THE PARTICIPATORY POTENTIAL OF EARLY CINEMA: 
A REEXAMINATION OF EARLY PROJECTED FILMS

BY

JESSICA ANN DANIEL

THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts in Art History in the Graduate College of the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, 2010

Urbana, Illinois

Adviser:

Assistant Professor Jennifer Greenhill
ABSTRACT

This paper examines the formal qualities and historic context of three early films produced for the Edison Manufacturing Company by James White and Frederick Blechynden in 1897 titled *Lurline Baths*, *Sutro Baths*, and *Sutro Baths, No. 1*. It argues that the standard readings of early films posited by Tom Gunning and Charles Musser do not fully account for the self-reflexive materiality of the actualities under consideration. Working through Gunning and Musser’s debate with *Lurline Baths*, *Sutro Baths*, and *Sutro Baths, No. 1* in mind, I argue for an alternative reading of early film that understands the participatory potentials of cinema.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ................................................................. 1
CHAPTER 2: SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS ..................................................... 6
CHAPTER 3: EXHIBITION AND PROJECTION ........................................ 14
CHAPTER 4: SELF-REFLEXIVITY ......................................................... 21
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION ................................................................. 27
CHAPTER 6: FIGURES ................................................................. 29
CHAPTER 7: BIBLIOGRAPHY ............................................................... 40
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The story so often told of early film screenings tells of entire theaters of spectators actively responding, even over-reacting, to the moving pictures projected on the screens of theaters around the turn of the last century. The most famous instance, the approaching train in Lumière’s famous *Arrivée d’un train* supposedly elicited responses that ranged from audience members ducking in a flinch-like response to the reality of the scene being projected to reports of masses of theater-goers fleeing from the image, fearful the train would burst through the screen. Early film scholarship continually returns to these late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century stories of the naïveté of the early film spectator, both as a means to understand cinema in its earliest manifestations as well as the culture that surrounded film’s conception.1 Whereas scholar Michael Leja characterizes a general skepticism in spectatorship circa 1900 wherein we may locate an early film viewer who would have looked askance at the early actualities and relished in the visual riddle provided by their deception,2 early film historians Tom Gunning and

---


Charles Musser offer more film-specific models for understanding early film and their spectators. I want to examine one set of actuality films from the early days of projected moving pictures and the scholarship of Gunning and Musser that most specifically addresses this genre and its reception in order to offer a different paradigm of the early film viewer: one that is neither a naïve nor a skeptical spectator but rather a creative participant urged to engage in the game of representation being played in the space of the theater.

In 1897 James White and Frederick Blechynden from the Edison Manufacturing Company produced a series of short actualities set in two swimming pools in San Francisco. Passed over in early film scholarship as mere examples of the ubiquitous actuality genre that dominated filmmaking in the 1890s, three films in this set, *Sutro Baths*, *Lurline Baths*, and *Sutro Baths, No. 1* are the subject of this examination. It is my assertion that this group of moving pictures evidence formal decisions that complicate our more standard readings of cinema in its earliest days of projection. I hope to demonstrate that neither Tom Gunning’s “cinema of attractions” nor Charles Musser’s pioneering scholarship on early film and its exhibition fully account for the participatory potentials inherent in White and Blechynden’s bath films.

The three short (each run just under thirty seconds) films each show boys and men enjoying the large urban pools of late-nineteenth century San Francisco. *Sutro Baths* presents the most complete image of one of these locations (see Figure 1). With the

concept of the skeptical American viewer. See also Leja’s contribution “Seeing, Touching, Feeling,” in Mathews. *Moving Pictures; American Art and Early Film, 1880-1910*, pp. 165-167, where Leja argues that early cinema spectators responded viscerally to illusion.
camera set at an oblique angle at some distance from the pool itself, the wide shot captures a corner of the pool, with its floating platform and tall slide, and three tiers of peopled balconies. The floating platform, close to the picture plane in the left half of the frame, locates the most diverse action. At first, some swimmers crowd the surface as others clamber atop the platform. Several bathers dive into the water as even more attempt to scale the wobbling float. The action builds as more and more swimmers swarm the platform, the various dives send up more and more bursts of white water, and the men begin to rough-house, pushing and pulling one another into the now tumultuous pool. The action is confounded by the simultaneous activity on the slide and balconies. The top two tiers of balconies teams with figures who shift positions, wave at the camera, and, on the middle tier, prepare to variously slip down the long white chute. As each figure descends the slide, they each playfully comport their bodies, with some heading down the chute headfirst, some sitting, some supine, and others with tucked legs or outstretched arms. Upon impact with the pool, each sends up a spattering of white water. In the bottom balcony, a few men mingle and several of the bathers climb over the wall and dive headfirst into the water, sending up single splashes to the left of the slide. On the other side of the tall toboggan on the lower level is the only space devoid of activity. A dark corner with only three small circular windows, this still space serves as both an index of the seemingly massive size of the bathhouse as well as a counter relief to the relentless activities and the churned white water they produce.

