. But if institutional closure is taken to be more than narrative self-sufficiency and a certain way of bringing the narrative to an end, if, on the contrary, it is treated as the sum of all the signifying systems that centre the subject and lay the basis for a full diegetic effect, including even the context of projection, then the primitive cinema is indeed non-closed as a whole.

However, the most acute manifestations of this non-closure do concern the narrative, its structure and its status.

Is the potential or actual presence of a lecturer alongside the primitive screen[3] the only explanation for the existence of films like Porter's **Uncle Tom's Cabin; or Slavery Days** (1903), a fifteen-minute, twenty-tableaux digest of a bulky novel? In any case, the extraordinary ellipses implied by such a procedure are

hardly filled by the captions to the different tableaux ('Eliza's Escape Across the River on the Floating Ice', 'Eva and Tom in the Garden'). It is as if story and characters were assumed to be familiar to the audience, or this knowledge was to be provided for them during the projection.

Initiated with the Passion films, this setting aside of the narrative instance, this tacit affirmation that the narrative discourse is located outside the picture—in the spectator's mind or the lecturer's mouth – was to inform the cinema for twenty years and more. Vitagraph's early 'art films' (e.g., **Francesca da Rimini**, 1907, **Richelieu; or, The Conspiracy**, 1910, and the Vitagraph version of **Uncle Tom's Cabin**, 1910) still appealed to an external narrative instance. It is so self-evident today that a film must tell its own story[4] that we are often unable to read such narratives. To our eyes, **L'Assassinat du duc de Guise**, for example, is incomplete as a film without some knowledge of History, whereas **Intolerance**, eight years later, is 'self-sufficient'.

From the simple headings they started as, insert titles began to change around 1905 into summaries of the action preceding each tableau. But this did not make any basic difference; the externality of the narrative was now simply inscribed into the film. When in 1905 Bitzer made **The Kentucky Feud**, based on a celebrated feud between two subsequently famous families, the Hatfields and the McCoys,[5] he introduced each tableau with a long intertitle summarising in dry telegraphese all the bloody peripeteia of the shot that follows ('Home of the McCoys. The Auction. Buddy McCoy shoots at Jim Hatfield and kills Hatfield's mother'). Such intertitles, systematically anticipating the narrative content of the following shot and thus eliminating any possible suspense, were to constitute a major obstacle to the linearisation of narrative for a further ten years at least, and their traces can be detected right through the 1920's, though with connotations that were ironic (Sennett), cultural (Gance), or distancing (Vertov). There was clearly *no discontinuity* between this use of the intertitle and the lecturer's commentary. One more example of a 'step forward' that brought with it a retreat (until around 1914). One more example, too, of a primitive feature that was to be successfully integrated into 'cultural' cinema.

I should add that this externality of the narrative instance in

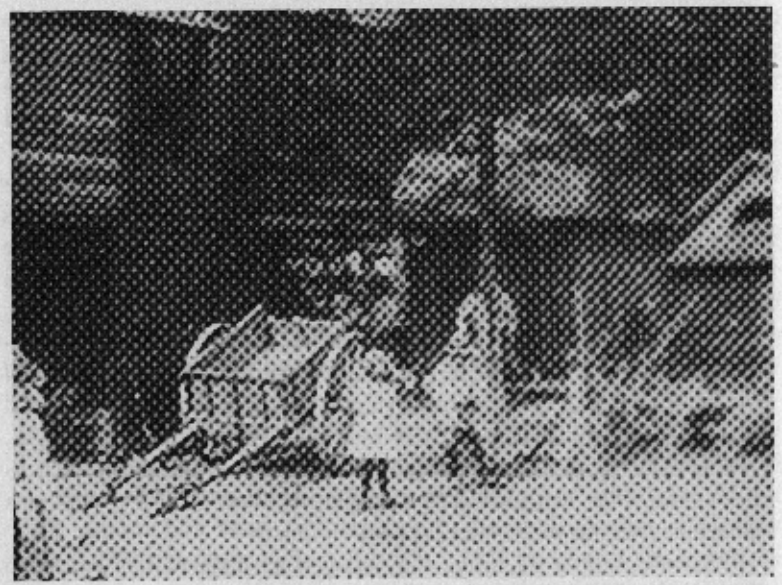

Fig. 23: **The Kentucky Feud** (Billy Bitzer, 1905).

the primitive cinema only existed for 'serious' subjects: Passion films, digests of famous plays or novels, melodramas, and, of course, scenics. It was hardly perceptible in trick films or burlesques, during which the bourgeois lecturer was at a loss for words.[6] Yet while these films with their very rudimentary stories, ritual rather than narrative, were sufficient unto themselves, it seems to me that they manifest the other, 'visible' face of what I call non-closure.

