

DIALOGUE

**THE CHANGING
FACE OF THE PAST.
IMMERSION,
VIRTUALITY
AND THE LIGHT
BORN(E) IMAGE**

Interview with

TOM GUNNING

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THE CHANGING FACE OF THE PAST. IMMERSION, VIRTUALITY AND THE LIGHT BORN(E) IMAGE

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Tom Gunning is one of the most important early cinema scholars. His characterisation of this cinema as a “cinema of attractions”, coined with André Gaudreault, became a major interpretative paradigm. This concept was a counterweight to an understanding of film as eminently narrative, and also contributed to a study of the period on its own instead of as solely a path to later cinema. An object of discussion and critique on its own, the idea of “cinema of attractions” has also been used to establish relations between this cinema and other periods or practices, such as blockbuster or avant-garde aesthetics (an example of the importance of this characterisation and its several uses is the volume of homage and discussion *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded* edited by Wanda Strauven). Gunning’s work as a historian,

however, is not only limited to this period: he has also studied 19th century audiovisual technologies and filmmakers such as Fritz Lang, and he maintains a sustained interest in experimental cinema.

In this dialogue we talk with him about the concepts of immersion and virtuality in the history of audiovisual media. Gunning not only navigates through different kinds of spectacles, technologies and motifs—such as panoramas or the film genre of the phantom ride—but also offers more theoretical reflections on the cinematic apparatus and on the meaning of these terms. Our eagerness to establish relations between contemporary and historical technologies, as a kind of recognition of the present in the past, is also proposed as an object of discussion. ■

This issue of *L'Atalante* is devoted to the idea of immersion and virtuality in audiovisual media. These are keywords of contemporary technologies, but they can also be traced back maybe longer than expected by some people. So the first question would be, and I know it's too broad but it can lead to a some sort of overview of the subject, how do you see, as a film historian, the importance of these words in audiovisual media history? Do they have a history and one relevant to our present devices and practices?

It's a big question, yes. And the first answer, the most obvious point is: yes, I think it is relevant and important. Then the question becomes: In what way? What are the specific interactions?

There is the issue of «what an image is» generally; anthropologically we could even say. And that implies, and this is the way it is usually approached, an issue of representation; that the image refers to something else. I think that, for this question, this is less interesting than the idea of the relation, not of the image to the referent, but to the viewer. So the issue is not so much «what does this represent?», but «how does it address me?», «how do I address it?», «what is the shared space between the viewer and the image?» And there are obviously an enormous number of modes for this relationship.

What is interesting to me, and in many ways I see my work as being devoted to, is the question of what is the history of the image. Historically and anthropologically, but also technologically. And therefore, what is the uniqueness of the film image and how does it relate to other types of imagery. And to start just a little bit, I would say that the most obvious point and one that I have constantly tried to emphasize because I think it's taken for granted too quickly, is the idea of the moving image. The fact that the image in cinema, and a few things that kind of lead up to cinema – certain types of what we often call proto-cinema –, tries not simply to create a still image but rather to create one that is moving.

This implies a number of things that are very important to your question. Not simply the idea of realism, which is certainly important –and is addressed by almost all the first viewers of the cinematic image– but that is more on the category of representation. But other ideas which are on the side of the viewer's relationship to the image. The viewer's unique relation to a moving image that it seems to, in some way, propel the viewer not just into a representation, but into a kind of world with duration and transformation. And therefore it has a very different, much more immersive, effect, I would claim, than a still image. I'm not trying to denigrate the still image, which is complicated and glorious. But the moving image has this quality of a kind of immersion, because of the very fact of both the movement and the duration of that movement. So that every moving image not only shoots an action, but takes some time.

When we are dealing with the photographic moving image, which of course is not the only type, we are also dealing with a kind of recording; again a kind of a representation, a capturing of a moment. And that is very important as well. When we are working with the history of cinema, we can kind of generalize schematically and say: «okay, so the image begins to move». And that involves things like the phenakisticope, the zoetrope... devices that do not depend on photography, but nonetheless occasion a moving image. When we add to that photography, we have a very particular series of things that includes not simply «realism» or even «indexicality», but rather the fact that something is recorded.

