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# 1 the origins of the film city

Film began with a scattering of gesturing ghosts, of human bodies walking city streets, within the encompassing outlines of bridges, hotels and warehouses, under polluted industrial skies. The first incendiary spark of the film image – extending across almost every country in the world, around the end of the nineteenth century – propelled forward a history of the body that remains inescapably locked into the history of the city.

The film city forms an entangled matter of image and language, of life and death. It incessantly takes on and discards its multiple figures and manifestations, and, through to its last monochrome nuance or lurid pixel, its vital axis lies in contradiction – every one of the aims and strategies of the film city's innumerable directors has been contested and refused, from the first moments of cinematic imagery. The film city's texture comprises an unsteady amalgam of sexual and corporeal traces, of illuminations and darknesses, of architectural ambitions and their cancellation, and of sudden movements between revolution and stasis. As a result, the film city is containable only in an open book of death and

origins, constructed from urban fragments that slip into freefall – in the hidden cracks in celluloid and digital images – so as to conjure the aberrant code of language which can itself perversely originate the essential visual compulsions and sensations of the projected or destroyed film city.

The passage from the photographic to the filmic to the digital image carries its own aberrance and contradictory reversals, which annul any sense of a linear history of cinema. The film image defined itself throughout its early decades via the construction of an aura of originality and uniqueness – in the form of irreplicable visual projections of human and urban forms, often in grandiose combat with one another – but the industrial medium of cinema intractably based itself instead on principles of infinite reproduction: of celluloid film prints, of cinema audiences and even of film-narrative forms. The digital image (as the definitive technological realization of this desire for endless reproduction) in effect careers backwards in film history, into the time zone before that of cinema's original images, since the digital image's instantly redundant forms – surpassed and eroded by the incessantly mutating corporate demands that engender them – possess a fundamental and extreme archaism. And, in its multiple births and rebirths, cinema's history ultimately conveys a harsh and conflictual set of beginnings to its film cities. The digital image of the city lacks entirely the raw irregularities through which the original film images of urban life sustained their crucial force of respiration. Cinema history itself was born in negation and cancellation, both of

its own forms and of the innumerable pre-filmic experiments (such as the Phantasmagoria, the Ergascopia and the Pantascopia) which proliferated in such urban environments as Paris and London in the early and middle decades of the nineteenth century. All visual obsessions cohere, however ephemerally, into particular forms, which then crack open once again. The history of cinema comprises only one variant of an all-encompassing, multiple history of the potential image, just as each city forms a single, momentary variant of the relentless processes of urban transformation.

The cities at the origins of European cinema are strange Edens, already contaminated in the first illumination of their urban matter: the soot-blackened bridge over the River Aire in Louis Le Prince's experimental images taken in the industrial city of Leeds in 1888; the rooftops of the Pankow district of Berlin in images captured by the Skladanowsky Brothers with the aim of infusing cinema for the first time with the spectacular magic of popular public performance; and the imposing tenements, advertising screens and factory buildings of Lyons, shot from trains, in the Lumière Brothers' vast project of collecting their city's visual components on film. The inhabitants of such cities who were captured, often by chance, in those first images became the primitive corporeal figures of cinema, in a parallel way to that in which – in those final years of the nineteenth century – certain oblivious populations such as the rural inhabitants of Romania or the Aran Islanders of western Ireland were being depicted as Europe's archetypal 'primitive' peoples. Cinema

itself, in its years of origin, was often denounced as a 'primitive' or crass medium; in a different register, film history since the 1970s has deliberated over the 'primitive' status of early cinema and its strategies. However, the adroit power struggles for control over the technology of film, and over the urban audiences that it enthralled, quickly became sophisticated as the cinema industry assembled its fragile apparition of aesthetic prestige. In order to secure cinema's status as both art form and mass entertainment product, film's profuse origins were rapidly reinvented as a heroic, mythic achievement, with its unified focus in the work of a few revered pioneers. But cinema and its origins never entirely succeeded in attaching themselves securely to the already unstable forms of early twentieth-century art. And the caustic approach often levelled in contemporary visual cultures towards the sense of a definitive power in images forms yet another reversal for the tenuous prestige accorded to cinema's original images in film history.