Let us therefore examine the history of *the ending* in the cinema, if only briefly and schematically.

The general rule in the Lumière films and in the subsequent 'Lumière school' was that the film (the shot) ended when there was no film left in the camera. Most of these films were actualities, which gave them the implicit signification that the action went on outside the film (before and after). But once we turn to Lumière's first entirely staged film we discover an initiatory feature.

Arroseur et arrosé concludes, more or less,[7] with a punishment: the mischievous boy is spanked by the angry gardener. Such *punitive endings* are legion throughout the primitive period: the voyeur in innumerable 'The Bride Retires' films is caught and beaten, or the bed canopy falls on him as he is about to substitute deeds for looks; as for the countless tramps and other outlaws of American and British films, they are invariably caught at the end of a spectacular chase and beaten black and blue, until the film runs out.[8] All sorts of variations are possible, from the umbrella blows a New York chaperone rains on the back of Porter's unlucky **Gay Shoe Clerk** (1903) to **The Ingenious Soubrette** in Zecca's film (1902) kicking off screen a cloddish valet. The symbolic import of these 'infantile', 'innocent' aggressions, these castratory endings (it is remarkable how often women have the punitive part, especially in the USA), is part of the overall symbolism of the primitive cinema that I must leave it to others to elucidate. But the extreme contrast between these endings and what we would recognise as an 'end' in the cinema today should draw our attention to the process whereby the 'satisfactory' endings of the institution were constructed. For the institutional ending was not self-evident, it was more than ten years before film-makers knew how to end their films in a way

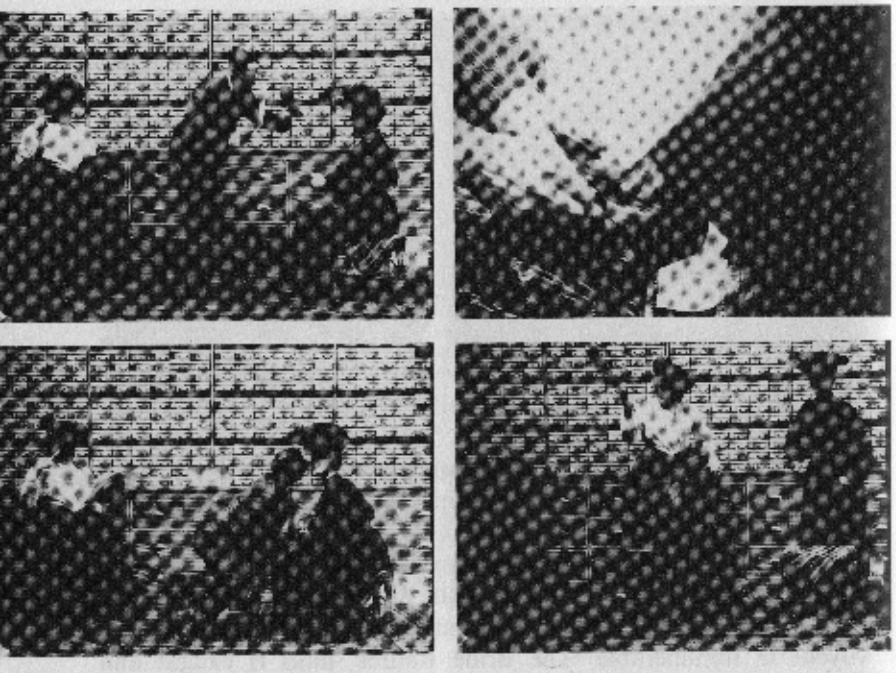

Fig. 24: **The Gay Shoe Clerk** (Porter, 1903). A classical punitive ending: the clerk is chastised for his kiss (and the spectator, perhaps, for his glimpse of a supposedly female ankle ... although the actor was probably a man!)

allowing the spectator to withdraw 'gently' from the diegetic experience, convinced that he or she had no more business in it and not feeling that the dream had been interrupted by a beating or by being kicked out of it.