Here it is very important to think about the moving image in relation to its twin. Edison in his first caveat of the motion picture patent emphasized that it has a strong relationship to its previous invention: the phonograph. The phonograph, before cinema and I think more or less uniquely, recorded a moment. Not only takes time, but actually records time and can repeat it. And so the type of immersion that we are talking about, a tempo-

ral immersion, not only in the movement but in the time it takes, also has a lot to do with the recording of sound. They can be independent, but when we combine them or even when we think about them together, I think there is an enormous issue there that helps us think about what immersion might be.

Now, to pick up another thread of this which is, I think, extremely interesting. If we again think about cinema in various forms, so that it actually would include something like the zoetrope, Edison's kinetoscope —the peepshow where you look at a moving photographic scene—... then the moment of projection —which is to some extent temporarily later than the other moving image but is very close to simultaneous— involves a whole other series of things that I would relate to immersion. And that has to do with the quality of light and darkness, something that I'm sure could be studied in terms of experimental and perceptual psychology.

I love the word «projection». Projection, «throwing in front of one», describes the action of the light-image being carried through space. From its source, a slide or a film, onto a screen and thrown in front of the viewer. But there is also a way, more metaphorical, that the viewer is thrown towards the image and towards the light. This may be related to what happens whenever we look at an image, but I think that with the idea of projecting a light image in darkness something immersive is happening, in which the actual surrounding world, that one is seated in or standing in, is occluded by the darkness and a different world is opened up by the image that is projected in front of one. My claim would be here, and I don't think it's radical, I think it's pretty much what we all experience, that we also are projected towards it. Of course perspective in a still image has already a quality of projecting our presence or our attention into an image. But again, I'm claiming that there is something more with the actual act of projecting.

I use a phrase which I like quite a bit: «light born image». It's a pun because «born» can be two words. «Borne» which means carried, «to be borne», and then also «born» which is, of course, birth. And so my interest here is the idea of an image being both generated, «born by light», but also being «carried by light». And that idea of carrying, transport, it is a very important word to me in terms of thinking about cinema and thinking about immersion, because I think that we as viewers are carried. The sense of movement is not only in the movement of the image, but of our attention, of our absorption. And of some entering into an alien world, a different world.

So that is a lot of stuff that I'm trying to outline, but I think it is kind of the essence of what to me sustains the idea of immersion. And there are many historical, technological and phenomenological details and differences. But these would be the most basic schemata of the phenomenon for me.

Thanks for the effort of addressing such an overview. It is useful in order to establish relations between different technologies and practices. You talked about immersion as an effect of several things. There is this immersion caused by the image having movement, that could have its own history, as for example with these day to night images that you could see in some «boîte d'optique». The immersion of projection –in the both directions that you signal– can go as far as the camera obscura. And there is this kind of temporary immersion of recording technologies, that relate cinema to other devices like the phonograph. As we were talking in a broad sense, I wonder if it could be interesting to address particular or more specific cases about immersive or virtual technologies.

The issue that kind of immediately comes up with immersion would be a kind of creation of an environment. Something that is in a way different from what I just outlined in terms of projection

in the moving image. Not unrelated, but not identical. Creation of an environment not just by the image, but an environment in which the image is presented and received and that invites immersion, almost like a physical absorption. And the most obvious example of this would be the panorama, which is extremely interesting for a number of reasons.

Number one; in the 19th century it was extremely popular and then, if not disappeared, became marginal. There might be some argument that there has been in the 21st century a kind of revival. Certainly there has been an historical interest in the panorama and a kind of preservation and restoration of the ones that have survived. Although what is interesting is that some new ones have emerged in the 21st century or even at the very end of the 20th century.

The panorama what it does, and I think it is very paradoxical, is to eliminate the frame. In almost all cases the image is defined, at least to some degree, by its frame. Its frame separates it from something else, from some other world. And it becomes in that way a kind of portal, a doorway. But what is curious about the Panorama is that the frame is eliminated. Perceptually we see no frame. This is primarily done architecturally by a special kind of construction. Also to some extent by the lighting. And of course, and this is architectural as well, by the whole situation of the viewer, so that the viewer is surrounded, and immersed in that sense, by a 360 degree image. One might say there has to be a frame there, a limit, but it is concealed. The top is usually concealed by some type of indication of a viewing platform that looks like a tent and the bottom is often concealed by a false landscape.

