

FILM  
CULTURE

IN TRANSITION

THE CINEMA OF  
ATTRACTIONS  
RELOADED

EDITED BY

WANDA STRAUVEN

AMSTERDAM UNIVERSITY PRESS

## The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded



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*Edited by Wanda Strauven*

AMSTERDAM UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cover illustration: Carrie-Anne Moss in *The Matrix* (1999). Directors: Andy and Carry Wachowski. © Photos 12

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*Wanda Strauven*  
*Amsterdam, August 2006*



# Introduction to an Attractive Concept

Wanda Strauven

DIE GROSSE ATTRAKTION (Max Reichmann, 1931), NIE YUAN (Keqing Chen & Kuang-chi Tu, 1952), NOVYY ATTRAKTSION (Boris Dolin, 1957), L'ATTRAZIONE (Mario Gariazzo, 1987), FATAL ATTRACTION (Adrian Lyne, 1987), ATRAÇÃO SATÂNICA (Fauzi Mansur, 1990), ATTRAZIONE PERICOLOSA (Bruno Mattei, 1993), FAMILY ATTRACTION (Brian Hecker, 1998), THE LAST BIG ATTRACTION (Hopwood DePree, 1999), THE RULES OF ATTRACTION (Roger Avary, 2002), ANIMAL ATTRACTION (Keith Hooker, 2004), FUTILE ATTRACTION (Mark Prebble, 2004), LAWS OF ATTRACTION (Peter Howitt, 2004). This is just a selection of movie titles that over the last seventy-five years have ensured the film spectator diegetic attractions; from shorts to feature length films; from comedy to romance, from drama and thriller to low-budget horror; from the USA to the USSR, from Hong Kong to Brazil. None of these films – not even the most popular one, FATAL ATTRACTION – is discussed in the present anthology. What is studied, however, is the attractiveness of the notion “attraction,” its use and usefulness, within the field of cinema studies and beyond. This anthology specifically reflects on the term as employed in the phrase “cinema of attractions,” coined in the mid-1980s by Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault in relation to early cinema and proven to be adequate, or at least “attractive,” for the definition of contemporary special effect cinema as well. THE MATRIX (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999), for instance, can be conceived of as a reloaded form of cinema of attractions in that it is “dedicated to presenting discontinuous visual attractions, moments of spectacle rather than narrative.”<sup>1</sup> Now, twenty years after the “birth” of the “cinema of attractions” (and, as I will discuss below, ten years after the “rebirth” of the “cinématographie-attraction”), it is the perfect time to look back upon the debate and question the relevance of the concept for the future.

## A Complex Chronology

Twenty years ago, in 1986, two essays which were fundamental in the formation and launching of the concept of “cinema of attractions” were published. Firstly, the by now classic essay of Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde,” appeared in the discontinued film quarterly *Wide Angle*, illustrated with some stills from THE GAY SHOE

CLERK (1903) on its title page (Fig. 1). And, secondly, the joint paper by André Gaudreault and the same Tom Gunning, “Le cinéma des premiers temps: un défi à l’histoire du cinéma?,” was printed in the Tokyo journal *Gendai Shiso. Revue de la pensée d’aujourd’hui* in Japanese translation “Eigashi No Hohoron” (Fig. 2).

## The Cinema of Attraction:

Early Film, Its Spectator  
and the Avant-Garde



The Gay Shoe Clerk (1903)

By Tom Gunning

Writing in 1922, flushed with the excitement of seeing Abel Gance's *La Roue*, Fernand Léger tried to define something of the radical possibilities of the cinema. The potential of the new art did not lay in "imitating the movements of nature" or in "the mistaken path" of its resemblance to theater. Its unique power was a "matter of *making images seen*."<sup>1</sup> It is precisely this harnessing of visibility,

映画史の方法論  
アンドレ・ゴドロー／トム・ガニング  
小松弘訳



Fig. 1. *Wide Angle* 8.3-4 (Fall 1986): “The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde”

Fig. 2. *Gendai Shiso* 14.12 (Nov. 1986): “Eigashi No Hohoron”

Whereas the first has been reprinted several times and translated into at least six different languages (Swedish, Danish, German, Finnish, Japanese, Hungarian, but, interestingly enough, not French), the latter appeared only once more after its Japanese première, in 1989, in its original French version.<sup>2</sup> One year later, Gunning revised his essay for its (first) reprint in what is now also a classic anthology edited by Thomas Elsaesser, *Early Cinema: Space Frame Narrative*,<sup>3</sup> adding one extra paragraph and changing the singular “attraction” of the title into plural. It is this 1990 reprint that Gunning considers the final (and correct) version. Thus, the French publication of “Un défi à l’histoire du cinéma” follows “The Cinema of Attraction,” but precedes “The Cinema of Attractions.”

