

# On Some Limitations of the Definition of the Dispositive “Cinema”<sup>1</sup>

*André Gaudreault*

If we were Artists  
We would not say the cinema  
We would say the cine

But if we were old professors  
from the provinces  
We would say neither cinema nor cine  
But cinematograph

Guillaume Apollinaire, excerpt from “Avant le cinéma,” 1917<sup>2</sup>

At the conference at which this paper was presented, two participants made a reference to Guillaume Apollinaire without consulting each other beforehand. François Albera first pointed out that, according to the author of “The New Spirit and the Poets,” poets wanted to be able some day “to mechanize poetry as the world has been mechanized.”<sup>3</sup> For my part, I projected an excerpt of the poem used here as an epigraph and straightforwardly titled “Before the Cinema.” No intention or planning, no machination should be read into this coincidence, which is first and foremost the result of chance.

1 This text was written as part of the research work of the GRAFICS (Groupe de recherches sur l'avènement et la formation des institutions cinématographique et scénique) at the Université de Montréal. The GRAFICS receives funding from Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the Fonds québécois pour la recherche sur la société et la culture. The GRAFICS belongs to the Centre de recherche sur l'intermédialité (CRI). The author wishes to thank Jean-Marc Lamotte and the Institut Lumière for the photograph of the Lumière device (fig. 1).

2 Guillaume Apollinaire, *Oeuvres poétiques*, Marcel Adéma and Michel Décaudin, eds. (Paris: Gallimard, NRF/Bibliothèque de La Pléiade, 1965) 362.

3 *Selected Writings of Guillaume Apollinaire*, ed. Roger Shattuck (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1971) 227-37, 237. Apollinaire's text comes from a lecture given in November 1917, the very year when the poem “Avant le cinéma” was published (a few months earlier, in April to be specific). In his talk, Albera referred to “The New Spirit and the Poets” within a larger argument on the prevalence of the model of the machine in the arts at the end of the nineteenth century, a time when the “machine ‘cinema’” was the driving force displacing the old categories of creation (see his contribution in this volume).

Still, the coincidence has a certain necessity to it. Indeed, the cinema holds an essential place in the work of the French poet, as Francis Ramirez has shown in a particularly inspired article on the question:

Cinema long behaved like an illegitimate child, looking for fathers, finding godfathers. Among them, Guillaume Apollinaire. At a time when dominant artists, particularly in France, showed contempt for cinema, the poet adopted it and emphatically greeted the art of movement in what he called “the new spirit.”<sup>4</sup>

In his poem (the one ending with the famous “My glass broke like a burst of laughter”), Apollinaire lists the variety of terms used during the period to refer to the cinema. In 1917, the *vulgum pecus* would have said “the cinema” whereas artists (the particular kind that are actors and actresses) would have preferred “the cine,” and “old professors from the provinces,” “the cinematograph.” For the record, here is the complete poem:

And tonight we will go  
To the cinema

Artists who are they then  
They are no longer the ones who cultivate the Fine Arts  
They are not the ones who take care of Art  
Poetic Art or music as well  
The Artists are actors and actresses

If we were Artists  
We would not say the cinema  
We would say the cine

But if we were old professors from  
the provinces  
We would say neither cine nor cinema  
But cinematograph

So my goodness do we need to have taste

4 Francis Ramirez, “Apollinaire et le désir de cinéma,” *Cahiers de l'Association internationale des études françaises* 47.1 (1995) 371. Available at [http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/caief\\_0571-5865\\_1995\\_num\\_47\\_1\\_1883](http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/caief_0571-5865_1995_num_47_1_1883), last accessed on September 28, 2012.

My glass is full of a wine that shimmers like a  
 flame  
 Listen to the slow song of a boatman  
 Telling of seven women he saw in the moonlight  
 Twisting their long green hair hanging to their feet

Stand up sing higher while dancing in a ring  
 So that I no longer hear the boatman singing  
 And place by me all the blond maidens  
 With their fixed stare their braids folded back

The Rhine the Rhine is drunk where the vineyards are mirrored  
 All the gold of the nights falls shimmering reflected in it  
 The voice is still singing, rattling itself to death  
 These fairies with green hair incanting the summer

My glass broke like a burst of laughter<sup>5</sup>

This question of which term to privilege when referring to (and naming) the new "medium" was topical in the second decade of the twentieth century. Indeed, the year Apollinaire published his poem, Louis Delluc wrote a rather enlightened opinion along the same lines: "We are in want of words, I mean brief and precise words [...] to replace *cinématographe*, which is heavy, endless, ugly, and does not apply very well to what it is meant to refer to."<sup>6</sup>

For the extoller of *photogénie*, the word *cinématographe* thus started to sound stale. What the supposed inventor of the word *cinéaste* sensed in 1917 was basically that the word had simply become outdated when it came to designating film activity as a whole. It is as though Delluc had a clear intuition that the situation had changed and that a new paradigm had emerged; as though he had a vague impression that, as the process of institutionalization of cinema irreducibly moved forward, the old term was increasingly at odds with the course of events, the state of things.