The one that I have spent the most time in is the Mesdag panorama in Den Hague, the Netherlands. It is from the end of the 19th century and it is a seascape of an actual place which is not that far, a dozen miles or so from the place where it is recreated. What has been preserved is the ac-

tual building. So you have the process that is so important for immersion of a gradual movement in. You do not just walk into the room and see the panorama. You walk through a kind of a corridor, it is dark, you climb stairs and you emerge into this immersive environment.

This whole sense of thinking paradoxically of the image not as a framed entity but as an environment, is kind of what we think is the most obvious example of immersion. I would argue that cinema, even with the maintaining of the frame, has these immersive effects thanks to movement and projection. But one would certainly has to claim that if one is dealing with this term in its most complete meaning, in the Panorama you really lose the sense of a frame and therefore lose the sense of an image. Being it replaced by the sense of an environment. That is probably what defines for most people the idea of immersion. I think the Panorama is the strong case and it is very fascinating.

There have been attempts throughout history to combine the moving image with this type of panoramic arrangement. Very early, in fact, like in the unsuccessful Cineorama of 1900 Paris Exhibition, designed as a 360 degree screening of images taken from balloons. It ended up not being realized due to technical problems, but it could have worked. It is curious to me that this has never become. The panorama at the end of the 19th century was quite popular. Almost every major city had a panorama, some of them permanent in a specific building, some of them temporary. But the motion picture panorama is very intermittent. The couple of times I've seen it, it grabbed my attention that there was a 360 degree screen and people were standing in the middle, but almost everybody just looked in front of them. Maybe only two people looked behind. I don't know whether that is just training from the cinema or if in fact it had something to do, which it seemed to me, with the films that were made —because what was most interesting was in front and the rest was just a kind of se-

ting. But I think it also has to do, and I would not claim this theoretically, it is merely an hypothesis, with the fact that when you have the immersive effects of cinema that I already described, adding the effects of the panorama is kind of an overkill. Maybe they work better separately. But I would not claim that as a principle, it is just a kind of observation.

The reason why I bring this up is because, in our previous e-mail exchange, you mentioned the Hale's Tour. This exhibition format in which films that were taken from the front of a train, were projected in a theater that was made up to look like a train car. Also usually with additional elements of sound or even swing –sometimes the cars moved a little bit at the very beginning of the show–, so that you would have these kind of physical associations as well as the environmental ones. This was presumably in the argument of realism, that you really felt that you were in a train looking at a view at the window rather than just simply watching a film.

What is curious to me is that this genre of early cinema known as phantom rides –which are films taken from a vehicle as it moves through space and showing either the train tracks, the street or even occasionally a river, when taken from boats– predates the Hale's tours. Hale's tours begins in 1904 at the St Louis World's Fair, and then begins to be placed in major cities as a form of exhibition. But the phantom rides, the films taken from vehicles, begin in 1896. They begin more or less with the very first films ever taken.

So in other words, that immersive effect of the image did not wait for the environmental context. That was rather kind of a second thought, like «let's do this even further by giving this added quality of being environmental, of designing the exhibition space so that no longer looks just like an exhibition space, but seems to sustain the imagery you're looking at». I find this interesting, although what I also would emphasize is that the films

preexisted. They did not depend or come from the idea of the environmental theater. So again, the immersion, I am kind of claiming, seems to be primary. Is inherent in the cinema, not in the mode of exhibition.

The idea of «concealing the frame» could be also related to Phantasmagoria, a subject that you have also covered in your writings, because one of the innovations of this magic lantern show was to hide the limits of the screen. And this was achieved not only by concealing the actual limits, but also by painting black the background in the slides (and this terminology exceeds the phantasmagoria shows to refer, in some writings, to any slide with a black background).

Also I think it is very interesting what you remarked about the experience of entering the panorama. Because it opens up the discussion from the image itself to other aspects of the dispositive that we may not be considering, but that are of importance for the spectator's experience.

Moving a bit to a slightly different approach; in the field of media archaeology there is a tendency to consider not only technologies that were developed, but also imaginary ones (being actual proposals or pure phantasies). So I wonder if you think that these are worth to explore also, and if there are any particular cases you think about in relation to immersion and virtuality. And not only in the 19th century, a period that we have talked more about, but also maybe in the 20s or 30s of the 20th century, a moment that you approached for instance in your book about Fritz Lang.

To try to isolate what I think is central about what you are asking, I would turn to some of the key terms and what they mean. Like «virtuality». I have an essay in which I try to make the point that our relation to the virtual is complex but also transforming.

