Corporeality *in* Early Cinema

Viscera, Skin, and Physical Form

Edited by Marina Dahlquist, Doron Galili, Jan Olsson, and Valentine Robert

13 Nudity in Early Cinema; or, the Pictorial Transgression

Valentine Robert

Let me begin with a song, written by Joseph Flynn in 1894 and titled "*McGinty at the Living Pictures*":[1]

> Dan McGinty went to the opera show with his old wife Mary Ann,
> And took a front seat in the middle aisle amongst the bald-headed clan;
> But he wasn't prepared for the sights he saw and he laughed with might and main
> When the living pictures came to view, why he nearly went insane.
>
> When he saw the Sleeping Beauty, why he got such a shock
> You could hear his heart ticking like an eight-day clock.
> Then he danced and he pranced,
> and said he, "I've been to France,
> But that's the finest sight I ever saw;"
>
> Then his eyes bulged out, he began to shout;
> The gallery boys hollered, "Put that Zulu out."
> Then his wife grabbed his feet,
> pulled him under the seat.
> So he couldn't gaze upon the living pictures.
>
> When the girl who posed as Venus, with her form so grand,
> You could hear McGinty holler a way above the band.
> Then said he, "Mary Ann,
> you will lose your old man
> If you don't be quick and take me out entirely."[2]

Luke McKernan, on his remarkable blog thebioscope.net, first thought that this song was about McGinty's discovery of early cinema, telling us "how excited some

My warmest thanks go to Louis Pelletier, whose linguistic corrections and scientific discussions invaluably contributed to this article.

could be at what they saw on the screen."[3] But McKernan later corrected in brackets: "This song refers to tableaux vivants, not motion pictures."[4] Indeed, instead of *moving pictures*, this song is about proper *living pictures*, *tableaux vivants*—that is, theatrical imitations of works of art that very often involved nude figures, as shown in our illustrations of Venus living pictures (figure 13.2 below), surely similar to the one that made McGinty holler! But as I will argue here, and as these photographs, which in reality are *cinematic frames*, reveal, Luke McKernan was not really mistaken in connecting these lyrics with early cinema. This chapter aims to show why.

Nude or Naked on Stage

Basically, this song is about discovering nakedness. McGinty, who had only seen his wife's undressed body, can suddenly ogle other women's forms. This music-hall song exaggerates this erotic shock, which drives McGinty to a grotesque form of madness. But this caricature is not groundless. One of the main reasons for the worldwide success of living pictures at the end of the nineteenth century was, indeed, the erotic power of these exhibitions of real nude bodies, mostly women, standing undressed before the viewers and the *male* gaze, the "bald-headed clan" described in the song. We can easily recognize them in illustrations of *tableaux vivants*, such as the 1848 engraving of "*The Three Graces*, as exhibited by the Model Artists of New York,"[5] where this male gaze was even helped by binoculars and opera glasses, rather reminiscent of McGinty's eyes "bulging out." But what made these shows appropriate for the opera house (not just the bawdy house) was the "fig leaf" of respectability: their *artistic quality*, or the accuracy and perfection of these "living" copies. In the *New Yorker* illustration, the three naked girls posing on stage are imitating Antonio Canova's *Three Graces* in absolutely every detail, from hairstyle to toe position, leading us to reconsider the front-row bald-headed spectators using binoculars. Are these gazing men really *voyeurs*, eagerly ogling the naked models and their most intimate anatomy? Or are they, on the contrary, art history *connoisseurs*, testing the details of the artistic copy, in line with the nineteenth-century trend of inspecting works of art with magnifying glasses, which became as compulsive for experts such as Bernard Berenson as for the general museum visitor.[6]

One may think that this question is in bad faith. But, whether an alibi or not, the argument did exist,[7] and the quality of the imitation of the work of art was a key issue in these performances, which were discussed in the newspapers, impacting on the longevity and the reputation of the shows. This ambivalence between lustful voyeurism and artistic contemplation was later theorized as an opposition between the words *naked* and *nude*. While other languages, like French, make no distinction (using the same word "*le nu*" for both translations), English does. Kenneth Clark has theorized this dissimilarity in the following polarization: On

the one hand he links "nakedness" with "artless," obscene exhibition and illicit voyeurism. On the other, he identifies "nudity" as an artistic category that deals with ideal beauty and deserves legitimate contemplation.[8] The attraction of living pictures precisely rested on this oscillation between nakedness and nudity, on the one hand de-idealizing the painting that takes shape in the flesh, on the other hand transfiguring the actors' bodies into works of art. The fact is too often overlooked, but thanks to this nude alibi, *tableaux vivants* were *the* means by which, historically, the naked body got on stage.[9] And the same story occurred on screen: the *naked* came into view under the guise of the *nude*, shaped by pictorial codes. Motion pictures became the direct heir of living pictures.