The issue of naming the new media was obviously not just a French affair at the time. Comparable questioning was taking place in the United States, one example being the well-known hesitation in the 1910s between *mov-*

5 Apollinaire, *Oeuvres poétiques* 362.

6 Louis Delluc, *Le Film* 12 Nov. 1917, in Jean Giraud, *Le lexique français du cinéma. Des origines à 1930* (Paris: CNRS, 1958), entry on "cinématographe," 90. This was also the month when Apollinaire gave his talk on "The New Spirit."

*ing pictures* and *motion pictures*, as reported by William Paul.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the attempt to introduce “photoplay” proved short-lived. Though it has registered in our memories through one of the first theoretical works on the cinema published by Hugo Münsterberg in 1916,<sup>8</sup> the term has long become obsolete.

One thing for certain is that the choice between two words in French (*cinématographe* and *cinéma*) to refer to the same historical object<sup>9</sup> causes much confusion, as will be demonstrated here once again. In fact, we will see that, as Guy Béart’s song goes, “the poet spoke the truth...” Indeed, Apollinaire’s poem contains the key word in the main proposition I am to make toward the end of my argument. Thinking ahead to the conclusion, I thus chose to title the present text “On Some Limitations of the Definition of the Dispositive ‘Cinema,’” not “On Some Limitations of the Definition of the *Cinematographic* Dispositive.”

Apparatus theory has been through difficult times lately – at least, that is what Nicolas Dulac and I put forward on the occasion of a recent conference.<sup>10</sup> It has been criticized on two counts: first, its lack of historical

7 William Paul, “Uncanny Theater. The Twin Inheritances of the Movies,” *Paradoxa* 3.3-4 (1997): 321-47. On this question, see also André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion, “En guise d’ouverture sur la problématique cinéma/bande dessinée,” *Cinema e fumetto. Cinema and Comics*, Leonardo Quaresima, Laura Ester Stangalli and Federico Zecca, eds. (Udine: Forum, 2009) 23-29.

8 Hugo Münsterberg’s *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* was first published by D. Appleton and Company (New York/London, 1916). Most people working in the field of film studies know it under the title of a new edition that appeared in the early 1970s, *The Film: A Psychological Study* (New York: Dover, 1970), which omitted “photoplay” and replaced it with “film.” The latest life of the work in question (in a recent, new publication) marked the return of the word “photoplay,” though the title contains the word “film” so that the “customer” knows what the book deals with: *Hugo Münsterberg on Film. The Photoplay: A Psychological Study and Other Writings*, ed. Allan Langdale (London: Routledge, 2002). In a review of the book, Ann M. Gibb wrote, “Are movies art, or entertainment? Does watching violent films encourage violent behavior in teenagers? Should movies be censored? A new book, above, by art historian Allan Langdale, collects all the writings on film by Hugo Münsterberg, an early film theorist. These questions are being debated today, but they were also posed nearly 100 years ago by Hugo Münsterberg, a German psychologist who came to America and fell under the enchantment of the *new medium* called the ‘photoplay’” (my emphasis). See Ann M. Gibb, “Book shows that debates over the role of films are nothing new,” *UC Santa Cruz Currents Online* 3 June 2002 <http://www.ucsc.edu/currents/01-02/06-03/film.html>, last accessed on September 28, 2012.

9 In actuality, it is not always the *same* historical object which is being referred to, even when only one term is available, since words never completely correspond to things and there never is a total adequation between reality and language (but that is a whole other story...).

10 International conference “Les dispositifs,” Université de Marne-la-Vallée and École nationale supérieure Louis-Lumière, France, 2006. See N. Dulac and A. Gaudreault, “Dispositifs optiques et attraction,” *Cahier Louis-Lumière (Les dispositifs)* 4 (June 2007): 91-108.

foundations; second, its inadequate picture of film reception. In its classical version at least, the theory has been described as lacking a proper historical grounding, as it rests on a theoretical construction that completely overlooks the diversity of practices and technologies developed in cinema since the "dispositif" was perfected. Besides, its assumption of a monolithic audience has been blamed for its inadequate account of film reception.

Jumping the gun on some aspects of the apparatus, theoreticians ended up crossing paths with historians (notably historians of early cinema) and other theoreticians (notably those working from a cognitivist or feminist perspective), who soon pointed out the inadequacies of some of their hypotheses. More and more historians are opting for a pragmatic-historical approach to the "dispositif" nowadays,<sup>11</sup> thus conceiving new analytical models anchored in the diachronic flow of the historical continuum. It has been shown that many spectatorial practices went against the model assumed by apparatus theory, and that the film "dispositif" did not constitute a unitary, inert entity cast in stone any more than did the spectator.

Besides, recent research and discussions have brought to light many practices that help us better understand the relation between spectator, "dispositif" and representation. The more the film "dispositif" loses its apparent uniqueness, the more the strictly ideological or technological explanation loses ground, revealing the complexity of the *basic "dispositif"* – if I may call it that.