The spoken version of the joint paper “Un défi à l’histoire du cinéma” also preceded “The Cinema of Attraction.” It was delivered by Gaudreault in August 1985 at the Cerisy Conference “Nouvelles approches de l’histoire du ci-

néma” in Normandy, France. Gunning, from his side, gave his paper shortly after, in the fall, at the Ohio University Film and Video Conference. The chronology is getting really imbricate if we consider that both papers cited Donald Crafton’s use of the term “attraction” in a paper he delivered in May 1985 at the FIAF Conference on Slapstick, which was held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.<sup>4</sup> Since the Slapstick Symposium only published its proceedings two years later, Crafton is translated in Japanese *ante litteram* (Fig. 3).<sup>5</sup>

- (49) すなわち一ショットを越える数のショットで作られていること。  
 (50) すなわち単一のショットで作られていること。  
 (51) アダム・シモンとの共同研究に際して、筆者たちはこのヘアトラクションという言葉の採択を決めた。これは一九八五年にニューヨークの近代美術館で行なわれたF・I・A・F（国際映画アーカイヴ連盟）の第四十一年次総会でなされたスラップスティック映画に関するシンポジウムにおける、ドン・クラフトンの報告によって作られた提案に続くものである。  
 Don Crafton, “Pie and Chase: The State of the Art of the Gag, 1925-26”, ドン・クラフトンはこの中で、ベン・ターピンがカメラに向かってごく単純に目をぎよろつかせるような種類のショットに言及して、次のように述べている。「このようなショットは、エイゼンシュテインが純粋なスペクタクルの要素ヘアトラクションと呼んだものの事例である。」  
 (52) Jacques Aumont, *Montage Eisenstein*, Paris, Albatros, 1979, p. 57.  
 (53) Ibid.

Fig. 3. “Eigashi No Hohoron,” note 51

In the written version of his 1985 paper, Crafton himself incorporated, quite anachronistically, not only a response to some of the criticism<sup>6</sup> Gunning made during the conference in New York, but also a paragraph long quotation from his essay “The Cinema of Attraction,” which had meanwhile been published in *Wide Angle*. Next to Crafton’s paper as direct source of inspiration, I should also name Adam Simon, who is mentioned in both the Cerisy paper and Gunning’s essay. On the role that Simon played in the theory formation I refer to Gunning’s personal account of the facts in his opening essay of the present anthology.

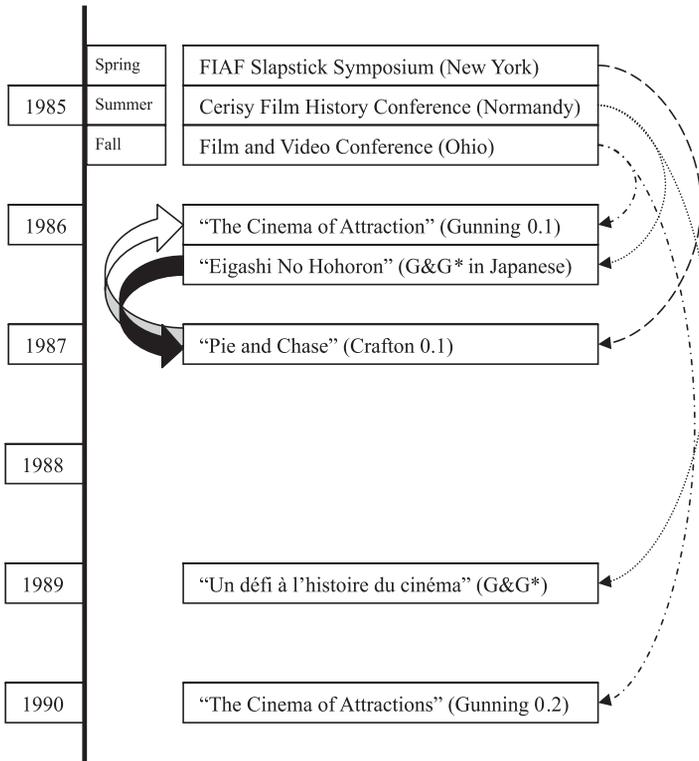


Fig. 4. Chronological Chart  
(\*G&G stands for Gaudreault & Gunning)