In the 1960s, the American film-maker Kenneth Anger often looked back nostalgically to the moment of cinema's origins as a 'black day for mankind', with the medium of film seen as inflicting a literally devilish malediction on humanity, while simultaneously raising the exhilarating creative potential for unrest, turmoil and even revolution. In Europe, the origins of cinema released exactly such a volatile upheaval into the visual perception of cities by their inhabitants. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, cities became transformed and even brought into

existence through the impetus and movement of film images, viewed collectively in the form of exhortative newsreels and feature films within crowded cinema spaces; at the same time, cities reached a point of crisis, and even were abandoned or destroyed, through the impact of film images on urban populations. The torn cities of revolutionary Europe at the end of the First World War, the industrial cities around the far edges of Siberia and the terminated locales of warfare in 1945 all became defined (and in some cases were invented) directly by the medium of the film image. That image powerfully recast the rapport between human vision and the space of the city, according absolute pre-eminence to the future work of the eye. Cinema is the medium that taught the sensory values of speed and intensity to human vision: even the enormous distance extending from the everyday images of life on the city streets in Louis Le Prince's 1888 film to the catastrophic zero-point of Europe's 1945 emptied cities, their utter desolation minutely rendered on film, can be scanned in one rapid eye movement.

The seminal film image forms an exploration of the city designed to capture the maximum intensity of urban life and its actions. The very first work in the history of cinema comprises an image of the city that is imbued with corporeal gestures and urban surfaces together with intimations of death and loss.

In October 1888, the French-born inventor Louis Le Prince positioned his experimental film camera in the window

of a tools workshop overlooking the south-east corner of Leeds Bridge, at the busiest moment of the day, and filmed a sequence showing human figures, horse-drawn carriages and carts traversing the river bridge in hazy autumn sunlight. He had selected that moment and site in order to saturate the image with the greatest possible accumulation of human movement. On the far side of the bridge, the smog-encrusted walls of substantial Victorian hotels and warehouses, each façade containing its own unexposed content of human figures, occupied the upper half of the image. The bodies crossing the bridge, unaware of the film being made, were caught in their intricate performance of the originating gestures of cinema. A man wipes his nose; a woman carries a parcel; two men in discussion lean over a parapet; another man politely touches his hat as a woman passes. All of the elements capable of launching an intricate fiction film narrative are already prepared in those banal, scattered gestures. And even within the concentrated temporal span of the film sequence, at the high point of the day's traffic across the bridge, those human figures succeed in sending forth a certain nonchalance: the body's time drifts infinitely. After only three seconds, the film is over.

Although the urban location for Le Prince's film remains tenaciously identical in the contemporary city (all that has changed over twelve decades has been that the surface layer of industrial dirt has been removed from the buildings), every physical gesture that had been enacted on the bridge, and embedded within the film image, vanished

instantly. And the surrounding world that had existed at that first cut into time of the film image would shatter, falling apart ever more calamitously as time moved further on and outwards from the image's few impenetrable moments. Le Prince's images initiated the capacity of film, throughout its history, to transfuse to its spectators a compacted charge of nostalgia for the momentary apparitions of cities or human bodies whose forms were just about to disappear forever, fatally engulfed either by conflicts and revolutions or by technological transformations. Le Prince – who had decided to base his research in the thriving industrial city of Leeds after developing the technological basis of his inventions while working as a wallpaper-printing engineer in New York – never found the resources necessary to project his films to audiences, and he moved desperately between France, England and the US in his attempts to engage financial backers in his experiments. During that period, international disputes over the ownership of the technologies of cinema began. Two years after making the original city film in Leeds, Le Prince abruptly disappeared without trace while travelling by train – together with his cameras and projectors – between Dijon and Paris, on 16 September 1890, in the first unsolvable mystery of cinema history. His film of Leeds Bridge remained preserved for 40 years or so, then itself disappeared; a hundred years on from its making, it could only be digitally re-animated from photographs taken in the 1930s of the original images, in an alliance of three conflictual visual media.

As well as seizing, for the first time, the essential banality of everyday human gestures in city streets, Le Prince also became the first film-maker to capture images prescient of death. In the same month as he shot his film of Leeds Bridge, he filmed a sequence in the same city of his elderly mother-in-law dancing, in the garden of her house in the suburban district of Roundhay, ten days before her death. In every film image, the capturing of the body intimates a simultaneous loss of corporeal existence; the immediacy of the image insistently counters sensations of presence with loss. The space of the city itself imbues the film image with an opposed dimension: the city adroitly negotiates and enforces its own mass within the image, applying intricate pressure around the human forms which that image holds. But, once the image has been fixed, its residue in urban space abruptly becomes vulnerable to erasure or alteration – the city is subject to the intrusive power of capricious elements beyond its own domain, in the form of the great upheavals that incessantly amend cities' faces. The innumerable disparities and enigmas that comprise the gap between the contemporary city and its filmed surfaces form the vital core in every human obsession with filmic urban space. But in Le Prince's very first film image of the city, no such disparity occurs, and an outlandish simultaneity arises between the moment of the film city's origin and its contemporary form, thereby summarily closing the gap between film and city. Only the ephemeral traces and memories of the human body have vanished.