Accordingly, there have been conferences on the notion of the "dispositif" before the one whose proceedings appear in this book, just as there will obviously be many others on the same theme over the next few years. Indeed, this notion lies at the center of the preoccupations of many dynamic research groups, whether in Switzerland, in the Netherlands, in France or in Quebec. Admittedly, since the turn of the century – not so long ago – the "dispositif" has made a much noted comeback on the intellectual scene that takes the cinema and *moving images* as its object.<sup>12</sup>

11 See Frank Kessler, "La cinématographie comme dispositif [du] spectaculaire," *Cinémas* 14.1 (Fall 2003): 21-34.

12 I would like to allow myself a short digression here, a "futurological" one, if you will. You probably noted the care with which I choose my words when I write of the intellectual work "that takes the cinema and *moving images* as its object." Given the new context in which we are currently immersed, with the proliferation of digital technologies and the dissemination/multiplication of screens and media, I am convinced that this tendency toward caution in the choice of words, which articulates the particular (cinema) with the more general (moving images), will be more and more frequent – this until the day when the particular term "cinema" is abandoned and only the generic term "moving images" remains. Already, the multiplication of expressions such as "images mouvantes," "images en mouvement," or "image animée" in French

The revival of the notion in advanced thinking on cinema (and moving images...) is itself not extraneous to the turbulence brought about by the *advent of digital technologies*, which have redrawn the maps once used with a bit of intuition to navigate the – then smaller – world of mere filming. It comes with its share of joy and sorrow – the latter somewhat linked to the semantic inflation produced by the notion of “dispositif.” Judging by the literature of the past few years, the concept may seem to thicken and the notion to lose its clarity gradually, as if everyone, myself included, had passed the word round to put their own twist on the notion. Scholars, however, are not necessarily responsible for this inflationary trend: the term itself is an invitation to all kinds of derivatives (and just as many tangents...).

“Dispositif” as a term has therefore become definitely polysemic, which in itself is not necessarily a problem. This short text I put together shows the extent to which the word lends itself to multiple meanings and levels of meaning:<sup>13</sup>

Probably drawing on the *social and industrial infrastructure* that was the Lumière company at the end of the nineteenth century in France, the Lumière brothers were able to find the means to develop their Cinematograph, a *technical dispositive* for which they filed an application in February 1895 as part of the *legal framework* designed for patents. The Cinematograph went down in history as the origin of the *film dispositive*. It should be mentioned, however, that the real invention of the Lumière brothers is limited to the sole small *mechanical device* known as the triangular eccentric cam, which made it possible to take photographs intermittently. Besides, it should be pointed out that the ingenious *shooting dispositive* of the Cinematograph was also designed for use as a *projection dispositive* in public screenings whose *dispositive* was blatantly and spectacularly reminiscent of the *dispositive* imagined by Plato in his famous allegory of the cave. In addition, these shows marked the beginning of a cultural series whose theoretical understanding was to culminate in the

has become perceptible in written discourse over the past few years. From my point of view, it is a clear symptom of the search for suitability between language and the new extra-linguistic reality. The situation is slightly different in English, of course, as the use side by side of two “clausulas,” both bearing on “pictures” which are “moving,” could amount to tautology. In English, I noted a tendency to use expressions such as “moving image studies” or “scholars of the moving image,” with the aim to avoid limiting discourse to cinema alone and excluding other instances of images in movement.

13 Translator’s note: the italics in the indented self-quotation that follows, found in the original source, refer to instances when the author uses the word “dispositif” in French.

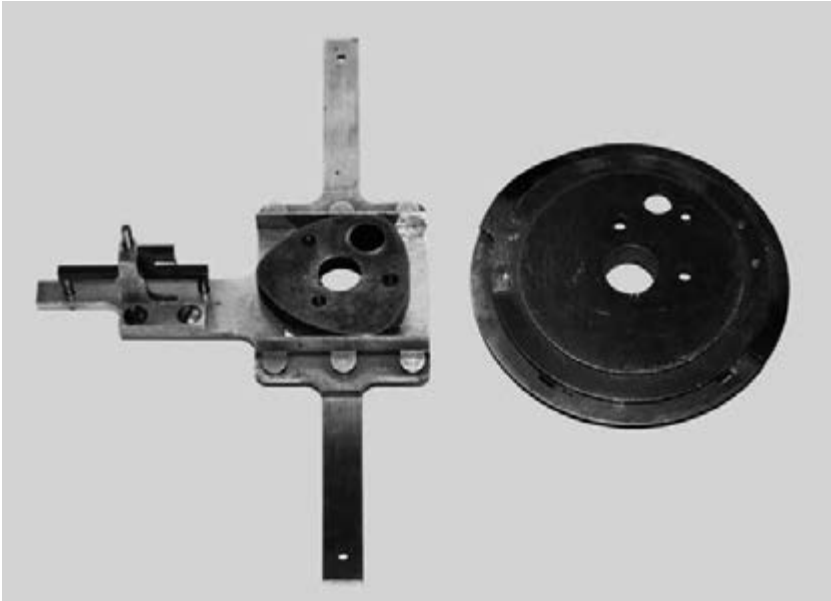


Fig. 1. The Lumière brothers' famous eccentric cam (on the left, the sliding frame that bears the claws, and whose two alternative conveyance movements are performed by the triangular eccentric cam placed at its center; on the right, the drum which, once assembled on the same axis as the eccentric cam's and interdependent with it, makes it possible – thanks to the ramps positioned on its rim – to command the alternating coming and going of the claws in the sprocket holes of the film). Photograph: Jean-Marc Lamotte (Institut Lumière).