The punitive ending came straight from the circus (the clown's closing kick in the behind) and from certain music-hall turns that themselves probably have the same source. The other main primitive ending was just as mechanical and arbitrary: the Méliès *apothéose*, adopted from the variety theatre and becoming almost obligatory in all French *féeries* and trick films[9] until the exhaustion of these genres around 1912. Punishment and *apothéose* have at least one thing in common: they are both open endings, associated with the primitive forms that were self-sufficient enough (popular enough?) to be able to dispense with either lecturers or intertitles—the chase and the *féerie*.

The next stage in the *history of the ending* had a life of its own and then an afterlife, both surprisingly long. It represented a decisive step towards closure—in particular because this new invention could involve both the end and the beginning of the film. This was the emblematic shot. The best known example today is surely the famous shot of the leader of the outlaws in **The Great Train Robbery** shooting at the audience to end (or begin) Porter's film (see p.197 below). Deriving directly from the autonomous genre of the primitive medium close-up—which died out between 1903 and 1906 as the emblematic shot became established—this kind of portrait could thus appear either at the beginning or at the end of a film, or both. As a general rule its semantic function was either to introduce the film's main concern (at the beginning of **Rescued by Rover** the baby is asleep, watched over by the dog) or to summarise the film's 'point', e.g., its moral (at the end of **How a British Bulldog Saved the Union Jack** the dog is filmed from close to with the flag between its teeth) or its 'joke' (at the end of **Le Bailleur**, 'The Yawner', Pathé 1907, the protagonist's irrepressible yawning, the sole source of the film's humour, breaks a strap that has been fastened round his jaws, in close-up).

Emerging around 1903—and partly determined by the search for character presence and the establishment of eye contact between actors and spectators—emblematic shots continued to be

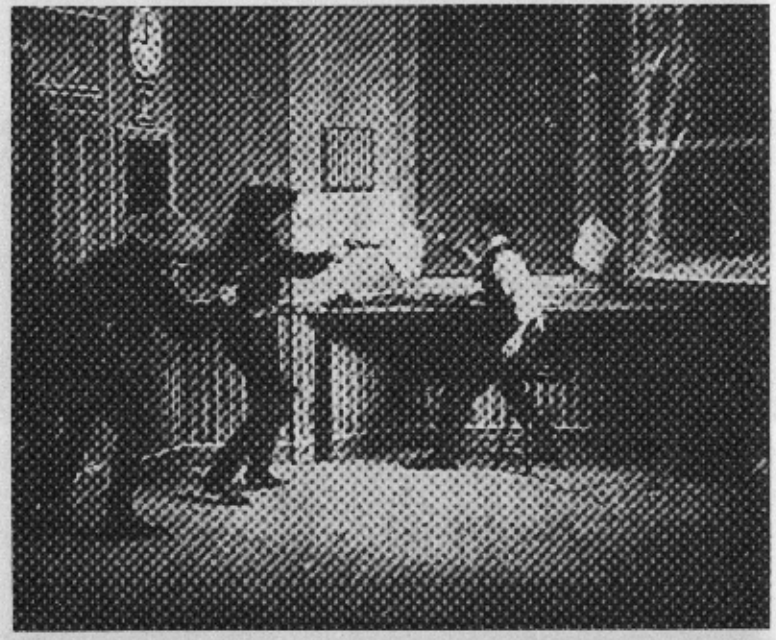

Fig. 25: In **The Great Train Robbery**, Porter sought perhaps to compensate for the impersonal quality of his stick-figures by providing an emblematic close-up which exhibitors could use to open or close the film *ad libidum*.