Let me just make a particular point here. The term commonly used, at least in English, tends to

mean «something less than real». For instance, if I say «you're the virtual king of Sweden», it would mean you are not the real king. But there are two kinds of claims in it. One is lesser: «you're not the real king». But the other is: «in effect you are as powerful as the real king». So on the one hand virtual takes away reality. On the other hand, it kind of changes its register and makes reality not a simple actuality, but a kind of condition of power.

The word «virtual» comes from the word «virtue», which we can associate primarily with morality. But traditionally, it did not mean that; primarily it meant «strength». And in fact, in a kind of sexist context, it was connected with manhood –«vir» in Latin–. So the whole idea of virtue was the power of something and a power that was potential. To some extent virtual and potential can be distinguished, but in many ways they are synonyms. In other words, when we are talking about a kind of «virtual quality», we are talking about not just what is, what actually exists, but what is potentially there.

We can think about «virtual reality» as meaning precisely this realm of possibility, of potential. So its connection to the imaginary –and not in the sense of the fanciful, the unrealistic, the dreamlike, but exactly the imagined– is very important. Therefore your question about imaginary technologies, literally would be «virtual technologies». Often this gets caught up, and maybe not illegitimately but for me rather limited, in the idea of progress: «you imagine it and then you realize it». That may or may not work in some type of theories of technology. But in what we are talking about it is not the idea of the virtual being the limited, the not quite real, the unrealized, but rather being the powerful, the potential.

In other words, if we think about «virtual reality» in the kind of almost literal sense, what it is doing is kind of short circuiting what I talked about earlier of the usual idea of the image as representation. No longer is the image, the image of something real –the indexical bond in a photogra-

ph or the iconic bond in a painting– but it is actually exceeding that. By being «virtual» it is thinking about doing something that is not real.

As I have indicated often in my writings, thinking about cinema as it was originally received as a super-realistic image –it adds temporality and movement to the still image–... I certainly would not want to deny that. It is very important and it has been the main way that cinema has theoretically and historically been thought about. But I would like to detour around it and think about the cinema image not as realistic, but as «virtual», as creating an alternative. And this is partly what I think is important in the idea of immersion. If on the one hand the panorama or even the Halle's tours can be talked about in terms of realism, I think it is actually a very limited way of thinking about them. Not false maybe, but limited. If we go back to what you were talking about, the journey into the panorama, that you go through the dark corridor, you climb up the stairs and you emerge in a very light filled image that surrounds you... What is important there is not just a sense of it being real, but of it being other. You have entered into another environment.

Going back to the Phantasmagoria, it is a perfect example. Because in the Phantasmagoria theater, where the magic lantern slides were projected –as you know, the Phantasmagoria had several rooms–, there was no attempt to show you something realistic. In fact what they tried to do was to show you something supernatural and yet, at the same time, it was announced «These are not real ghosts». Robertson or Philipsthal said «what you are going to see is illusion. I'm not showing you wonders. I'm showing you things that I can make. But you will feel that they're real». So there is that whole kind of contradiction again. The paradox of the Phantasmagoria is that it convinces you that something «exists, it does not exist».

Phantasmagoria does that partly as you move into an auditorium, you are seated and it is dark. Again the darkness, as I have indicated with pro-

jection, is extremely important (and in contrast somewhat to the panorama where light is abundant). Therefore with these illuminated projected images –backprojected, of course– and the screen that is, as you say, hidden, dark, what one gets is a sense not of an image appearing on a screen, but rather of something appearing out of darkness. There are also the various movements of the lantern, which would allow the images to seem to actually be coming closer or withdrawing. The spatial illusions are very important but they are illusions; acknowledged as such and intended. This is what is important to emphasize, because all too often, partly for political reasons, illusion is thought about as a kind of trick, where we are made to think something that is not real is real. But in the Phantasmagoria there is no such subterfuge. You are rather invited to think of the paradox of what you are seeing. What you are experiencing and what you are perceiving is not what you think it is. And there is both an uncanny experience and a kind of excitement. You are put in a state where you do not know what is real. But for something to be realistic is to be illusionary.

As it is quite usual, and a lot of us find it very interesting, to establish relations between older technologies and new ones –let’s say a kind of 19th-21st connection– maybe we can talk a bit about this idea in itself: why do we establish connections? Are they useful? Are they concealing something? What are the differences? Because, of course, a relation means that there are differences too. Maybe one difference is a matter of frequency? That today are much more common than then, or even that then they were the exception and now are the rule? Or maybe this or other relations we establish are a mistake from our point of view; something that maybe needs a kind of «perspective correction»?