1970s with the advent of a rather convoluted theoretical system known as *apparatus theory* – but not until the *basic apparatus* had undergone a few important modifications, including the addition of a *sound apparatus*.

As this shows, “dispositif” refers to a number of different notions. Accordingly, we are quite justified in making a number of distinctions, as Jean-Pierre Sirois-Trahan has already suggested with his *material dispositive*, *mental dispositive*, *production dispositive*, *reception dispositive* and *distribution dispositive*.<sup>14</sup> As difficult as the task may prove, I believe that we should build a theoretical model for each definition of the word “dispositif,” which branches off into technological, discursive, material, psychological, ideological and linguistic directions, to name but a few.

Some day, we should also come to distinguish sharply and rigorously between “dispositive,” “apparatus,” “device,” “process,” and other thingies.

14 Jean-Pierre Sirois-Trahan, “Dispositif(s) et réception,” *Cinémas* 14.2-3 (Fall 2003): 149-76.

This is far from simple, since the boundaries between each of these terms do not always appear clearly when the moment comes to designate the object of our thought. This may also be observed in English, as “apparatus,” also used to translate “dispositif,” is a rather vague equivalent for the word, which also translates as “device,” for instance. Some, like Frank Kessler,<sup>15</sup> purely and simply propose that the French word “dispositif” be maintained in English.

A “dispositif” may thus be a concrete thing, but it may also be abstract. It may be a big or large thing, just as it may be a very small one. I asked researcher Jean-Marc Lamotte, who is in charge of collections at the Institut Lumière in Lyons, for further information on the “*thingy* that made all the difference in the Cinématographe.”<sup>16</sup> Here is what he answered:

In fact, the “Lumière claw system” constitutes a complete *device* [“dispositif”]: indeed, it includes the eccentric cam (whether it is round or triangular basically does not make any difference). The cam is the mechanical piece that transforms the rotation of the crank into an alternating movement which it then transmits to a frame bearing the driving claws. The frame thus goes up and down. Yet the drum with the two ramps, which is interdependent with the cam, is just as essential: it controls the coming and going of the claws in the sprocket holes, thereby allowing the frame bearing the claws to come back up empty, leaving the film still even so briefly – the very principle of the intermittent advance of film.<sup>17</sup>

This specialist of the Lumière Cinematograph, who considers what I call the Lumière *thingy* (the eccentric cam) to be more than a mere thingy, thus used the word “dispositif” in an unbiased way. Lamotte even added:

This is all to say that we (in fact, almost everybody when speaking from memory) slightly simplify when we speak only of the cam, when in fact the Lumière system is a whole, a *dispositive* by which a continuous movement of rotation (the axis bearing the cam, the drum and the shutter) is turned into two alternating conveyance movements: a vertical movement, controlled by the cam mounted on the rotating camshaft

15 Frank Kessler, “La cinématographie comme dispositif [du] spectaculaire,” *Cinémas* 14.1 (Fall 2003): 21-34.

16 I did write “bidule” (“thingy”) in my query to Jean-Marc Lamotte. At no point did I mention the word “dispositif.”

17 E-mail to the author, 25 May 2008 (my emphasis).



and transmitted to a frame bearing mobile claws; a horizontal movement controlled by two ramps on the rim of the drum also mounted on the rotating camshaft, and transmitted to the claws [...].<sup>18</sup>

This manifestly belongs to the category of *technical* dispositive, one degree above my somewhat unreliable "category" of the "thingy" – a technical dispositive that was to make it possible for the Lumière Cinematograph to shoot intermittently. This intermittence allows for the taking of shots that may be *projected* later by the Cinematograph, once it is turned into a *technical* screening dispositive within the *material* and *social* dispositive of the screening room, which implies the "co-presence" in the same space of a projector, a projectionist, a screen, a film and spectators. All of these essential conditions were in turn to make it possible for French film theoreticians to found the so-called, metaphorical "apparatus theory" after the dispositive had been in social use for eighty years.

These various manifestations and materializations of the notion of "dispositif" take us from the world of the extremely technical to the more simple technical world, then to the social world and finally to the world of ideas. It is also a shift from the smallest to the much larger, the immeasurable even; from the concrete to the abstract; and, last of all, from the empirical to the speculative. It takes place by simply moving the *same term*, the *same lexical unit* from one sphere to another, along the same chain, each time conferring an additional meaning, if not a new spirit, on it.

By the way, what is so special about the first element in this chain, the smallest and apparently the most insignificant of all, and yet the first cause in what I propose to call the "chain of the 'dispositif'"? This more-than-a-thingy, these mere pieces of metal assembled and arranged in quite a specific way, forming a dispositive, and which inadvertently made it possible to produce gains as algorithmic as they are exponential and unexpected?

It undoubtedly has to be a little marvel, a marvelous device to arouse – or rather, to unleash – as many passions (this cam may have been called "eccentric" for a reason...). It must be a little marvel indeed, and yet it remains the place *par excellence* of the *contradiction* specific to the *cinematographic*, as I will attempt to demonstrate.