Pathé's Saucy but Pictorial Scenes

Let us return to our illustrated living Venus, taken from an 1899 Pathé production titled *Birth of Venus* (*La naissance de Venus*) (see figure 13.2a). In the Pathé Catalogue, the film appears in a series called *scènes grivoises d'un caractère piquant*, literally meaning "saucy scenes with a hot quality." In addition to this title, a warning advises exhibitors to "exclude children from the exhibition of these pictures."[10] The tone is set. The detailed descriptions of these films then systematically refer to undressed bodies: "barely dressed"; "half dressed"; "dressed with a negligee"; "undressed"; "unclothed"; or "entirely naked."[11] The exhibition of flesh is the main selling point. Furthermore, almost all these quotations refer to *female* undressed bodies. We can then surmise that when Pathé asked exhibitors to exclude children, the implication was that mothers and maids were also to stay outside with their flock.

It is somewhat different in English. The series title is simply translated as "Scenes for Smoking Concerts" in the London catalog.[12] It could seem chaster than the "hot" and "saucy" original title, but "Smoking Concert" implies explicit conditions of reception: for men only. Then, not only children but women are also excluded, raising fascinating issues about the varying status of the female spectator of these first erotic films and shows (recall the role of McGinty's wife, for example). This terminology also reveals the filiation between these early legal and official productions and the illegal pornographic films that would soon be called "stag movies"—"stag" being a synonym of "smoking concert." Unfortunately, the summaries describing the undressed quality of these scenes are not translated in the extant English catalogs (at least the ones I had access to), preventing us from knowing if the chosen word would have been "naked" or "nude." The hesitation is justified, because these film descriptions not only praise their transgressive undressed bodies, they also advertise their artistic and cultural references.

The catalog summaries make constant reference to art, literature, mythology, and famous iconic nude figures in a lyrical literary style, with sophisticated adjectives, elaborated grammar, and a touch of poetry quelling any suspicion of

vulgarity.[13] And several surviving films of this not-for-children-list prove that the reference was visually significant. *La Naissance de Vénus* (Pathé, ca. 1899) is inspired by William Bouguereau's painted Venus; *Le Jugement de Phryné* (Pathé, ca. 1899) is arranged after the famous painting of the same title by Jean-Léon Gérôme; and *Le Réveil de Chrysis* (Pathé, ca. 1899) has much in common with Ferdinand Roybet's *Odalisque*.[14] One of these 1899 nude films (a second one appeared a few years later[15]) is even openly described in the catalog as a "reproduction of Garnier's famous painting."[16] In my research, I found many *tableaux vivants* in early cinema (particularly in historical or biblical early films).[17] But my findings also suggest that catalogs seldom cited the pictorial sources of the pictures they described—*except* for films displaying naked figures. In this risqué realm, reference goes hand in hand with prudence. Framing the film as a copy of a work of art shifts the responsibility for its undressed staging to the artist, and at the same time it justifies nudity as part of an artistic tradition, far from gratuitous and reprehensible exhibitionism. Similarly, on stage, quoting the artistic sources played a significant role in the legitimizing strategy of the living pictures, which had always struggled with censorship.[18]

Gaumont's Secret but Perfect Engravings

It is no surprise, then, to discover that an entire series of early naked films secretly produced by Gaumont in 1907 was composed only of meticulously referenced living pictures. This series was demonstratively called "Vieilles Estampes," meaning "Old Engravings." The clandestine catalog in which they were sold reprised the titles of the "original" painting and made sure to brandish the names of their reputable creators.[19] Moreover, the reference was explicit even in the screenplays of these early nude films, deposited with the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. The action of these contemplative pictures is so limited that their two-line descriptions could well hold the record for shortest screenplay ever. But this nonexistent narrative is offset by the attributions added to the titles ("after Fragonard," "after Baudoin," "after Dennel"). The entire plots of these "old engravings" are there, in the actualization of the image.

The real action is in the eye of the beholder, who recognizes these "engravings" and relishes the sight of these *half-nude, half-naked* bodies put on cinematic display. The real narrative is in the imitative staging, as shown by the exactitude of the Gaumont living picture after Dennel, which manages to keep each element and detail of the composition while adapting the image to the enlarged format of the screen. The same degree of accuracy can be seen in the embodiment of a Baudoin painting considered in all its baroque details, from furniture—even including wall molding and the drape of the curtain—to the smallest accessories such as an upside-down high-heeled shoe left in a corner. This example is all the more mesmerizing in its content. Titled *Le modèle honnête*, Baudoin's

painting—reproduced down to the smallest detail and even in its title by *Le modèle honnête* (Gaumont, 1907)—depicts an artist's model crying of modesty as she poses undressed in front of a painter, hiding her face while also exhibiting her breast (in a paradoxical gesture typical of Gérôme's *Phryne*).[20] This cinematic *tableau vivant* then creates a perfect mise en abyme of the blurring of the boundary between the naked and the nude.