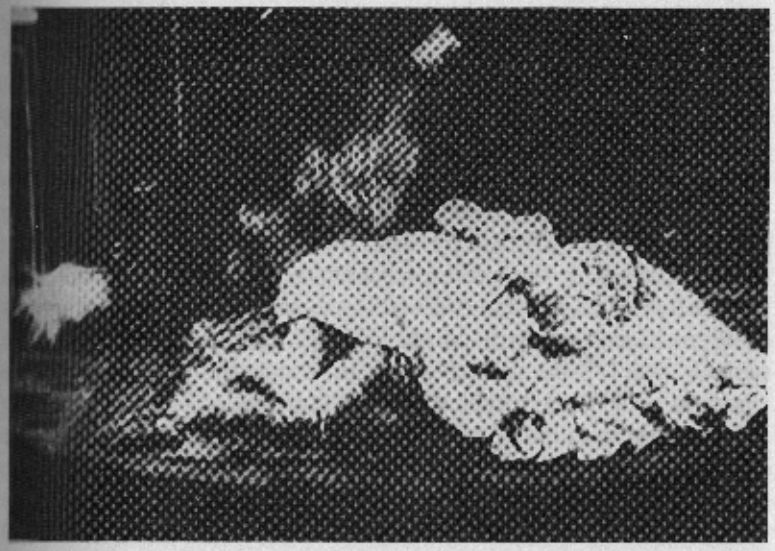

Fig. 26: The emblematic shot which opens **Rescued by Rover**.

used for six or seven years. After 1906 they often became a way to present, usually as an '*apothéose*', the smiling face of the heroine, at last seen from close to.[10] But at the same time more far-sighted spirits began to forge more consistent links between the emblematic shot and the main body of the narrative. One of these innovators was a notorious 'plagiarist', Siegmund Lubin. In his **Bold Bank Robbery** (1904), the initial presentation of the three gentlemen-crooks is made by a portrait shot which, although it is not matched with the succeeding action, is shot on the same set with the same characters dressed in the same costumes and in the same positions; they are simply 'posing' for the cameraman. The same is true of the final picture, in which the three pose once again, but this time in their convict's uniforms.

In its presentational and often extra-narrative dimension the emblematic shot was still a rejection of closure. At the beginning of the film it ultimately metamorphosed into a 'live' introduction of the characters (e.g. **The Cheat**), a practice that persisted throughout the silent cinema, in which it constituted a clear primitive survival. But the terminal emblematic shot, especially insofar as it was the repository of the 'point' of the film (for Lubin: 'Crime does not pay'), is particularly revealing about the future Institution.

The notion of an 'ideological point' (not always a particular 'message', sometimes just the reconfirmation of an institution like marriage) that each spectator should be able to take away at the end of a film seems to me to be an essential aspect of institutional centring. Linked to the notion of a central character anchoring diegetic production, this point was displayed in the last picture for a long time, like the primitive emblem: think of the handclasp of Labour and Capital at the end of **Metropolis**, or the corpse of **Little Cæsar** lying in the rubbish behind an enormous billboard. Think, too, of the final kiss in so many Hollywood happy ends. The Institution has become more sophisticated today, but this practice is still alive: consider the two workers, one white, the other black, attacking one another in a freeze frame at the end of Paul Schrader's pernicious **Blue Collar**.

One more characteristic of the primitive cinema taken as a whole:[11] the prodigious 'circulation of signs' that went on in it. At the time, of course, it was more common to speak of

plagiarism or piracy. In the absence of appropriate legal provisions (an absence with its own history and its own lessons)[12] or international legal recourse, films could easily be copied in a laboratory and distributed without the producer-proprietor's agreement. But more interesting to us here is the fact that films could also be copied in their substance, their staging and their editing, by any other film-maker, whether a foreigner or a rival compatriot, and without any possible retaliation.[13] It seems even that, unlike the printing of pirated copies, the practice was hardly thought objectionable among film-makers. The first major trial involving the cinema in France that centred on artistic property occurred in 1908, when Georges Courteline sued Pathé for the unauthorised adaptation of his play *Boubourache*. Courteline's success established a precedent. For, in the primitive period, the notion of artistic property had not been felt to apply to the cinema: these pictures belonged more or less to everyone. Thus film-makers as important as Porter or Zecca could acquire subjects and conceptions of direction by unconcernedly stealing from each other and their English colleagues, who did not hesitate to repay them in kind.

Finally there is the characteristic of primitive cinema most obvious to modern eyes, a characteristic both of its peculiar forms of narrative and of the rules of direction then in force. I mean the absence of the *classical persona*.