To complete my chronological chart (Fig. 4), I should specify that Gunning's "The Cinema of Attraction(s)" (in both its original and final version) refers to his collaboration with Gaudreault and their paper given at Cerisy. The Cerisy publication, on the contrary, does not take into account the *Wide Angle* article, which had not come out at the time of writing. "Un défi à l'histoire du cinéma" actually does not propose or include the phrase "cinema of attractions"! In this paper Gaudreault and Gunning suggest a distinction between two successive "modes of film practice": on the one hand, the "system of monstrative attractions" which covers *grosso modo* the period 1895-1908; and, on the other, the "system of narrative integration" which defines the period 1909-1914.<sup>7</sup> The term "monstrative" builds upon the concept of "monstration" that Gaudreault

had introduced around 1984 in the field of early cinema.<sup>8</sup> Monstration (showing) is to narration (telling) what presentation is to representation or, in Gunning's terms, "exhibitionism" to voyeurism. It is all about the cinema's ability to *show* something, to "*make images seen*,"<sup>9</sup> to directly address the spectator. For the concept of the attraction, Gaudreault and Gunning rely upon Jacques Aumont's *Montage Eisenstein*, and more specifically upon his first definition of the Eisensteinian attraction, that is, as performance (which should, however, be considered in close relation to the second and the third definition of the attraction, that is, as association of ideas and as agitation of the spectator).<sup>10</sup> Although the reference to Aumont is missing in "The Cinema of Attraction(s)," Gunning does not overlook the fundamental question of the impact on the spectator. This question is actually central to his theorization of the "cinema of attractions," for which he cites not only Eisenstein's "Montage of Attractions" (1923), but also Marinetti's manifesto of "The Variety Theater" (1913).

These are some of the points of convergence and divergence between "The Cinema of Attraction(s)" and "Un défi à l'histoire du cinéma." There is much more to be said about the differences in approach, context and background, but what they have in common is that they are the product of a series of discussions between Gunning and Gaudreault; and that they were both published, in one form or another, in 1986. The present volume brings them together for the first time, with the first English translation of "Un défi à l'histoire du cinéma," making an actual comparison possible.

Yet this comparison should be contextualized: "The Cinema of Attraction(s)" and "Un défi à l'histoire du cinéma" are not only the outcome of a series of discussions between the two authors; they are also typical expressions of the post-Brighton movement. Both Gunning and Gaudreault relate in their respective contribution in this volume the importance of the legendary 34th FIAF Conference held in Brighton, England, in 1978. More particularly, they both stress the importance of the screening of all the surviving and in FIAF archives preserved films that were made between 1900 and 1906. It was this extensive and systematic viewing process that radically changed (Old) Film History.

Too young to participate in (or even know about) the Brighton Project, I had the opportunity to attend a less extensive, but equally systematic screening much later, in the summer of 1996, at the second Cerisy Conference on Georges Méliès.<sup>11</sup> There we watched in chronological order the integral oeuvre of Méliès, the by then 170 discovered films, which represent a third of his entire production. For my PhD dissertation on Futurism, this experience meant a point of no return. Thanks to its daily screenings and its inaugural live performance, this conference made me realize that in order to understand Marinetti's writings of the 1910s I had not only to look forward to the experimental cinema of the 1920s and 1960s (following for instance Dominique Noguez's path "From Futurism to

Underground"<sup>12</sup>), but also and especially backward to early cinema and its vaudeville origins. This does not mean that I had so far totally ignored early cinema,<sup>13</sup> but I had underestimated (and under-explored) the different meanings of its specific "language," on the one hand, and its exhibition practices, on the other, for Futurism in general and for Marinetti in particular.

At the same conference, in 1996, André Gaudreault gave a paper that questioned the teleological implications of certain historiographical notions, such as the French "cinéma des premiers temps," insisting instead on the importance of using terms that reflect historical realities. At the end of his paper he cautiously proposed for the first time G.-Michel Coissac's term "cinématographie-attraction," which he had found in Jean Giraud's *Lexique français du cinéma des origines à 1930*.<sup>14</sup> A linguist by training, this quest for "terminological correctness" certainly attracted me and offered me a concrete tool by which to rethink (Futurist) history.