It is an interesting question and hard to resolve. Because there is, I think, a sense of recognition. The turn of the 19th to the 20th century is a period

of enormous technological acceleration. Usually things that had been gestating through the 19th century, but that in the last 20 years or so become accelerated and there are a whole series of transformations. The question we are talking about is: is this last turn from the 20th to 21st parallel? Is it a situation of a similar acceleration? The problem is that all through the 20th century we have a kind of acceleration, so it is not as demarcated. But there is this sense of acceleration and why is this, I think it is something that we will probably not be able to figure out for a long time and that would involve various types of research.

But nonetheless the observation that there is this kind of desire to find an earlier version of what we are going through –one which is both, as you say, similar and different–... I think that is significant. Even if we found that we could deny it on some level in terms of actual historical transformations, the fact that there is that desire to find a kind of distant mirror is important. And what does it involve? It partly involves that sense of wanting to be able to define an era. That there has been some type of transformation just recently and that it has a parallel to the earlier transformation as a way to understand it.

The other aspect of this relations, that I always emphasize as a historian, is about what changes. If we suddenly have a sense of transformation is partly because we understand something differently. The way I would usually put this is: suddenly the past looks different. I often tell an anecdote I heard about scholars under Ceausescu in Romania, a regime that followed the Stalinist model of constantly rewriting the textbooks of the revolution, the photographs and so on. A scholar said at one point: «our only hope lies in the future because the past is so uncertain; it’s always changing». He was talking about that kind of false certification of the past. But it seems to me to express some principle which as a historian I find really true and really important, which is that the past is not something that is set in concrete and untouchable, but in fact

it is something that we constantly go back to and looks different than it did.

To give an illustration that is very direct. My own work on early cinema, which started around the Brighton Symposium in 1978 when I was just a young graduate student, was partly that there was already a narrative in place about what early cinema was. That it was the gradual accumulation of the techniques of narrative film. And Christian Metz in the sixties was saying that narrative is the railroad, that all films moved towards narrative. Looking at early films under the context of the preparation for the Brighton Symposium in 1977, I said: «No, most of these are not narrative. There are some and they are important and they are interesting. But to kind of see everything of early cinema as a preparation for this kind of “railroad” of telling stories is simply not accurate». And furthermore, to my mind, it distorted what we really find interesting in film. I was roundly criticized by some people for this, because I’m very interested in the avant garde cinema. So for me, when I look at films, I don’t think, «okay, how does this lead to *Gone With the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939) or *The Sound of Music* (Robert Wise, 1965)?». I look at them and think, «how does it lead to *La regione centrale* (Michael Snow, 1971) or *Dog Star Man* (Stan Brakhage, 1961-1964)?». And some people —Janet Staiger, Charles Musser,...— criticized me; said: «you’re distorting this because you’re looking at it from your perspective». Now, essential to me is that we always look from our perspective. And if we think we do not, this is fooling ourselves and fooling other people. But furthermore, where did they get the assumption that everybody was thinking in terms of narrative? Looking at contemporary comments on films I found something, not like the avant-garde because that’s a very different thing, but much more like what I called the cinema of attractions.

So the point is, I guess, that we have a sense of historical change because suddenly the past does not seem to tell the same story that it always did. Suddenly we notice things in it that we did not

notice before. Why? Not just because they were there —not just the kind of rankian «history as what was»—, but also because suddenly we are in a new kind of hermeneutic relationship. We are asking new questions. We are noticing new things. I think that is true now.

But the thing that is the hardest to figure out for me... Let me just put it this way: the biggest transformation is not any particular technology —technology has changed but not enormously since 1895— but rather the omnipresence of images. And particularly of moving images or projected images. Now we live in an environment of those types of images, partly through advertising and through surveillance cameras. In any urban or technological area one would be hard pressed to avoid seeing images. And it is interesting because already in the 19th century urban areas had this quality. It is very fascinating to me if we think about posters. If you look at photographs of the late 19th century, whether it is Paris or New York or wherever, every surface seems to be covered by advertising images. And there is a difference in and there is not a difference again. In terms of what we were saying before, it is the omnipresence of the image around us now that makes me more sensitive to looking back at the 19th century and seeing all those posters.