The Lumière brothers thus owe this cam their reputation in history as the inventors of the *cinema*. Not shying away from grand statements, let us also reckon here that this first-rate recognition should similarly make them the designers – rather unconsciously and unintentionally – of the *film*

18 E-mail to the author, May 25, 2008.

*apparatus* in the sense given to the expression by French film theory. They would certainly never have dared to claim as much, since they invented neither the *film apparatus* described by Baudry nor the *dispositive cinema*. Indeed, as I have been professing for a while, the Lumière brothers have been abusively considered the inventors of cinema.<sup>19</sup> Basically and quite simply, the Lumière brothers only came up with a machine to shoot views – extraordinary and brilliantly designed, to be sure, but a machine all the same.

One thing is certain, we should acknowledge that the dispositive-thingy of the Lumière brothers proved priceless for them.<sup>20</sup> Just as certainly, it earned them their share of attacks. Over the past few years, many have raised questions about the brothers' primacy in the race to the so-called invention of cinema. Some have even argued that what I identify as the dispositive-thingy, the eccentric cam – whose invention dates back to late 1894 – should in no way be considered an essential requirement for a projection dispositive to become established as such. To those holding this position, the dispositive-thingy is in the end a phony device, no more, no less...

Still others consider the dispositive-thingy to be rather small to elicit so much praise, given all the preexisting technologies used alongside it in the Lumière device. Michel Frizot claims, for instance: "Still, [the] rather complex description [of the Cinématographe] reveals but little invention on the part of the Lumière brothers, as most of the processes comprising it existed beforehand."<sup>21</sup>

Those who made the year 1995 the terminal point of the first century of cinema generally hold in very high esteem the device-thingy in question, since it is really what made it possible to identify the starting point of the "series" whose centenary was being celebrated. For some, as is well-known, the "foundational" event is the invention of the Lumière device and the registration of the patent on February 13, 1895, in the wake of the development of the dispositive-thingy. On these grounds, speaking of "the century of cinema" without elaborating further amounted to dispensing with the demonstration that would justify the equivalence between *cinématograph*

19 I refer the reader interested in further developments on my position on this issue to my *Film and Attraction. From Kinematography to Cinema*, trans. Timothy Barnard (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

20 That this machine made it possible for them to produce films with undeniable intrinsic qualities is another story altogether.

21 Michel Frizot, "Qu'est-ce qu'une invention? (le cinéma). La technique et ses possibles," *Trafic* 50 (summer 2004), P.O.L., Paris, 2004: 319.

– the Lumière cinematograph, to boot – and *cinema* (and between *cinema* and *cinematograph*).

For others, the starting point would tend to be the famous Premier Paying Public Projection (PPPP) on December 28, 1895, at the Grand Café in Paris (since this took place during the same calendar year, 1895, it does not affect the terminal point, 1995). The question we may ask, then, is the following: *is this PPPP really the very Premier PPP?* Indeed, the “premier” nature of the event has frequently been contested, particularly of late, since a number of new facts have been dug out since classical historians of cinema last closed the matter. Recent, well-documented research does show evidence that the paying public projection of December 28, 1895, unquestionably and indisputably had precedents. I will mention only the three most important cases here, those of Latham’s Panoptikon (United States), Armat and Jenkins’s Phantoscope (United States), and the Skladanowsky brothers’ Bioskop (Germany):

- On *May 20, 1895*, the Latham family (father Woodville and his sons Otway and Grey) used their Panoptikon (also known as Eidoloscope, sometimes spelled Pantoptikon or Panopticon) to project the film of a boxing match (between Young Griffo and Charles Barnett) to a paying audience on Broadway, New York City. This paying projection apparently took place repeatedly over several months. The Lathams also showed their film from time to time in several towns in the United States.
- In *late September 1895*, C. Francis Jenkins and Thomas Armat also showed films to a paying audience thanks to their Phantoscope at the Cotton States Exhibition in Atlanta, Georgia. Armat was to sell the rights to his Phantoscope to Edison after making several alterations to it (Edison presented the device under a different name, Vitascope, and under his own name as he launched his own film screenings on April 23, 1896, four months after the Salon Indien projection at the Grand Café).
- On *November 1, 1895*, a program of eight films was presented to a paying audience at the Wintergarten, a Berlin variety hall, by brothers Emil and Max Skladanowsky (cinema seems to have been a matter of siblings then), thanks to their Bioskop (sometimes spelled Bioskope, Bioscope or Bioscop).<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> The reader interested in this question may refer to André Gaudreault and Tom Gunning, “Introduction: American Cinema Emerges (1890-1909),” in *American Cinema, 1890-1909. Themes and Variations*, ed. André Gaudreault (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2009) 1-21; and to Deac Rossel, *Living Pictures: The Origins of the Movies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

Each of the devices that made these paying public projections possible involved particular characteristics distinguishing them from one another as well as from the Lumière Cinematograph (and of course, *none was quite as well designed* as the latter):