Biograph's Naked but Covered Pictures

This intermedial process becomes still more visually striking in the Biograph series of nude films explicitly called *living pictures*. The production catalog also precisely cites the original and "faithfully represent[ed] well-known art master-pieces [by Sarony, Landell, Delaplanche, etc.]."[21] But these films are not simply framed as paintings, as they are listed in the "vaudeville" section of the catalog and even explicitly stated to be "shown exactly as in first-class vaudeville theatres."[22] This entrenchment of references is made concrete visually (see figure 13.1).

The living pictures are not only incredibly accurate and motionless,[23] but in the illustrated example the black background even highlights the precision of the body stances and the foreground details. A giant frame is set around the scene, sealing the pictorial origin of the image. Still, a second level of intermedial interplay appears: around the frame's golden border, we can see the edge of a theatrical scene, with stagehands opening and closing the curtains. The same double device appears in most of these Biograph living pictures, "covering" the naked body with the double "protection" of the theatrical *and* pictorial reference, twice legitimizing the nude tradition, twice exonerating the film production of the undressing gesture.

These nude bodies have yet another proper cover: the Biograph models are not really naked but wearing a flesh-colored leotard. This semitransparent bodysuit, which became widespread in early American and English films to represent naked women, comes directly from theatrical living pictures. Nineteenth-century audiences discovered these props in the *tableaux vivants*. Victor Hugo described this novelty at a living-pictures show he attended for the first time in Paris in 1846. "The pink silk tights that covered [the models] from the feet to the neck were so thin and transparent that you could see not only the toes, the navel, the nipples, but also the veins and the colour of every mark on the skin in every part of the body. Toward the pelvis, however, the tights were thicker and you could make out only the shape."[24] While Hugo obviously scrutinized this leotard very closely(!), the Biograph camera remains more distant. They are, nevertheless, the same kind of tights that dressed (or should we say *undressed*) the Biograph's living-pictures models.

Figure 13.1a–b. Comparison between the original nude painting by Louis-Maurice Boutet de Monvel, *La leçon avant le sabbat*, 1880 (h/t, 165 × 132 cm, Nemours, Château-Musée, d.r.), photo © RMN-Grand Palais/Philippe Fuzeau, and its cinematic tableau vivant in *Living Pictures: "Departure for Sabaoth"* (Arthur Marvin, Biograph, 1900).

Venus in the Washroom

The comparison between Pathé's *Birth of Venus* and the Biograph version of the same subject emblematically shows the two main ways of staging the naked body in early cinema.

Most of the time, the explicitly "saucy" French productions revealed the breasts and buttocks entirely. In the 1899 film (figure 13.2a), the Pathé Venus does an ostentatious, slow spin to exhibit her naked bottom in addition to her breasts. But like most of these early French nude films, underwear conceals the model's pubis.

The traditional Anglo-Saxon way of half-veiling the body with the living-pictures leotard may appear more modest (see figure 13.2b). It may seem to echo the way in which academic painters (such as Bouguereau or Cabanel, who also bequeath *Births of Venus* to posterity) depicted a pearly, slick flesh to idealize their nude figures. Émile Zola hilariously satirized this code of "goddesses drowned in milk" and bodies made of "almond paste."[25] But it was the sculptural quality of cold, classical marble that this pictorial convention mainly sought.[26] The leotard had a similar effect, even more so on the screen, where the black-and-white image "sculpts" shadows and gives the flesh-colored tights a marblelike whiteness.[27]

However, the Pathé Venus is cast in such a powerful contrast between light and shade that (on purpose or not, we will never know)[28] the overexposed naked body is also covered with a smoothing brightness, a "veil of light" concealing and shrouding the body. The modesty of the Biograph Venus is not so obvious. First of all, the flesh-colored leotard was sometimes considered, at the time, "worse" than proper nakedness.[29] And Victor Hugo's description shows how much the