In *Lurline Baths*, a stationary camera set at eyelevel on the edge of a pool faces a toboggan slide, which a series of bathers slide down in almost constant succession (see Figure 2). A tighter shot than that of *Sutro Baths*, the frame is split vertically in half.
The right half of the frame contains most of the action: the slick slide registers as a white strip near the right edge of the frame, just barely tilted to the picture plane. Boys in full black swimming trunks enter the frame at the top of the ramp as they begin their descent. We see their black-clad bodies glide down the strip of white, hit the light-mottled water, and send up bright white splashes of water. Behind and slightly to the left of the slide, one can just barely discern bathers swinging over the pool on a rope swing. The pool and the two tiered wall of the bath occupies the left half of the shot; although single figures emerge from the water and some of the bathers enter the space after their descent down the slide, the left hand portion of the frame is relatively still. Because of the dynamic activity, the piercing white of the slide facing us, and the fact that the bathers near the slide gesture directly at the camera, our attention is directed over and over again to the chute and the rapid stream of bodies cascading down its surface.

The slide in *Sutro Baths, No. 1* also faces the camera directly, but is closer to the center of the frame and the camera is set higher in relation to the pool (see Figure 3).\(^3\) The slide, here more grey than white, is accompanied by an assortment of walkways, platforms, and springboards from which the bathers jump, dive, and flip into the pool from multiple directions. The depth accomplished in the framing of the pools in *Lurline Baths* and *Sutro Baths* is absent here. The contrast of dark and light, so at play in the

\(^3\) There is some discrepancy over the two actualities of the Sutro Baths, copyrighted as 52619 and 60559. The titles and descriptions given to these two films vary between the catalogue by Kemp R. Niver, the filmography by Charles Musser, and the Library of Congress. For the sake of clarity, I will refer to the film 52619, copyrighted on September 22, 1897 as *Sutro Baths* and film 60559, copyrighted on October 25, 1897, as *Sutro Baths, No. 1*, as per the names given by the Library of Congress, which appear as titles on the digital versions of the films. To clarify, despite the two different copyright dates, they were both filmed on site on August 22, 1897 as indicated by the date written on frames of both films and the fact that this date corresponds with the Leander Sisters’ performances at the baths, which White and Blechynden also recorded.
other bath films, is diminished; the pool is backlit by a glass wall, casting a mid-grey tone to the entire frame that serves to flatten the space. To the left of the chute, the graphic posters reinforce this planarity. Also, as opposed to the directed attention demanded by the framing of the white slide in *Lurline Baths*, in *Sutro Baths, No. 1* our attention is not drawn to a single stream of activity. Instead, the various actions of the bathers tightly overlap one another creating a syncopated attention that constantly shifts along the surface of the image. At the same time though, this film differs from the wash of activity in *Sutro Baths*, in which our distance from the pool only allows us to register movement generally. In the shallow plane of *Sutro Baths, No. 1*, the effect is more mechanic, with a great amount and variance of activity happening simultaneously but in a seemingly organized manner as if the bathers were cogs in a machine.

Looking closely at this set of films, then, it becomes clear that different effects are produced in each of the three films: *Sutro Baths* appears objective; *Lurline Baths* generates directed, climactic action; and *Sutro Baths, No. 1* becomes a shallow field of mechanical rhythm. Artistic care was clearly taken in the production of each film, but how were these constructions decided? How do these formal choices function? How can we understand these films as projected images? How do they operate in the space of the theater?
CHAPTER 2

SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

It seems at first that we may understand these films via film historian Tom Gunning’s concept of the “cinema of attractions.” A term used again and again in early film studies, Gunning explains its definition:

attractions address the viewer directly, soliciting attention and curiosity through acts of display. As moments of spectacle, their purpose lies in the attention they draw to themselves, rather than in developing the basic donnees of narrative: characterization…causality…narrative suspense…or the creation of a consistent fictional world.4

This attraction, Gunning argues, is characterized by Baudelaire’s motifs of modernity: “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent,” and the urban crowd.5 It is easy to see the bath films in this light. Decidedly non-narrative and spectacular in various ways, Lurline Baths, Sutro Baths, and Sutro Baths, No. 1 are scenes of modernity: recently constructed swimming pools, spectacular feats of modern engineering in themselves, are captured on film teeming with dynamic activity only made visible through the camera’s ability to register movement.

Gunning states that his use of Eisenstein’s term “attractions” in the “cinema of attractions” paradigm points to early film’s preference for “exhibitionist confrontation rather than diegetic absorption.”6 This exhibitionism often ruptures the fourth wall of the film’s fictional world, as we experience when watching Lurline Baths. Here, a small boy, after coming down the slide and emerging from his plunge in the water, takes a position

---

5 Ibid., p. 193
slightly left of the center of the frame. He catches his balance, appears to rub his nose and then turns to face the camera. The boy lifts his arm in an excited gesture and remains turned towards the camera for some time as if communicating with the camera operator.