- 1) The Latham family's Panoptikon did not feature any mechanism for the intermittent advance of the film, or any other system to make up for its absence. Accordingly, the screening of each image had to be as brief as possible to avoid any blur, which in turn required a larger film surface, given the need to beam light more strongly on images. In fact, the Panoptikon was not as efficient as hoped for, if we are to believe the report of a journalist present at one of the demonstrations: "There is considerable room for improvement and many drawbacks have yet to be overcome."<sup>23</sup>
- 2) As to Jenkins and Armat's Phantoscope, which was equipped with an intermittent mechanism, it gave much more satisfying results than the Lathams' Panoptikon. This quite evidently explains its fortune with Edison the following year under a borrowed name (Vitascope).
- 3) Finally, the Skladanowsky brothers' Bioskop, founded on a rather complex projection system, did not enjoy much success. Everything came in pairs in the German dispositive: light sources, driving mechanisms, films (two prints of the same film, actually), lenses. The main concern was to synchronize the two prints perfectly, since each of them was alternately masked by a central shutter. Appearing on the screen in alternation, then, were an image from print A and an image from print B. In a sense, the systematic alternation between the two emulated the intermittent movement lacking in the Bioskop. Due to the extreme complexity of its dispositive, not offset with any other advantage over the systems using the intermittent advance of a single film, the machine was short-lived and did not have much of a legacy.

In this obstacle race to determine where priority lies in the invention of the dispositive, historians should first ask themselves what matters first and foremost. At bottom, the issue is whether public projection should be *the* decisive criterion (and whether it should be a *paying* show), or the mere invention of the device is enough. Serious historians may also wonder whether the search "for the One, Definite and Definitive invention," to

<sup>23</sup> Article in *Photographic Times*, quoted by Stephen Herbert at <http://www.victorian-cinema.net/latham.htm> (last accessed on September 28, 2012).

quote Michel Frizot again,<sup>24</sup> is a game worth the trouble – or an incredibly vain exercise, in the end.

In any case, if projection alone – to a limited public and at no charge – was deemed legitimate as *the* decisive criterion, a strong case could be made for the precedence of the Lumière brothers due to their first semi-private (hence semi-public!) screening on March 22, 1895, two months before the Lathams' own projection.<sup>25</sup> However, this in turn raises a series of questions, to which I will return.

Besides, in the name of which principle should the projection of moving images (private or public, paying or not) be considered the necessary starting point – and the inaugural moment – of what is called "cinema"? Is a simple viewing (private or public, paying or not) not enough? This is an essential question. The notion of a starting point is a key idea running throughout the twentieth century and gaining ground into souls and consciousnesses, so much so that many specialists now take it for granted. In his *Histoire du visuel*, Laurent Gervereau writes for instance that "[...] cinema, whose characteristic is indeed *the public projection in the theater as inaugurated by the Lumière brothers* (not the individual viewing in a cabinet launched by Edison), expanded considerably from the First World War on."<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, why should this first projection be both public and paying to be considered as the first cause in the "cinema" series, as some claim? Should we understand that, if the famous (or supposed) PPPP of the Grand Café had taken place on January 1, 1896, we should then have celebrated its centenary in 1996? That is apparently the assumption. But then, which status should we grant the very first projection of the clever dispositive that is Émile Reynaud's Théâtre optique, a projection of *moving images* that took place on October 28, 1892, over *three years before* the invention of the Cinématographe

24 Michel Frizot, "Qu'est-ce qu'une invention?": 319.

25 It took the Lumière brothers quite some time (nine months!) before their first paying projection, simply because they wanted to be ready to face potential demand on the day when their invention would be made available to the general public. Before the public, paying show on December 28, 1895, they set up about ten screenings to demonstrate the "capacities" of the dispositive in front of non-paying, hand-picked audiences: photographers, industrialists, scientists, journalists, etc. – an audience who could appreciate what they were seeing and accordingly praise it in some popular scientific periodicals. The Lumière brothers also had to be able to launch their invention on a large scale and master the whole supply chain (film, dispositives, operating network, etc.). In other words, they were nosed out – temporally, not qualitatively speaking – by their many, less patient and less perfectionist competitors because they held themselves up for strictly commercial reasons.

26 Laurent Gervereau, *Histoire du visuel au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 2003) 34-35 (my emphasis).

Lumière? What should these projections inaugurate? Should they serve as the starting point of the cultural series of “light projections with movement”?

The October 28, 1892 screening was in a way a genuine PPPP (premier paying public projection). In truth, though, it was a PPPDI (public paying projection of *drawn* images) rather than a PPPPI (public paying projection of *photographic* images), like the Lumière brothers'. Indeed, Reynaud's dispositive projected, not photographic images, but drawn material. This explains why teleological historians have ostracized Reynaud, all the more since he committed a “capital sin.” Indeed, for his praxinoscope and its various avatars, Reynaud “dared” to opt for a “regressive” direction, rejecting the system of slit shutters of the Zoetrope and Phenakistiscope (the principle of the shutter being rightly or wrongly considered as one of the fundamental bases of cinema). Reynaud instead privileged a system of mirrors placed around a polygonal crown, a process deemed anti-cinematographic by traditional historians of cinema, who forget that it was fashionable for quite a long time in these very cinematographic editing benches, including Steenbeck machines...

Not ci-ne-ma-to-gra-phi-c, the polygon of mirrors? Not literally so, evidently, since it was invented *before* the word ci-ne-ma-to-graph became prevalent...