In **The Great Train Robbery**, as in all narrative films up to that point (a few milestones as a reminder: Williamson's **Fire!**, Mottershaw's **A Daring Daylight Burglary**, Méliès's **L'Affaire Dreyfus**), although a certain linearisation is beginning to appear, the actors are still seen from very far away. Their faces are hardly visible, their presence on screen is only a bodily presence, they only have at their disposal a *language of gestures*. The essential supports of 'human presence'—the language of the face and above all of the voice—are still completely lacking. The addition to **The Great Train Robbery** by Porter and his collaborators at Edison of a mobile close-up—which could be shown at the beginning or at the end of the film, as the exhibitor chose[14]—was intended, among other things, to give the film this dimension, which they presumably felt it sadly lacked. I speak of an addition to the film rather than an insert because at this time the

introduction of inserts was almost inconceivable.[15] That is why it wanders about the margins of the diegesis, with no fixed abode. And that was how the emblematic shot began. But much more was needed to make the cinema leave the field of a strictly external 'behaviourism' and embark for the continent of *psychology*.

One last word on the very notion of a Primitive Mode of Representation. Unlike some English and American writers, overinfluenced by modernist ideology, perhaps, I no longer really see the primitive cinema as a 'good object' on the grounds that it contains countless 'prefigurations' of modernism's rejection of classical readerly representation. These prefigurations are clearly no accident: it is not surprising that the obstacles that blocked the rise of the Institution in its 'prehistory' should appear as strategies in the works of creators seeking explicitly or implicitly to deconstruct classical vision. But to see the primitive cinema as a lost paradise and to fail to see the emergence of the IMR as an objective advance is to flirt with obscurantism.

Nevertheless, the primitive cinema did produce some films that strike us today as 'minor masterpieces', sometimes in a certain archaic perfection – as in Méliès's finest films, **Voyage dans la lune, Voyage à travers l'impossible, L'Affaire Dreyfus, Barbe Bleue, Le Royaume des fées**, and in certain films of Zecca's discussed in 'The Wrong Side of the Tracks' above. But there are other very different films in which primitive otherness produces a strange poetry all of its own, irreducible either to the codes of the popular arts of the period or to some anticipation of modernist strategies.

I have already discussed the magnificent British film **Charles Peace**, in which the combination of two systems of representation of space, of elements taken from the circus and from the serial novel, produce a poetry of this kind. **Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son** and **The Kentucky Feud**, two Biograph films Bitzer worked on, also seem to me to have this 'primitive originality'.

But I would like especially to evoke a little French film of 1905, of uncertain genre and only two minutes long, called **L'Envers du théâtre** ('Behind the Stage'), which is a condensation of primitive otherness. It consists of three shots, stencil-tinted in the version I have seen, which give a slight impression of having been taken from very different sources. (This is not completely impossible, what we would call collage having been a common technique at that time.)

1 A cab deposits some night owls in front of a theatre.
2 A tableau of a teeming crowd of people in a theatre dressing room; a flirtation, jealousy (all barely adumbrated).
3 The camera is at the back of the stage facing the auditorium (a painted backdrop glimpsed in the distance), the curtain is up. A prima donna is standing with her back to the camera. She finishes her song; flowers are tossed to her; the curtain falls; a fireman crosses the stage; the stage manager (?) comes and peeps through the spyhole in the curtain; a bit of the scenery falls on his head and breaks to pieces.

Whatever may have been thought when this film was 'rediscovered' at the FIAF Congress in Brighton in 1978, this really is a complete film: the *punitive ending*—punishing a voyeur into the bargain—so highly codified at the time, signifies without any shadow of doubt the end of a 'narrative' (which I see as a transposition of the gossip columnist's write-up), a narrative as open and non-centred as is conceivable, a kind of *haiku* produced in the Pathé factory, why and how we will probably never know.[16]

Here is a jewel buried in a 'heap of rubbish' that deserves to be dug into.

NOTES

1 For example, the astonishing **The Dialogue of Legs** (a French film of 1902?), an attempt to establish the cinematic equivalent of the 'synechdoche' (adumbrated in the same period by Porter in the close-up of the fire-alarm box in **Life of an American Fireman**). The film tells a 'dirty story' in several concatenated shots unashamedly showing an assignation with a prostitute in the grass of a Parisian wood. After a tableau presenting the situation in long shot (the streetwalker meets her client on a café terrace), we only see the characters' legs. But as this film was made at a time when the articulation of a series of close-ups was still inconceivable, the truncation of the bodies is achieved by a series of extraordinary off-centre long shots placing the legs at the very top

or bottom of the screen. The ambivalence of primitive 'advances' is admirably represented by this film, which was remade in 1914 in Italy, in accordance with the new codes of editing.