Louis Le Prince's films of the city occupy a unique space of flux between invention and death. In his own inexplicable vanishing, he imparted to film history its originating figure of corporeal disappearance – a figure prophetic both for the contemporary impact of digital media on cinema and for the status of the human body within the city's infinitely hazardous arena. Le Prince's often supplanted position within cinema history alternates between utter oblivion and oblique re-instatement, and coheres only within the surviving fragments of his initiatory images of the film city and its gesturing human forms.

In the city-film images of the Skladanowsky Brothers, the rooftops of Berlin's Pankow and Prenzlauer Berg districts stretch outwards across the lower part of the frame, with industrial chimneys and church steeples occasionally punctuating the relentless urban sprawl of factory workers' tenements. While one of the two brothers, Max, operated his film camera, the Bioskop, the other brother, Emil, performed a maladroit dance of bizarrely outstretched arms and legs, facing the lens with a grin and holding his hat high in the air: an aberrant gesture of elation within the framework of those decrepit urban districts, habitually defined by the endlessly repeated gestures of manual labour. Behind the figure in movement of Emil Skladanowsky, a vacant sky occupies the remainder of the frame. Inside the camera, designed to Max Skladanowsky's idiosyncratic specifications, the film jolted from image to image, its perforations

having been incised by hand into the celluloid by the film-maker. The image of the human body in the city subsists for a few moments longer than in Le Prince's film, then it too cuts off abruptly, and the body dematerializes. Max Skladanowsky retrospectively provided a date for his images of Berlin, filmed from the roof of a building in the Schönhauser Allee – 20 August 1892 – although this mythical date may have been as spontaneously invented as his brother's dance on the rooftop overlooking the city. Almost four years had passed since Le Prince's seminal images of the inhabitants and urban surfaces of Leeds. In those years, the film cities and populations of Europe had lain dormant, awaiting their next visual resuscitation.

The Skladanowsky Brothers – they hold their place in cinema history as equal collaborators, although it seems clear that Max conducted all of the gruelling work of invention, while the less technologically adept Emil performed the more erratic work of infusing vivid movement into their film images – had begun their visual experiments over a decade earlier, at the end of the 1870s, while demonstrating a variant of one of the innumerable pre-cinema spectacles, the Nebula, to Berlin's novelty-avid population. During that period, the city existed in a state of almost delirious expansion and desire for entertainment, as its sudden industrial ascendancy spread its raw, crammed tenement suburbs outwards from the centre. The Nebula spectacle, shown in popular entertainment halls, employed multiple image sources and cacophonies in order to project awesome repre-

sentations of destroyed cities: they veered disturbingly in and out of focus, suffering multiple catastrophes that ranged from earthquakes to firestorms. The success of the Nebula – undoubtedly more immediate in its compounded sensorial impact than many contemporary digital-image installations with identical strategies – gradually led the Skladanowsky Brothers to envisage presenting their own experimental film images to public audiences.

On 1 November 1895, at the Wintergarten hall in Berlin (a multi-purpose entertainment venue capable of hosting such popular spectacles as acrobatics, wrestling and erotic cabarets, in addition to innovations in the development of the film image), the Skladanowsky Brothers held the first-ever screening of films for a public audience. Their programme lasted for around fifteen minutes and included footage of a boxing kangaroo and of children's folk dances, alongside a number of films of the urban landscapes of Berlin which Max Skladanowsky had filmed especially for the event over the preceding months. The screening's reception proved to be enthusiastic – although most early audiences viewed the images presented to them as flat, monochrome hallucinations of stilted motion, in contrast with the more engulfing spectacles of pre-cinema media. As well as instigating film spectatorship, the Skladanowsky Brothers initiated one further essential component of cinema: the first paying customer entering their Wintergarten screening served unwittingly to activate the financial regime of the cinema industry, thereby irreparably determining the future course of film.