Is the fact that Reynaud did not use photographic images enough to count him out so summarily? Shouldn't the recent advent of digital technologies make us aware that, as far as cinema is concerned (assuming we find ourselves over and over again in that paradigm), *photographic* technology is not always there? If DVD viewing (*no projection whatsoever*) and computer-generated films (*no photographic trace whatsoever*) are included within the contemporary sphere of cinema, how not to grant a retrospective certificate of “authenticity” and primacy to Reynaud's Théâtre optique? It lacks photographic credentials, to be sure, yet it is founded on an orthodox projection “dispositif” that would enthral Baudry. This is all the more true if one takes into account the early *mise en abyme* of the film spectator in the film titled *AUTOUR D'UNE CABINE*: it features a Peeping Tom who, through a keyhole and without the slightest shame, eyes up a lady taking her clothes off.

Considering how historians have treated Reynaud and his invention, the publication of a book as anti-establishment and disputable as Bernard Lonjon's scathing attack comes as no surprise. In his recent *Émile Reynaud. Le véritable inventeur du cinéma*,<sup>27</sup> the author goes as far as to dub the city

27 Bernard Lonjon, *Émile Reynaud. Le véritable inventeur du cinéma* (Polignac: Éditions du Roure, 2007).

of Le Puy-en-Velay, which Reynaud used as a base, "the mother city of the cinematograph" (word for word, with cinematograph taking a lower-case "c," of course!). This would be as early as June 1875... The invention of the cinema in 1875 in Le Puy-en-Velay: the mind boggles.

While this type of assertion certainly verges on the ultimate degree of hyperbole, historians of cinema have been so lax that this type of backfiring serves them right; they have little choice but to take stock of it. Lonjon's foregone conclusion even represents, I should say, a return of the repressed: since Reynaud's Théâtre optique did not have the place it deserved in histories of cinema, an advocate of Reynaud's was almost bound to go in the same direction as Lonjon's some day. Historical and theoretical thinking has never taken Reynaud's dispositive into account; this dispositive, it should be said, inaugurates something in the order of the "animated film," yet no one knows exactly how to affiliate the latter to the former. Be that as it may, Reynaud did well and truly carry out *paying public projections of moving images* (assembled on a *perforated film strip*, to boot) *38 months before December 28, 1895*. That took some doing...

Let us return for a few moments to the Lumières and examine the text of the commemorative plaque affixed to the exterior walls of the Grand Café in 1926: "On December 28, 1895, this was the site of the first public projections of animated photography with the Cinematograph a device invented by the Lumière brothers."<sup>28</sup> (fig. 2) We know well what the plaque wants (and is meant) to commemorate: a *genuine first* (plaques are rarely affixed to celebrate "second times"). The "*first* public projections of animated photography" *in the entire history of humankind* thus reportedly took place at the Grand Café on December 28, 1895. Which, as is now well-known, is fundamentally inaccurate. Still, looking at it a bit closer, another signification may be read into the text of the plaque – a signification which, in my eyes at least, would prove its author one hundred percent right. What the plaque may mean is that what took place on December 28, 1895, in the place where it is affixed, is not "the first public projections of animated photography" *in the entire history of humankind* but "the first public projections of animated photography" *ever to have been done with-the-Cinématographe-Lumière*. This admittedly verges on truism! Yet this is what the text of the plaque spells

28 1925 is often reported as the date for the unveiling of the plaque, but the event did in fact take place in 1926 (on March 17), a date confirmed in the March 18, 1926, issue of the periodical *Comœdia*. See also the account of the ceremony in issue 520 of *L'Écran*, the journal of the French federation of film theater owners, dated March 20, 1926. I wish to thank Jean-Marc Lamotte for providing me with these details.



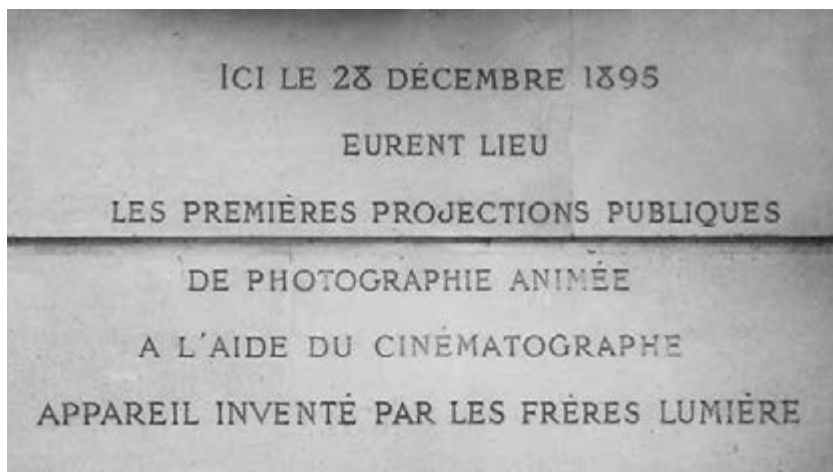


Fig. 2. Commemorative plaque affixed in 1926 on the façade of the building that housed the Salon Indien of the Grand Café (14, boulevard des Capucines in Paris).

out (for lack of commas): “first public projections of animated photography with the *Cinématograph*...”<sup>29</sup>

This second interpretation is as implacable as it is tautological, but any attempt to understand the role of the Lumière brothers in the invention of the cinema leads to frequent brushes with tautology. Thus understood, the text of the plaque remains forever indisputable: it was indeed on December 28, 1895, that the *Cinématographe* Lumière was used for the first time before a paying audience.