2 The genre (which in fact comprises several sub-genres) of the 'portrait' in medium close-up also seems to have been a stable form until its absorption into the emblematic shot (see below).

3 It is not impossible that there was a lecturer on hand for film projections in certain vaudeville houses in the USA, but I have no evidence of this.

4 To understand **All the President's Men** one does, it is true, have to have some general knowledge about the political situation in the USA in 1973 and 1974, for example. But the kind of cultural competence demanded by any modern film is one thing, the basically lacunary structure on the screen of these primitives is quite another.

5 There is a famous ballad about them.

6 'Comic films as a rule require no explanation, it is in dramatic and historical pictures that the need for some brief synopsis is most felt' (Anon. 1909b). By contrast, a 'comic' film that adopted the form of the political cartoon such as Porter's curious **Terrible Teddy, the Grizzly King** (1901) certainly needed a spoken 'caption'.

7 In fact the film ends a few seconds after the spanking with little going on (the gardener is about to return to work and the scapegrace is running off). But it is interesting that the series of 'popular' engravings of 1887 that is strikingly similar to Lumière's film (see Sadoul 1973, t.I, pp.296-7) ended with the actual punishment. The film goes on after this because the seventeen metres in the magazine had to be completely used up!

8 In other words, the film ends with a kind of 'closed groove' like a gramophone record, it does not terminate, it is arbitrarily stopped in a perpetual motion which is simply a condensation of the repetitive character of the chase as a whole.

9 It seems also to have been extended to more 'modern' genres in which the institutional narrative is already in gestation. At the end of the astonishing *composite* film **Tour du monde d'un policier** ('A Detective's Tour of the World', Pathé, 1906)—it alternates scenic shots and composed views—the end of the story strictly speaking (the pursued fraud settles his debt and sets up in business with the detective as his partner!) is followed in due form by an *apothéose*, a series of tableaux vivants evoking the different countries visited during the film, in the manner of a variety show.

10 1906 or thereabouts was also the time at which female parts ceased to be played by men: the world the cinema was entering was that of the close-up, in which such 'frauds' were no longer acceptable; but the world it was leaving was primarily that of the music-hall where this was a standard practice.

11 At this level I have already discussed the characteristic opposition between interiors and exteriors, flatness and depth (see p.173 above).

12 For a first, incomplete approach to this question, see Edelman (1979).

13 I need only mention the countless versions of **Arroseur et arrosé** and **Le Coucher de la mariée** ('The Bride Retires') or Porter's copy of **Rêve à la lune** ('Moon Lover' or 'Drunkard's Dream, or "Why You Should Sign the Pledge"') in **Dream of a Rarebit Fiend**, little more than the title of which was taken from McCay's cartoons.

14 Charles Musser (1981) sees this latitude conceded to the exhibitor as a vestige of the period when, in the USA especially, it seems, the film-maker's job consisted essentially of shooting raw material that he did not really know how to work up but preferred to hand over to the exhibitor to sort it, arrange it and establish its articulations. For example, **Execution of Czolgosz** (Porter, 1901) was sold both with and without the descriptive track along the outside of Auburn Prison (**Panorama of Auburn Prison**) that Porter also shot.

15 The situation shown in **The Gay Shoe Clerk** which permitted the insertion of the close-up, still quite exceptional in 1903, was itself rather exceptional: static, with few characters, a restricted set, etc. One has a feeling that this film, like other analogous ones (**A Subject for the Rogues Gallery**) was shot with the sole aim of introducing this close-up.

16 This description of the film is my decipherment after three viewings of it (projected, not on an editing table). Ben Brewster has pointed out to me that the Pathé Catalogue talks of an old stage-door Johnny snubbed by a dancing girl (?), obliged to give the bouquet intended for her to the stage fireman, and the butt of practical jokes from the stage hands. The example is, I believe, evidence both of the difficulties we often experience in deciphering the films of this remote period, and of the 'externality of the narrative instance', which, as is so often the case, is better articulated in the catalogues than it is on the screen. But however accidental, the poetry remains.