It is very interesting how you explain it. And also, to point to a detail, I also find important that you mentioned the whole 20th century as a process of acceleration. Because in all these relations sometimes we tend to forget it (and for a reason in the case of film history, as it has been much talked about —even if, of course, a lot has been neglected too). But this can lead to a misconception; as if all this was something that somehow ended and then appeared again. While it is more a continuous trend that maybe goes up and down, but that is never lost.

In a recent conference you gave at Xcèntric in Barcelona, I think that you mentioned some-

thing about cinema today being a place of attention. I do not remember the exact phrase or context but I remember it because it resonated to me. Because I really think that in our present media landscape and the practices it has imposed to us (this constant attention to our devices) entering a movie theater could be a kind of balm, as you concentrate on just one thing. And of course, if I say so, it is because this is the exact opposite of what cinema represented for a lot of people in the twenties or thirties; this idea that cinema is an embodiment of the experience of everyday modernity with its constant distraction, etc. And I am not saying that any of the two characterizations are false. I rather find interesting that the characterization can go sort of from one pole to the other, and what this says about our present experience.

When I read this, as you mentioned it in our previous e-mail exchange, I thought that it is both very interesting and very hard to respond to. Because it is, in fact, essential to the way that I have been thinking, that cinema as an attraction is partly a kind of distraction. But it is exactly the two things together. What can grab your attention, when you're distracted. In other words, it is not the old model of contemplation; you go before a revered painting and you contemplate it and you lose yourself in it, lose yourself in time... In cinema, although you perhaps become immersed and absorbed, is almost always against the background of distraction. It is complicated because it seems contradictory. I would claim it is dialectical, not just simply a dichotomy. The image itself is multiple. Does not have to be, but if we think particularly of the Lumière or the Mitchell and Kenyon early films of the street, it is exploding all around. It is not the centered, contemplating experience. And yet at the same time, because you are, as I have indicated, transported by both the process of the attention grabbing quality of movement—something moves we tend to pay attention to—and the immersive quality of a projection... we

are taken to some place. And this is to me really important, this idea of transport.

Where are we taken? We are not necessarily taken to a total concentration and a single viewpoint. Not that we can not do that, but I think the nature of the solicitation of film to the viewer is one of multiplicity. Again phantom rides are the perfect illustration. We have the constant forward thrust of the camera down the tracks or down the street. And yet what we are seeing is constantly changing. So there is something hypnotic about the progress into it, but something almost distracting by the multiplicity of things to look at.

To me, ultimately, I would not say either that film is about attention or that it is simply about distraction. It seems to be about the play. And this is a term that I love not only because of the idea of «playful» and «ludic», but also I love how it relates to the engineering term «play», «flexibility», something that vibrates... We move back and forth as we are watching a moving image. And this even goes into things that are important like boredom—which I have written an essay about.

What I would emphasize is, I think you are absolutely on to something in asking this question. But it is hard to answer, because it is not as though with film we simply are channeled into it. Nor are we simply not paying attention. This is an issue of this kind of modern play between attention and distraction, as being kind of the condition of the modern environment. And cinema in some way can not replicate... but has the same quality. And partly that is why we were fascinated by it.

There is also this question that all of us have that kind of both belief and inclination towards total absorption. That classical cinema environment: darkened room, no ambient noise... However, what is interesting to me is that it is more dialectical. That exists only against the background of distraction. In the last two years, because of COVID and because of a variety of things, I have seen relatively few films at a theater and primarily see them on my monitor or on my computer.

And one of the things I notice is how often I check the running time of the film. And I think it is very much like when I am reading. I check to see what page I am on, but that does not mean I am not absorbed in the reading. But it is interesting that I check what page it is and that I check what time it is in the film. Sometimes it is with an analytical interest, kind of «it is at this point in the narrative, how much more time can it take to work this out?» So it is as though there is always some other awareness.

And could this be maybe something that previous historical spectators experienced in a similar but different way too? As a speculation, sometimes when writing about films, let's say in the first decades of the century, people used reels as a kind of measure («that happened in the third reel»). Could this be something that spectators were aware of?