Why such a recurrence of tautological thoughts in the case of the Lumières? I think it may be explained as follows: this strong tendency may result from the confusion felt by everyone about the invention of cinema, but also from the dominance of the Lumière brothers’ device over all its

29 It should be noted that, contrary to expectation and – dare I say – without much regard for the rules of punctuation, the text does not include any comma at all. One comma at least would be indisputably called for – on the penultimate line, between the word “cinématographe” and the word “appareil.” As can be observed, the text is printed exclusively in capital letters – a frequent occurrence with this kind of exercise, in which a new line may in some cases give the text its rhythm and substitute for possible commas. The rule of the new line as a substitute for the comma does not hold throughout the text, however, since the shifts from line 2 to line 3 and from line 3 to line 4 do not involve the replacement of any comma whatsoever. That is not the case with the shift from line 4 to line 5, though: there may be a comma between “de photographie animée” and “à l’aide du Cinématographe,” just as there may be none at all, depending on what is meant. If a comma is introduced, the second signification I suggest does not hold water... Could it be that the comma possibly *missing* here amounts to an *acte manqué*?



main competitors. The word "cinematograph" became established in such a way that, instead of strictly referring to what it was initially meant to designate (a shooting device, a machine among others), it met with a clearly "synecdochic" fate and ended up referring to the spectacle of the projection of moving images itself – regardless of the device used – and by extension to the whole industry of production of moving images. In the early twentieth century, the word "cinematograph" covered a vast number of semantic fields, which is no longer the case at all these days. Indeed, a century later, we are back to square one, since in the early twenty-first century the word "cinematograph" may no longer designate anything else than the device of the Lumière brothers, *as it did in 1895*. This is in fact what all common dictionaries teach us. Nowadays, as has been the case for several decades, the word "cinema" assumes the multiple uses formerly assigned to the word "cinematograph." According to the *Le Robert* dictionary, the word "cinema" covers five meanings and may simultaneously designate:

- 1) the "technology that allows the photographic recording and projecting of moving images";
- 2) the "art of composing and making films" and, by extension, the "industry of cinematographic spectacles";
- 3) the cinematographic projection;
- 4) "affected demonstrations, for instance in order to see a whim gratified," as attested in the expression "Arrête ton cinéma!";
- 5) the "theatrical space where cinematographic films are projected."<sup>30</sup>

With the entry word "cinématographe," the same edition of *Le Nouveau Petit Robert* refers the reader to the Lumière-designed device while mentioning a late occurrence of the word with a famous and not too dated author referring to the art of film:

Dispositif inventé par les frères Lumière, qui peut reproduire le mouvement par une succession de photographes.

O. Cinéma. "Le cinématographe est un art." (Cocteau)

"O." ("Vx" in French) stands for "old," or "vieux": "word, meaning or use in the old language, incomprehensible or little comprehensible nowadays and never used, except as a stylistic effect: archaism."

<sup>30</sup> "Cinéma," *Le Nouveau Petit Robert de la langue française*, electronic edition (Paris: Le Robert, 2007).

It now seems rather obvious that many contrarities (and contradictions) may be avoided in this whole story of the so-called “invention” of cinema if we stuck to the facts, and only the facts. What exactly did the Lumière brothers invent? Unanimous answer: the Cinématographe. Better still: the Cinématographe Lumière (tautology, when you have us in your grip)! Who invented cinema? Answer: the cinema cannot be invented (there is no patent to be registered): it becomes *established*, gradually and collectively...

In other words, let us not mix up cinematograph and cinema any longer. The *fusion* of the two entities creates some *confusion* and causes unfortunate misunderstandings. It is in fact to avoid any such ambiguity that I indicated early on that this text had been rather pertinently titled “On Some Limitations of the Definition of the Dispositive ‘*Cinema*’ ” and not “On Some Limitations of the Definition of the *Cinematographic* Dispositive.” Had I written “*cinematographic* dispositive,” I would have risked sowing some confusion: within the framework of my reflection, readers may have wondered whether I meant by this expression the “dispositive of *cinema*” or the “dispositive of the *cinematograph*” – since “cinematographic” may indeed mean one or the other, as most will easily acknowledge.

I sometimes wonder whether, in order to dispel all the confusion that characterizes the matter, we should not use the epithet “cinematic” or even return to the former, and so charming term used by Dulac, L’Herbier and company, “cinographic.” Not that I entertain any illusions: this is a losing battle. I hardly see myself suggesting to my colleagues in the Département d’histoire de l’art et d’études *cinématographiques* of the Université de Montréal, to which I am attached, that the name of the unit be changed to “Département d’histoire de l’art et d’études *cinématiques*” or “Département d’histoire de l’art et d’études *cinégraphiques*”...

Still, this would bring a little poetry in the world and would reconcile us with Apollinaire, for whom it was imperative “to mechanize poetry as the world has been mechanized.” We only need to reverse his formula to suggest that nowadays, we should *poeticize the machine just as the cinema poeticized the world*...