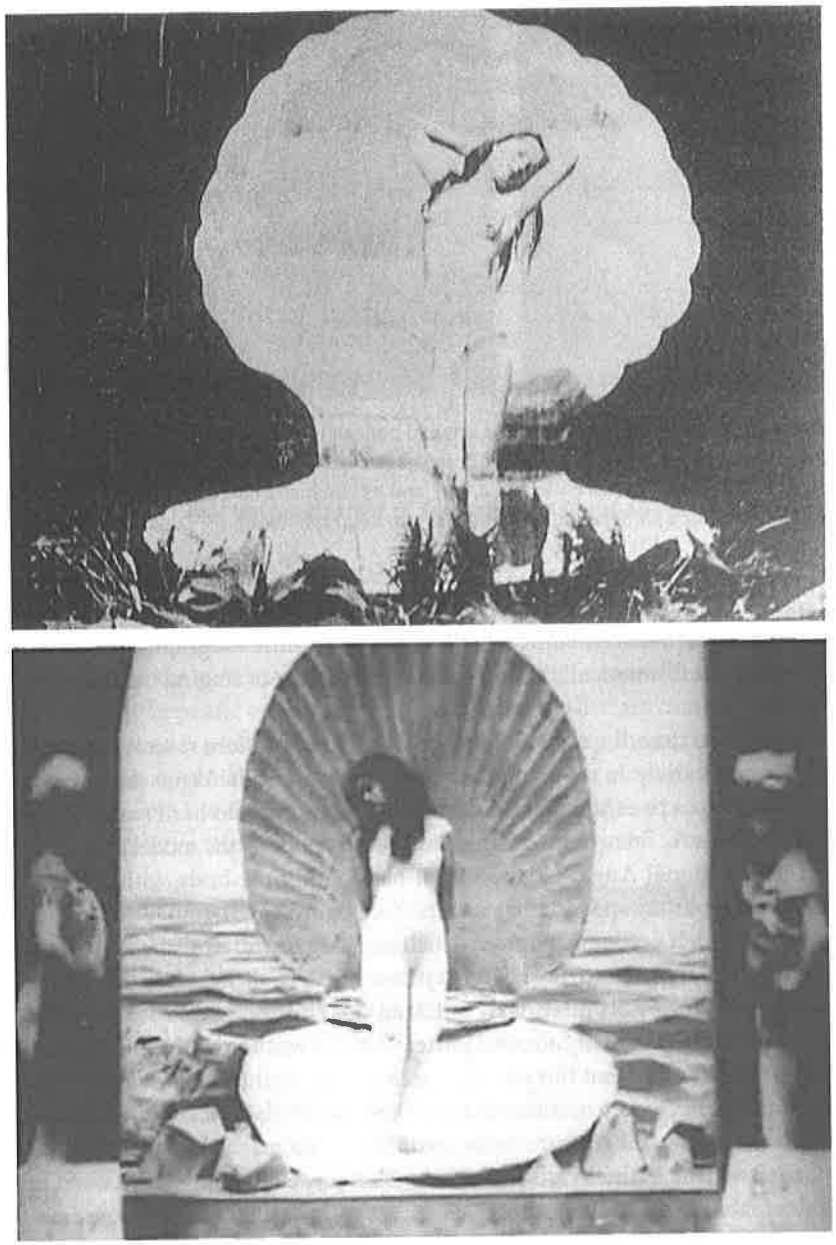

Figure 13.2a-b. Comparison between an almost naked Venus by the French Pathé Company in *La naissance de Vénus* (Pathé, ca. 1899, frame grab) and an almost (but differently) naked Venus by the American Biograph Company in *"Birth of the Pearl": Living Pictures* (Frederick S. Armitage, Biograph, 1901).

spectators were irresistibly led to test the actual presence of this second skin in the most intimate parts of a body far more *revealed* than *concealed*. This phenomenon is emphasized in these early films with zenith lighting, high contrast, and unsteady images, notably creating with this Biograph Venus an extremely ambiguous shadow in the pelvic area.

Moreover, the very way in which viewers encountered these Biograph living pictures must be considered, because they were primarily made for the mutoscope—that is, for private peep-show devices made for solitary viewing, with a handle and a loop structure (the come-and-go of the curtain) allowing for feverish repetition. This suggestive connection with "solitary vices," which immediately tarnished the reputation of the mutoscope,[30] reached its high point when the puritan city of Rhyl decided, in 1899, to place the mutoscopes in . . . the men's room![31] One may easily assume that in the washroom (which quickly became overcrowded and forced the mutoscope business to stop) the whole "bald-headed clan" was probably as unrestrained as McGinty.[32]