Definitely were in up until about 1916-17, which is often when people say that is the beginning of classical cinema. Silent films very often had an actual title that would say «Act one», «Act two». In other words, the reels became part of the dramaturge, related to theatrical. But then that disappears. And to what extent you could be aware of it in a classical cinema... In fact the projectionist is aware of these little marks that indicate the ending and beginning of reels and one can notice it; but I don't think that most people did.

As we talked a lot about historical practices, I wonder, and this will be the last question, if you can talk about some contemporary work, technology or practice that you think is particularly interesting.

I am friends with Paul Kaiser and Marc Downie, two video-artists that work together under the name of OpenEndedGroup. They work a lot with a variety of things, including 3D. I have learned a great deal from them, and we even taught a course together some years ago about the possibilities

of new media. They did a work called *Ulysses in the Subway* in collaboration with Ken and Flo Jacobs. Ken Jacobs had an audio recording of him, purely sound, taking a trip from Times Square down to his loft in Lower Manhattan primarily on the subway. And they asked them to make something with this, working with the idea of visualize the sound. So Mark and Paul created a kind of abstract image of lines, a little bit like an oscilloscope but much more complicated, that responded to sound. Mark described it as a kind of wire sculpture, only that it is 12 miles long and we are kind of moving through it.

I found this piece, partly because of friendship, partly because of the process, to be extremely exciting. They actually have it in two forms. One is as a 3D film and the other as a VR, with the helmet. So that not only is this line constantly moving, but it comes closer and farther away. And to me, it is just very exciting that there is such an enormous number of technologies available now to interact with each other. This piece is abstract cinema, but at the same time you are hearing a very anecdotally and recognizable face. And if you know New York, you know exactly where you are –where the subway has changed ... There's something very narrative, very indexical even, and yet very abstract and bizarre. So this would be a quick answer and an example of what I am most excited by. I also find very interesting all the work of Jacobs in 3D.

I do not know this work but it seems quite appealing and I am happy that there is another reference to experimental cinema in the interview, as it is a field sometimes forgotten in canonical film histories (of course, less and less, but still...)

I am interested in all kind of films and I am interested in literature, painting, architecture... But why did I choose cinema as my main preoccupation? Undoubtedly they are autobiographical explanations, but one that I would give rationally would be that I love the fact that, whereas in

other media or art forms the classical and the experimental are totally separate, in film these are happening at the same time. In other words, commercial cinema and avant-garde cinema, we are not talking about different centuries. They are not in the same theaters maybe, but they are in the same historical period. ■

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THE CHANGING FACE OF THE PAST. IMMERSION, VIRTUALITY AND THE LIGHT BORN(E) IMAGE. A DIALOGUE WITH TOM GUNNING

Abstract

Dialogue with Tom Gunning about the concepts of immersion and virtuality in the history of audiovisual media. Gunning proposes some theoretical reflections on the cinematographic device and its immersive character, while also emphasising the meaning of the word "virtual" as potential. The dialogue delves into 19th-century technologies and spectacles such as the panorama and the phantasmagoria and genres and exhibition practices of early cinema such as Hale's Tours or the phantom rides. The practice of history and the tendency to recognise the present in the past are also some of the questions addressed. Finally, the contemporary experience of cinema is discussed and some current work in the field of experimental cinema is mentioned.

Key words

Immersion; Virtual; Cinema of attractions; Panorama; Phantasmagoria; Hale's Tours; Media archaeology.

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EL ROSTRO CAMBIANTE DEL PASADO. INMERSIÓN, VIRTUALIDAD Y LA IMAGEN ALUMBRADA. UN DIÁLOGO CON TOM GUNNING

Resumen

Conversación con Tom Gunning sobre los conceptos de inmersión y virtualidad en la historia del audiovisual. Gunning establece algunas reflexiones de carácter teórico acerca del dispositivo cinematográfico y su carácter inmersivo y hace hincapié en el significado concreto de la palabra virtualidad como potencia. Se discuten tecnologías y espectáculos del siglo XIX, como el panorama o la fantasmagoría y géneros y dispositivos propios del cine de los primeros tiempos, como los Tours de Hale o los *phantom ride*. También se reflexiona al respecto de la práctica de la historia y de la tendencia a reconocer el presente en el pasado. En último lugar, se habla de la experiencia del cine en la actualidad y se mencionan algunas obras contemporáneas cercanas al cine experimental.

Palabras clave

Inmersión; Virtual; Cine de atracciones; Panorama; Fantasmagoría; Hale's Tours; Arqueología de los medios.

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