Then, in a sudden flurry, several other bathers enter the frame from the left, pass the boy as he turns to join them, and together the group dashes over to the right of the frame. At the same time, the stream of bathers gliding down the slide speed up, turning up more and more water until a climax of action is reached with the convergence of the bathers and the boy with a tremendous volume of churned, white water (see Figure 4). The scene is evidently crafted and the boy’s acknowledgement, even interaction with the camera, points to this fact; it is as if Blechynden and White asked the swimmers to perform their activities in a certain way, having to expressly remind the boy after he finished his descent down the slide where and when he needed to move.

Such diegetic ruptures that call into question the ostensible reality of the actuality genre were in fact quite common for the years of cinema in which Gunning locates his “cinema of attraction,” from approximately 1895 to 1908. A slightly later Edison production provides a useful example that may help us understand how these ruptures work, and how they might function differently in the set of bath films. *What Happened on Twenty-third Street, New York City* is an actuality film copyrighted on August 21, 1901 (see Figure 5). A fixed camera, set at a slightly-lower-than-eye-level angle on the ground, captures a broad stretch of sidewalk as people walk up, down, and across it. Placed just at the edge of the sidewalk, we are given a frame of deep perspective: the divide between the street and sidewalk forms a diagonal stretching far into the distance with tall buildings closing off the sides. Cars move in the street and the figures busily
walk in and out of the frame. At one point, a man, casually walking with his hands in his pockets walks across the frame, nearly reaches the street, stops short when he notices the camera, and quickly turns around and walks out of the frame (see Figure 6). While he scurries away, we can begin to faintly make out a couple in the distance heading toward the camera as they amiably chat (see Figure 7). As the man and woman come closer to the camera, which they never acknowledge despite walking directly toward it and presumably the filmmakers, they slow down. A blast of air escapes from a grate below the couple and the woman’s white dress is blown up, revealing her legs. Shocked and embarrassed, the woman crouches to lower her skirts, while the man, who had stepped off the grate with only a ruffled tie, stands aside (see Figure 8). Once collected, the man leads the woman off the screen, to the left of the camera. Before exiting however, the couple looks back at an unseen person and laughs heartily (see Figure 9). Two male figures, a middle-aged man and a teenager, come into the frame from either side staring intently at the camera as they cross, revealing as they leave the frame a solitary boy in a stark white shirt standing still in the center of the composition (see Figure 10). This boy in fact stands still, legs apart and arms behind his back, in the left of the picture a little more than half way up the frame for most of the one minute, seventeen second film. He remains in this position, shifting slightly and craning his neck to remain in contact with the camera despite the bodies moving around him until he walks into his final position in the center of the frame as the couple passes over the grate and what happened on Twenty-third Street happens.

While we know that this event was staged on some level – two actors involved in several of Edison’s projects, A.C. Abadie and Florence Georgie, played the strolling
couple\textsuperscript{7} - it was sold as an actuality, as if the camera captured a real moment on Twenty-third Street. Many interpretations of \textit{What Happened on Twenty-third Street, New York City} point to an exhibitionist rupturing of narrative related to Gunning’s “cinema of attractions.” Indeed, in Constance Balides discussion of the many early films where the everyday activities of women, such as hanging laundry or walking down the street, become sexualized spectacles, Balides argues via Gunning “that sexual difference is inscribed in film representation early on and that women become a certain kind of attraction in the cinema of attractions.”\textsuperscript{8} Balides identifies a moment of self-consciousness within the film \textit{Getting Stronger} (1904) when the actresses look at the camera, “producing a distance between the characters and their sexual display…[that] also foregrounds the performative space occupied by the actresses. As the spectacle of objectification breaks down, the female characters’ actions produce another scenario of the everyday, one that digresses from the film’s intent to expose women’s bodies.

Analyzing these other spaces – in which women characters perform everyday activities and actresses perform their roles – is another way of understanding the attraction of women in the cinema of attractions.”\textsuperscript{9} Self-consciousness, in this context, of the performers themselves, is critical to a diegetic and ideological breakdown like the one in \textit{What Happened on Twenty-third Street, New York} enacted by the boy in the white shirt. Instead of the female performer addressing the camera as the actresses do in \textit{Growing Strong}, the boy determinedly staring at the camera does so in a way that similarly


\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., p. 37.
transgresses the fourth wall by shifting our attention to him and his attention to the camera.

Self-consciousness then is at issue in *What Happened on Twenty-third Street, New York City*. In fact, Nancy Mowll Mathews identifies self-consciousness as one of the difficulties facing the making of actualities.