However, eventually, it was Gunning's essay "The Cinema of Attraction(s)" that helped me in reinforcing my Futurist thesis, not least because of his explicit reference to Marinetti and his incitement, in the opening paragraph, to re-explore early cinema's inspiration for the historical avant-garde. One could say I took his words quite literally. The notion of attraction that refers both "backwards to a popular tradition and forwards to an avant-garde subversion,"<sup>15</sup> as Gunning explains in his follow up article "An Aesthetic of Astonishment," became the guiding principle for my research on Marinetti and his relation to cinema.<sup>16</sup>

## Attraction vs. Attractions, Attraction vs. Monstration

As Gaudreault himself explains, the term "cinématographie-attraction," as borrowed from Coissac, has a couple of advantages with respect to Gunning's concept: first, it captures the phenomenon of "attraction" under the denomination of "cinematography" (instead of "cinema") and, second, it testifies to the fact that the phenomenon of "cinematography" was indeed received as such, that is, as attraction, at the time described by Coissac (which, however, corresponds more or less to the end of the cinema of attractions and the beginning of institutionalized cinema).<sup>17</sup> What is remarkable about Coissac's expression is the use of attraction in its singular form. This might be peculiar to the French language, if one considers more recent expressions such as Livio Belloi's "image-attraction"<sup>18</sup> or the common "cinéma-attraction." But does "cinéma-attraction" in French have the same meaning as "cinéma des attractions"? And, further, is the "image-attraction" just one of the attractions of a particular film or is it rather an

image of attraction, that is, an image with the quality of attracting the gaze, a “dialectical image,” as Belloï defines it, which exists only because we look at it?<sup>19</sup>

My next question would be: is there any fundamental difference between Gunning’s “cinema of attraction” (as used in the *Wide Angle* version of 1986) and “cinema of attractions” (as in the revised version of 1990)? Is the first not inviting us more directly to consider the cinema itself, that is “the Cinématographe, the Biograph or the Vitascope,”<sup>20</sup> as an attraction, whereas the latter rather suggests (or focuses on) the cinema as a series of attractions, as a succession of astonishing numbers, be it the individual “animated views” or the magical tricks within one and the same view (or the special effects within one and the same feature length film)? This distinction, if it exists, could then be compared with the differentiation between the system of monstration and the system of monstrative attractions, which find their respective “opponent” in the system of narration and the system of narrative integration?

Attraction and monstration, albeit both equally “opposed” to narration, cannot simply be considered as synonyms. Whereas the concept of monstration implies a (narratological) instance that shows something, the notion of attraction emphasizes the magnetism of the spectacle shown. In the mode of attraction the spectator is *attracted* toward the filmic (or the apparatical); this direction is somehow reversed in the case of monstration, where the filmic (or the apparatical) is *monstrated* to the spectator. Attraction involves, more manifestly than monstration, the spectator; it is a force put upon the latter.

## Laws of Attraction

The first definition of attraction given in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is “the action of drawing or sucking in.” Etymologically the English term was adopted in the 16th century from the French *attraction*, which derived from the Latin *tractio*, meaning “‘contraction,’ and, grammatically, ‘attraction’ (from *trahere*, to pull).”<sup>21</sup> Conversely, the attraction in terms of spectacle or any other form of entertainment drawing crowds was adopted into French from English in the early 19th century. See also the *OED* quoting “Littré [who], in his Supplement, says that this ‘English sense’ of attraction began to be borrowed in French about the era of the Great Exhibitions, and had then, in 1869, become quite current.”

In order to give a comprehensive definition of the term, at least three different levels of meaning should be distinguished: the grammatical, the spectacular and the physical. The grammatical significance of attraction is probably the less known one. It concerns, however, its original Latin use referring to the modifi-

cation of one form under the influence of another form which stands in syntactical relation to the first. In French, there is for instance the attraction of genders, which is illustrated in *Le Petit Robert* with the following example: “un espèce d’idiot” (the article “une,” that the feminine noun “espèce” requires, is transformed into “un” under the influence of the masculine noun “idiot”). In English a similar phenomenon can be found in the use of the expression “kind of,” when (incorrectly) preceded by *these, those*, and the like, and followed by a plural verb and pronoun under the influence of the plural noun it defines. See the example given by the *OED*: “these kind of men have their use.” As far as I know, this specific meaning of attraction has not been applied, at least not explicitly and intentionally, to (early) cinema; one could think of valid analyses that examine whether or not a non-fiction film was received as fictional under the influence of the fiction films that preceded or followed it; that is, whether or not the genre of a film was transformed by its particular (grammatical) position in the program.<sup>22</sup>