During its first year, cinema projection remained an almost entirely urban phenomenon, with the many inventors of the diverse technologies touring the grand theatres and cafés of the European capitals, their breakneck schedules determined by heated rivalries. Later, films would also be shown to rural audiences, in improvised venues such as barns and stables, with often incendiary results (the first projectors proved notoriously combustible, and early film history is constellated with accounts of audiences fleeing burning cinema spaces). As well as providing a technological and sensory initiation, those rural screenings jolted their audiences with a first vision of the city, as both a potentially dangerous and an alluring destination. During the span of only two months, the fragile position of the Skladanowsky Brothers in film history shifted from one of innovation to one of archaism and incipient oblivion; on 29 December 1895, they travelled to Paris to present their film spectacle at the Folies Bergère, but arrived to discover that their French rivals, the Lumière Brothers, had held their own first public cinema event in the city on the previous day, thereby instantly cornering the Parisian market and necessitating the cancellation of the Skladanowsky Brothers' spectacle. After intermittently touring Northern European cities over the next year in the face of increasingly ferocious competition, the Skladanowsky Brothers abruptly retired from cinema exhibition in 1897 while it was still only in the initial stages of its expansion. Returning home to Berlin, they largely abandoned their inventions and made their living in

*Panorama of the arrival at Perrache station*, Lumière Brothers

obscurity by specializing in obsolete pre-film media such as flick-books.

Nearly 40 years after its premature curtailment, the work of the Skladanowsky Brothers was abruptly resurrected in one of the supreme aberrations of film history. In 1935, the National Socialist government in Germany seized on the then-aged and forgotten Max Skladanowsky, representing him as the pre-eminent world-wide pioneer of film, in order

to counter the status of the Lumière Brothers as cinema's primary inventors. An official plaque was unveiled at the Wintergarten to emphasize that it had been in Germany, rather than in France or the US, that the first screening had been held, and the Skladanowsky Brothers' film images of Berlin briefly became a matter of elation and prestige once again. But during the first moments of the Second World War, on 30 November 1939, Max Skladanowsky died in Berlin; by the war's end, the volatile city whose buildings and inhabitants he had filmed for the first time had been virtually obliterated.[1]

social revolt. Human bodies had been umbilically linked to those images of urban upheaval, the mute figures vividly gesturing across the city's face in elation or negation. But the arrival of synchronized-sound cinema implied the destitution of that evocatory power of the film image as all of the great European experimental film-makers of the period foresaw: vocal sound would trivialize cinema into dramatic narrative forms and open it up to forced global appropriation by Hollywood. While the film image existed in vital flux and constantly induced vertiginous innovation, sound carried with it all of the deadening stasis of spoken language that would fix cinema for the next decade as a subsidiary variant of theatre. As a last stand before the arrival of sound synchronization, a rush of city films appeared across Europe, especially in Germany, France and the Soviet Union, in which the visual city's fluid forms determinedly took pre-eminence, their compelling images engrained with their own imminent vulnerability to archaism. Alongside this ascendant preoccupation with urban space in the final city films of silent cinema, explorations into the intricate forms of the human body plummeted and dissolved; the First World War – disseminated in cinema spaces via newsreels – had spread so many images of mud-encrusted figures locked in intractable combat, and arbitrarily slaughtered in their millions, that corporeal form itself had become irreparably devalorized. As a result, the inhabitants of the film cities of the 1920s possessed a tenuous emotional status, defined only by their basic desires of lust and greed.

The perceiving eye supplanted the body, and the matter of vision in the city – with all of its provocative transmutations – formed the essential matter of those 1920s city films.

Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: The Symphony of the Great City* (1927) opens with a journey by train into the city – an arrival that accelerates rather than slows, accumulating and manipulating a relentless sensory exhilaration, in an inverse strategy to the Lumière Brothers' artless arrival in the seemingly depopulated city of Lyons 30 years earlier. That seminal arrival into the core of the city was replicated in innumerable city films of subsequent years. Once immersed within Berlin, the film (which Ruttmann edited from footage shot in the streets over a period of a year by concealed cinematographers) oscillates between scanning its surfaces, as the ephemeral traces of a day and night pass over its buildings and avenues, and examining the nature of perception in the city, with the camera following the inhabitants' gaze at its incessant spectacle. The inhabitants of Berlin themselves play no part in the city's vital insurgencies and convulsions, which are all generated within the visual matter of the place itself: Ruttmann shows them stampeding into their factories and offices, the images intercut with footage of cattle herded passively through the gates of an abattoir; after dark, those moribund inhabitants pursue a similar regime of self-immolation, via alcohol and lust, in sex cabarets and bars. Only the city itself possesses any dignity and resilience, which it intermittently allows its inhabitants the luxury to perceive through the medium of its illuminations: its neon screens, advertising