In actualities – documentaries of “real life” people, places, events - which were made without experienced performers or directorial control by the filmmaker, it was even more difficult for the camera to be unacknowledged…But compared to the makers of still images, the filmmaker could record the changes *as they were happening* and could even use dialogue between the observer and the observed to create a new version of realism. The movie camera’s recording of the subject’s self-consciousness showed a powerful interaction between the artist and “reality” in which both are in a constant state of discovery and change.10

While taking a rather naïve stance on the reality of actualities by claiming that they were made without direction, Mathews assessment of the effect of self-consciousness in these early films is insightful and speaks very much to the effect of the boy in *What Happened on Twenty-third Street, New York City*. The issue of self-consciousness in early film also brings Jonathan Auerbach to the film in his book *Body Shots: Early Cinema’s Incarnations*. He devotes an entire section to self-consciousness. He argues that actualities around the turn-of-century had lost their novelty and filmmakers therefore highlighted self-consciousness to make it emerge from the particular action on-screen as opposed to stemming simply from the presence of the camera itself. In these instances we have what might be called pseudo-actualities, carefully orchestrated representations of social interaction that disguise signs of the

---

He goes on to discuss *What Happened on Twenty-third Street, New York City* as one of these pseudo-actualities. Auerbach describes how “the woman’s plotted embarrassment at being so bodily exposed...must compete for our attention with a young boy in a bright white shirt standing at midrange left,” which in effect, creates “two rival modes of representation, two modes of objectification, two different ways that the boy and the woman each become acutely aware and center themselves.” Auerbach continues: “Trying to have its cake and eat it too, combining the appearance of spontaneous actuality with narrative control, the film ends up showing two dramas instead of one.”

In this assessment of *What Happened on Twenty-third Street, New York City*, we come to understand self-consciousness as a particular manifestation of the cinema of attractions, one that is constructed to engage the ever-more adept moviegoer but also undercuts the diegesis of the film. The film asks for a skeptical viewer like that described by Leja. The turn-of-the-century spectator characterized by Leja responded to the destabilized condition of vision created through the spectacles, technologies, and media of the modern urban environment with skepticism. They learned to look askance. Naturalizing illusion as part and parcel to the very construction of vision, Leja’s viewer took a critical stance to the visual world. Looking askance became a way for the spectator to engage and enjoy the dynamic relationship between art and reality offered by such ruptures as seen in *What Happened on Twenty-third Street, New York City*. In the film, the diegetic rupture

---

12 Ibid., p. 57.
becomes a modulation of the cinema of attractions wherein the appeal is not mere
eexhibition but also the playful puzzle of fact and fiction *What Happened on Twenty-third

Street, New York City* provokes. The boy’s stoic presence and unwavering attention to
the camera calls the narrative of the scene and the claim to truth made by the film into
question.

The waving swimmers in *Lurline Baths, Sutro Baths*, and *Sutro Baths, No. 1*
would seem to function as self-conscious diegetic ruptures as well. However, in
examining, for instance, the boy who seems to communicate with the camera in *Lurline

Baths* next to the boy in *What Happened on Twenty-third Street, New York City*, there is a
palpable difference of affect. We are not startled by the boy’s connection to the camera
in *Lurline Baths*; the boy’s playful candor amongst the other boys, his stumbling through
the swells of water, the nonchalance with which he rubs his nose, and his easy
communication with the camera lends to the effect of building action. His casual,
comfortable presence does not absorb us into the scene but rather begs us to actively
imagine the cool splashes of water and cavernous reverberations of the swimmers’
delighted screams as they slide and play. In the New York film, on the other hand, the
boy’s self-consciousness and relentless stare, echoed in the piercing whiteness of his
shirt, breaks the narrative, destroying our engagement in the story of the woman’s
accidental exposure. In *Lurline Baths*, as in the other bath films, there is no attempt at
narrative control as seen in *What Happened in Twenty-third Street, New York City*: there
simply is no diegesis to disrupt. The waving and the constant acknowledgment of the
camera functions then not so much as a disruption but as a self-referential trope that calls
attention to the camera’s presence, relinquishing its authorial control as producer of the
scene and asking the viewer to imaginatively enter the space the projected film creates in
the theater. In other words, the difference between the boy in *What Happened on
Twenty-third Street, New York City* and the bath actualities has to do with the location of
the creative act. In *What Happened on Twenty-third Street, New York City*, a clear shift
to singular authorial control via diegetic narrative is registered as tension created through
the presence of the static, staring boy. Notably, Edwin S. Porter, the producer behind this
film, has come to be seen by many film historians as the first director. In the bath films,
however, the creative act is shared: there is no resulting tension from the waving
swimmers because there is no attempt at authorial control.
CHAPTER 3