The second sense of attraction, on the other hand, is the most common one in our field: it concerns the attraction value of different forms of entertainment. Very generally, attraction stands for “center of interest,” for that which attracts people (e.g. tourist attraction); more specifically, it can refer to a spectacle, a (variety, circus, cinema, etc.) show, or – in Eisenstein’s theory – to one of the “peak moments”<sup>23</sup> of a (variety, circus, cinema, etc.) show. This second significance of attraction corresponds to its so-called “English sense,” defined by the *OED* as follows: “A thing or feature which draws people by appealing to their desires, tastes, etc.; *esp.* any interesting or amusing exhibition which ‘draws’ crowds.” The “English sense” is the most banal meaning of the cinema of attractions (in both its original and reloaded form), but the definition of Gunning’s phrase, like Eisenstein’s montage of attractions, implicates a direct, somewhat aggressive, address of the spectator; it goes beyond (or even against) a simple process of appealing to the taste of the public. According to Eisenstein, an attraction was supposed to produce “emotional shocks.”<sup>24</sup> For this aggressive dimension of the spectacle, the Soviet director relies upon the tradition of the French Grand Guignol Theater that was notorious for its horror and special effects: e.g. “an eye is gouged out, an arm or leg amputated before the very eyes of the audience.”<sup>25</sup> It is remarkable that this bodily violence characterizes early cinema as well. Numerous car accidents and cutting up of the body were exhibited to the early film spectator. These were attractions that attempted to shock, that is, to *épater les bourgeois* rather than appeal to their taste.

The spectacular dimension of attraction grounds itself on the literal and physical sense of the term, namely “the force that draws or sucks in.” One of the most elementary substances that in this sense can be drawn in is air; hence, the obsolete meaning of attraction as “drawing in of the breath, inspiration, inhala-

tion,” to which Vivian Sobchack’s contribution in this volume draws our attention, more particularly in relation to the (modern) “aesthetic of astonishment.” More common, of course, is the force that draws together two distinct bodies, which leads us not only to the “fatal attraction” between human beings, but also and especially to Newton’s law of attraction (Fig. 5). The *OED* speaks of the “attraction of gravity,” which is defined as “that which exists between all bodies, and acts at all distances, with a force proportional to their masses, and inversely proportional to the square of their distance apart.” No further reference is made to Newton in the present anthology, although his law of attraction could prove to be stimulating and fruitful to map out the possible effects on the spectator according to his/her distance to the screen, to his/her own body mass and to the size of the image.

$$F_A \cong \frac{M_1 \times M_2}{r^2}$$

Fig. 5. Newton’s law of attraction

And, what is more, this third physical (or scientific) meaning of attraction could help us to better understand Eisenstein’s Constructivist film theory. In his “Montage of Attractions” (1923) the Soviet director talks about the attraction as “a molecular (i.e. compound) unity of the *efficiency* of the theater and of *theater in general*.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, should we not examine the laws of “molecular attraction” rather than the attractions of Coney Island? Because of his contacts with the Factory of the Eccentric Actor (FEKS), Eisenstein certainly was attracted to the fairground. But, in the end, he was less concerned with roller coasters than with a scientific approach to art. It should not be forgotten that Eisenstein was an engineer by training. And as an engineer he learned that “any approach becomes scientific when the domain of research acquires its own unit of measurement.”<sup>27</sup> In his *Memoirs*, Eisenstein gives us insight into his theory formation:

Let us thus go in search for a unit that will measure the influence of art.

Science has its “ions,” its “electrons,” its “neutrons.”

Art will have – its “attractions”!

From the production processes, a technical term has become part of everyday language, designating assemblages in terms of machines, water canalizations, machine tools, the beautiful word “montage,” that designates – an assemblage.

Even if the word is not yet in vogue, it has potentially everything to work well.

Well, let us go!

And may *the combination of the units of influence in a whole* receive the double designation, half-production, half-music hall [...]

This is how the term “montage of attractions” was born.<sup>28</sup>