EXHIBITION AND PROJECTION

This distinction between the effects of the self-conscious figures in the two films has everything to do with the different moments in which the bath actualities and *What Happened on Twenty-third Street, New York City* were produced. The latter was made at the cusp of narrative becoming the dominant form of cinema whereas the former was produced when experimentation was the only convention and projection was the newest novelty. The experimental nature of early film production is made clear in the plethora of genres that existed in the early years of motion pictures. In cataloguing the motion pictures from 1894 through 1912 in the Library of Congress’s Paper Print Collection, Kemp R. Niver identifies fifteen categories in which these early films could be placed. Although Niver’s project is that of a twentieth-century archivist, it points to the amount of experimentation that was taking place in 1890s film production. The almost boundless potential offered by the ability to capture motion was in fact lauded as early as 1895 in a publication written by W.K.L. Dickson, the leader of Edison’s motion picture laboratory, and his sister Antonia Dickson. “What is the future of the kinetograph? Ask rather, from what conceivable phase of the future it can be debarred. In the promotion of business interests, in the advancement of science, in the revelation of unguessed words, in its educational and re-creative powers, and in its ability to immortalize our fleeting but

---

14 Niver, Kemp R. Early Motion Pictures: The Paper Print Collection in the Library of Congress. ed. Bebe Bergsten. Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1967. Each film is listed alphabetically in its given category, but Niver acknowledges the artificiality of creating generic categories for these films by including under the identifying information of each film the other categories to which the film relates. The 1985 edition of the catalogue abandons the contrived categories all together, instead only listing the films alphabetically. In archiving these early motion pictures, their very undefined state is made apparent.
beloved associations, the kinetograph stands foremost among the creations of modern inventive genius.”

The indefinite nature of moving image technology expanded experimentation to outside the production of motion pictures as well. Many exhibitors of films, after the 1896 “novelty year” took on a more creative role in how films were shown: they would create single-subject evening-length programs, displaying a series of motion pictures with sound accompaniment. Perhaps the most conspicuous of these series was of the Corbett-Fitzsimmons fight. Illegal in the flesh, boxing matches could be legally exhibited and watched as a motion picture. Exhibitors, and the boxers themselves, took advantage of this privilege, turning the fight and its various re-enactments into a nation-wide spectacle that could be promoted and sold for weeks as an evening of entertainment. On a smaller scale, projectionists were given creative leave in how they would display the short motion pictures. Bill Bitzer, a projectionist and cameraman for the Biograph Company, for example, would often splice individual films together with slides in-between to announce the next film in order to create a more cohesive unit of moving pictures. Such displays of early films certainly had consequences in the way movies developed: as precursors to editing these activities anticipated the narrative system with which film would soon be defined.

Charles Musser has produced the most extensive and insightful scholarship on this topic of early film exhibition. Through his studies, Musser develops an argument

---

17 Ibid., p. 181.
that convincingly challenges Gunning’s “cinema of attraction” model. The film, ruptures and all, in Gunning’s paradigm confronts, stimulates, and astonishes the viewer; the moving picture, for Gunning, is ultimately a closed object. Musser, on the other hand, understands film production as merely one node in the creation of a moving picture. According to this film scholar, in the period in which the White and Blechynden films were produced, the filmmaker and the film projectionist and exhibitor shared creative responsibility.¹⁸ Musser devotes an entire book to showman Lyman H. Howe in order to evidence, as the book’s title proclaims, the “forgotten era of traveling exhibition.” Chronicling Howe’s entrepreneurial use of moving image technologies, Musser demonstrates Howe’s abilities to balance popular entertainment with conservative morals through his carefully selected programs of films innovatively accompanied by narration, music, sound effects, and voice. For all intents and purposes, Howe transformed the short silent movies of film’s early days into multi-media performances. Even more to the point, in his book on the exhibitor-turned-filmmaker Porter (who produced *What Happened on Twenty-third Street, New York City*), Musser goes as far as to assert that the work of exhibitors is in fact the work of editing.¹⁹ In the period of filmmaking around 1897 to 1901, film programming created by the projectionist and exhibitor constituted the post-production activities of picture making. Through this claim, along with his extensive research on Howe and Porter, Musser’s goal is to open film scholarship to exhibition as well as production in order to account for the difference between film in its early manifestation and cinema as it came to be known in the 1910s.

¹⁹ Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon*, p. 5.
However, with this move, editing as a means of narrative construction is naturalized as the defining characteristic of cinema. Indeed, the priority given to editing as a fundamental component of cinema is repeated throughout film theory. Siegfried Kracauer, in fact, in his foundational *Theory of Film* defines editing as the “most general and indispensable” property unique to film.\(^{20}\) So while Musser may state that “the tendency among historians to equate film production to the whole of cinema has severely limited our understanding of motion pictures during the pre-Griffith era,”\(^{21}\) his argument’s insistence on editing ultimately falls into the same trap as understanding early film through the film history codified by its narrative manifestation in the 1910s and in Hollywood.

In 1897, however, this narrative tendency was just one of many options in film production and was certainly not the most ubiquitous. In fact, actualities dominated early film production in the United States. The Edison Manufacturing Company, still the leading motion picture producer in 1897 (although their growth would dwindle in the following two years), mostly produced actuality films in the 1890s.\(^{22}\) Inexpensive to film, actualities were motion pictures taken of a variety of everyday activities as they were happening. Their ostensibly direct access to the world gave the actualities great commercial potential; recording everything from President McKinley’s inauguration in 1897 to vaudeville acts and Eugene Sandow’s displays of strength to scenes of American landscapes, actualities were used as records of historical events, as entertainment, and as promotional material. The latter use was perhaps the reason why the Edison

---


\(^{21}\) Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon*, p. 5.

\(^{22}\) Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema*, p. 232.
Manufacturing Company produced so many films in this genre in 1897. Always the clever businessman, Edison forged relationships with railroad companies, sending the head of his Kinetograph department, White, with cameraman Blechynden on a filming expedition to the Western United States with subsidy from the tourist industry, specifically major railroad companies.\textsuperscript{23} White and Blechynden toured and filmed for ten months, from August 1897 to May 1898. Traveling mostly by railroad and ship, the expedition took the two-man crew through the American West, into Mexico, across the Pacific to Japan and Hong Kong, to Hawaii, and then back East to the Edison Manufacturing Company in New Jersey. It was in the course of this filming expedition, during White and Blechyden’s time in San Francisco in the fall of 1897, that the \textit{Lurline Baths, Sutro Baths, and Sutro Baths, No. 1} were produced.

As a production manager White preferred to create groups of related films. This may stem from his earlier work under Holland and Raff & Gammon as a projectionist (and then filmmaker) prior to joining Edison’s Kinetograph department in October of 1896; perhaps, like Howe and Porter in Musser’s assessment, White had enjoying creating cohesive exhibitions of movies and carried that creative mode of projection over to production. Indeed, in looking at the films he and Blechynden produced in San Francisco in 1897, one cannot help but notice an organization to the subjects of the actualities. The implicit categorization of these films demonstrates that White was filming his scenes with exhibition in mind. The 120 copyrighted actualities produced in White and Blechynden’s filming trip can all be fit into one of the following categories: the \textquote{Pacific Coast Life Saving Series;} the \textquote{Southern Pacific Company Series;}”

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p. 234.
newsreel-like scenes related to current events, such as arrests and the launching of ships, both commercial (S.S. “Coptic”) and military; picturesque harbor scenes of daily life; and the series of actualities of the Sutro and Lurline baths.

However, although they form a discrete group of films, *Lurline Baths*, *Sutro Baths*, and *Sutro Baths, No. 1* do not serve the immediate functions of the other San Francisco films White and Blechynden made in 1897. Of course, the baths were most likely chosen as a subject because of their draw as tourist attractions – after all, White and Blechynden were traveling on the railroads’ dollar – but this is a rather vague function and one that did not make specific demands on the form these films would take.

The “Pacific Coast Life Saving Series” serves as an instructive point of comparison. It consists of three films: *Launch of Lifeboat*, *Capsize of Lifeboat*, and *Return of Lifeboat* (see Figures 11, 12, and 13). Serving to illustrate the work of the United States Life Saving Corp for the general public, these actualities visually assert their instructional purpose. Ostensibly staged, *Launch of Lifeboat* and *Capsize of Lifeboat* are filmed from a vessel only a few yards away from the lifeboat; the rocking of the boat is registered in the constant shifting of the camera. Although nearby, the members of the Corp never address the camera and in fact, as opposed to what we have seen in other actualities, the men act as if the camera and its crew were not there at all. The combined effect implies that the Life Saving Corp is performing its actions for the camera, and therefore the viewer’s, educative benefit. This is made even more apparent in the final film of the set, *Return of Lifeboat*. Now, instead of filming from a boat, the camera is set on a beach facing the breakers through which the lifeboat maneuvers. The instructional purpose of the series demanded that White and Blechynden clearly illustrate
the ability of the Corp to work their vessel through the waves; therefore, when the surf became too obstructive, the camera was moved. Reframing the shot while filming, White and Blechynden were able to keep the boat in the frame while again calling attention to the camera’s function as a documentary device with the potential to disseminate didactic information.
CHAPTER 4

SELF-REFLEXIVITY

The function of the bath actualities does not make such specific demands on how the scenes were shot, as the variety of the three films’ appearances suggests. Instead, we discover a creative impulse in this group, one that insists on performing what the medium can do in order to urge creative intervention from its viewers instead of trying to render it transparent in order to immerse the spectator in a diegetic world. It is notable in fact that the film’s formal merits were seen as their strongest selling point. The three bath actualities were advertised in the F.Z. Maguire & Co. catalogue of March 1898 for their amount of action and their “exceedingly sharp and clear” quality. *Sutro Baths* is publicized as being “without a doubt one of the best film subjects we have ever made” and *Sutro Baths, No. 1* is “just as interesting,” but “if possible, contains more action.” The F.Z. Maguire catalogue also notes the “pleasing effect” of the “milky foam” produced by the numerous splashes of water and that the bather’s black trunks “show in striking contrast to their exposed flesh and the foam.” Implicit in these descriptions is the way in which these film’s formal qualities are linked with the specificity of film’s medium. Indeed, taken individually, *Sutro Baths, Lurline Baths,* and *Sutro Baths, No. 1* each display artistic concerns that reference the medium of film and its projection in the theater space. Instead of producing a mere attraction, the formal qualities of these films insist on the materiality of moving pictures that has to do with a particularly 1897 understanding of and attention to projection.

---

Although the Kinetograph, the photographic device that permitted moving images to be recorded, was patented by Thomas Edison in 1891, the motion pictures filmed were only able to be viewed through the Kinetoscope, a peephole box in which 35mm films were projected for a single curious viewer. First exhibited by Holland Brothers at the Grand Central Palace in New York in the fall of 1894, the Kinetoscope and its moving images were but one of the many optical devices in vogue as delighting amusement for the fin-de-siècle public. When, in April of 1896, the Vitascope was exhibited at Koster and Bial’s, cinema as we understand it today was made possible: with this machine, and Edison’s Projectoscope, which premiered in November of the same year, moving images were able to be projected on a large screen for an entire audience of people.

Produced by a one-time projectionist just one year after projection became the norm then, we can understand the bath actualities as being produced with projection, particularly as it existed in 1897, in mind. This interest in the material reality of the artist’s medium is most apparent in *Sutro Baths, No. 1*. There is a certain mechanical quality to this actuality, which is particularly evident when compared with the other Sutro Bath scene. In *Sutro Baths* there is at first less sense of the filmmakers’ hand in the filming of the scene. The wide shot of the camera captures the pool and its environs in one frame, registering an almost constant flood of activity in all areas of the voluminous space. There is no rhythmic quality to the actions of the figures. Those rushing down the slide do so without the intent urgency of the sliders in *Sutro Baths, No. 1* (and *Lurline Baths*) and the various playful activities of the other bathers on the platform and in the pool create splashes and bursts of commotion in an unbridled manner. We cannot even register all the movements at once; our attention must constantly shift between the
bathers rough-housing on the floating platform, the divers, the antics of the swimmers as they slip down the slide, and the bustle of indistinct motion in the peopled balconies. The placement of the camera is high above the pool, as if it too, like the crowds populating the galleries of the hall, were a detached onlooker.

Although various activities – sliding, jumping, diving, flipping, and climbing – are happening simultaneously in multiple directions in *Sutro Baths, No. 1* as well, there is a sense that they are working in tandem to one another. In the first few frames of the picture, for instance, the following movements take place: one bather jumps from the left edge of the pool to a trampoline midway between the slide and the edge of the pool, as he touches down on the trampoline and prepares to jump into the water on the other side of the slide, a diver on the edge of the pool facing us begins his leap and the bather atop the slide begins his descent. This simultaneous initiation of their actions puts into play a series of visual rhythms between the three bather’s bodies: at one point, for instance, both jumpers are in horizontal positions perpendicular to the camera, the first, his side toward the camera as he passes behind the slide and the second with his body foreshortened while the bather on the slide is laid out flatly facing us. The top, side, and front views of the bodies are presented in unison. The three bodies then maintain their harmony as they splash into the water, throwing up three nearly simultaneous frothy sprays (see Figure 14).

Although not all the action in *Sutro Baths, No. 1* is as synchronized, there is a sense that a system of movement is in play, one that is created specifically for the camera’s lens in order to be projected in the theater. To clarify, this mechanical, cog-like
quality of the film is created in order to reference the mechanism of projection itself.

Compare, for example, *Sutro Baths, No. 1* with a description of the Vitascope from 1896:

The vitascope...takes this same ribbon which had been prepared by the kinetoscope, and coils it up on a disc at the top of the machine, from which it is passed over a system of wheels and through a narrow, upright clamp-like contrivance that brings it down to a strong magnifying lens, behind which there is an electric burner of high capacity. The light from this carbon burner blazes fiercely through the translucent ribbon, and projects the images on the negatives there, blended, to a distant screen, with great clearness, for the benefit of the audience. The clamp device just mentioned regulates the gliding or the pausing of the gelatine ribbon, and is further assisted by an automatic hammer below it, which recedes and advances fifty times in a second, keeping the ribbon flat and straight as it passes down before the magnifying lens. In fifty feet of the photographic gelatine film or ribbon there are some 750 negatives.  

The rhythmic movements in *Sutro Baths, No. 1* behave in a strikingly similar way to this description of the mechanism of projection: The queue for the slide becomes the coil of film; the bathers on the slide, the ribbon of film; the various dives, jumps, and flips layered with the slide, the regulating clamp device; the bright white splashes, the blazing light from the lamp. That the slide is described as being 50 feet long in the various catalogue accounts of the Sutro Baths films, the very length of the film stock, calls even further attention to the self-reflexivity of the material reality of *Sutro Baths, No. 1*.

To return to Gunning, his analysis of early film offers an idea of looking wherein everything is offered to the eye; the film is made transparent in the “cinema of attractions.” The hypervisuality of the “cinema of attractions” and the idea of modernity it represents, Gunning himself notes, is undeniably associated with issues of control and

---

surveillance. However, in our bath actualities, a transparent display is not what is being offered. Instead, as we have seen especially in *Sutro Baths, No. 1*, self-reflexive materiality is being projected. In two frames of the short moving picture, the representation of the recreational scene is disrupted by large black imperfections (see Figures 15 and 16). Most likely spots of melted film caused by the very material that makes motion pictures possible – the blazing electric light of the projector’s lamp – these large black blobs would hardly register to the causal viewer. But, their presence in the actuality most concerned with film’s materiality in our bath set seems meaningful. In the projection of this film, the material substance breaks through the depiction as a “sovereign accident,” to use Georges Didi-Huberman’s formulation. Such a rupture, wherein the material becomes a patch of opaque matter, points to the very instability of any artistic claim to representation by insisting on the mere substance of the medium in which it appears. The moment of recognizing the patch for what it is - mere substance - instead of how it serves the representative power of the medium is also the moment of realizing the process of seeing and understanding; it is a moment that forces the spectator into participation by demonstrating that the spectator is already actively engaged by having already interpreted the patch, and indeed the picture as a whole, as something more that its material substance. Reading the black spots in *Sutro Baths, No. 1* through Didi-Huberman then, we can understand the two patches of melted film as activating the space of cinema in a way that does not recreate the modern regime of control through vision, but rather solicits creative intervention. That is, the viewer is made aware of her

---

role in the game of representation and is therefore given the choice to engage in the films’
crafted reality.

The self-conscious gestures of the boys begs for this engagement, asking the
viewer, made equally self-aware through the material self-reflexivity of the films, to
imagine the scene, to let it enter into the space of the theater, and to therefore complete
the representation. The projected moving image becomes a node in a mutual exchange of
imagination made all the more active because of each player’s self-consciousness of the
game in which they are engaged: the waving figures imagining the viewer, the
cameramen imagining projection, and the viewer imagining the representation - the pools
and their playful bathers - to be present in the space of the theater.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

Musser’s explorations of early film exhibition helped us to understand the film showman’s role in fulfilling the creative act in the theater’s space. However, his insistence on the drive toward narrative does not take into account the crafted self-reflexivity of the bath scenes, which calls forth an active spectator as well. Musser’s analysis of early film exhibition practices simply does not account for the audience’s role in the space of the cinema, responses touted even in contemporary accounts of early film. Of course, while we cannot take these accounts as entirely accurate all the time, they do point to a more participatory spectator than Musser’s assessment. Early films were screened most commonly in a vaudeville setting where audiences were accustomed to sing along with musicians, heckle comedians and generally transgress the separation between stage and audience. It is notable in fact that the first public display of the Vitascope was at the famous vaudeville theater in New York, Koster and Bial’s Music Hall, in April of 1896. Here, contemporary accounts claim “the spectator’s imagination filled the atmosphere with electricity” more than the new projection machine itself, which was “neatly covered with the blue velvet brocade which is the favorite decorative material in this house.” With even this very first Vitascope projection, then, we see the emphasis placed on the role of the spectator in the creation of cinema. Musser’s studies convinced us that the space of projection was active. His argument however only considers how the exhibitor constructed the space of cinema.

The material self-reflexivity of these films insists on an activation of the cinema in general by pointing to what is actually happening in the space: a game of representation played through projection. The audience, as if mirroring the figures on the screen, would have experienced a self-conscious moment; provoked by the films’ self-reflexivity to take notice of the material reality of their cinematic experience, the audience was activated. So, it seems the material reality of the film opens up the space of cinema to become a space for creativity. Clearly, White and Blechynden did not have the final word in how their films are understood; their attention to artistic concerns are undeniable but the function of such artistic self-reflexivity may ultimately have been to call the viewer into a self-conscious realization that transformed the theater into an active space for shared creativity. In this way, this reading of *Lurline Baths*, *Sutro Baths*, and *Sutro Baths, No. 1* has provided a way for the myth of the power of cinema to re-enter our understanding of early film, showing us the potential of early film as a participatory art.