The Voyeur behind the Connoisseur

The audience is precisely the point with which I will end this chapter. For the difference between the naked and the nude is, ultimately, a pure matter of looking. And here lies the scandal, or legitimacy, of early nude films. How else could the first known example of censorship have concerned *Studio Troubles* (British Biograph, 1899)?[33] First, the woman's body is covered with a leotard. Second, the scene takes place in a painter's studio, following an early cinema tradition that provided narrative *and* aesthetic justification for the model's exhibition.[34] Last of all, the scene *is* a living picture, modeled on an academic English painting by Frank Hyde titled *The Artist's Studio*.[35] But all these legitimizing arguments collapse when confronted with the description of the McGinty-esque behavior of the viewers, especially the "youths and men who, with leering eyes and base language, supplement[ed] any vicious suggestions these pictures had already made."[36] Here, the mutoscope viewing hood seems to have been used much more like a voyeuristic device than a tool for art experts.[37]

On the contrary—and lastly—how could such a film as the 1903 Oskar Messter production *AktSkulpturen* (*Live Sculptures*) *not* have been banned? It uses iconic references with no accuracy, no leotard, and no set, and it distinctly exhibits nakedness. The totally naked and well-lit models stand on a turntable and each pose lasts for a full rotation, allowing an unrestricted, voyeuristic view of the breasts, buttocks, and pubis. The answer to this *nakedness* is *nudity*, or, in other words the artistic argument, this time directly applied to the audience. Indeed, this film was not so much a film *after* than *for* painters. The subtitle identified the production as a *Studienfilm für bildende Künstler* ("Film study for pictorial artists").[38] These early nude films' best alibi was, therefore, in the viewer's

eye, and in his ability (which McGinty lacked) to hide the voyeur behind the art connoisseur.

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Notes

1. While an original score can be found at the New York Public Library, there is an audio recording sung by Edward M. Favor (ca. 1902) at the Library of Congress on an Edison Gold Moulded Record (#1066).
2. Joseph Flynn, *McGinty at the Living Pictures* (sheet music) (New York: Spaulding and Gray, 1894).
3. Luke McKernan, "Since Mother Goes to the Movie Shows," Bioscope, May 18, 2011, https://thebioscope.net/2011/05/18/since-mother-goes-to-the-movie-shows.
4. Ibid. This correction was added after a comment by Rich Markow, bottom of the page.
5. Quotation of the title of this engraving published by James Baillie (New York City, 1848). I reproduced and commented on this illustration in Valentine Robert, "Le tableau vivant ou l'origine de l'"art' cinématographique," in *Le tableau vivant ou l'image performée*, ed. Julie Ramos (Paris: Mare and Martin/Inha, 2014), 262–82.
6. See Ernest Samuels, *Bernard Berenson: The Making of a Connoisseur* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 95, 103, 149. This common practice was most notably commented on and satirized by Emile Zola, *Ecrits sur l'art* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 177–87, 363–94.
7. One of the best examples I found was a review of a *tableaux vivants* performance in Paris in 1849, where the art critic swears to have looked at "each of these pictures," with "pleasure," "regarding art only." According to him, he needed to be disturbed by the colorful reactions of his neighbors to realize that this pleasure could be erotic: "Judging by the vivid impressions they seem to be feeling, [they] were likely looking at the same pictures in a fully other perspective" (*Journal des Beaux-Arts*, April 22, 1849, 63).
8. Kenneth Clark, *The Nude, A Study in Ideal Form* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1954), 23ff.
9. See G[ustave]-J[oseph] Witkowsky & L[ucien] Nass, *Le Nu au Théâtre, depuis l'Antiquité jusqu'à nos jours* (Paris: Daragon, 1909), 222–23.
10. "Exclure les enfants pour l'exhibition de ces tableaux," *Pathé Catalogue* (Paris, 1900), 50.
11. "à peine vêtu, à demi vêtue, habillée d'un saut de lit, déshabillé, dévêtue, entièrement nue," *Pathé Catalogue* (Paris, 1900), 50–51.
12. *Pathé Catalogue* (London, 1903), 69.
13. *Pathé Catalogue* (Paris, 1900), 50–51.
14. For a visual confrontation of *Le Réveil de Chrysis* and Roybet's painting, see Maria Magdalena Brotons Capó, *El cine en Francia, 1895–1914: Reflejo de la cultura visual de una época* (Santander, Spain: Genueve Ediciones, 2014), 190–91.
15. See *Pathé Catalogue* (London, 1903), 70, or *Pathé Catalogue* (Paris, 1904), 97.

16. "Reproduction du célèbre tableau de Garnier, " *Pathé Catalogue* (Paris, 1900), 51.
17. See Valentine Robert, "L'origine picturale du cinéma. Le tableau vivant, une esthétique du film des premiers temps," PhD diss., University of Lausanne, 2016.
18. Among the remarkable collection of living-pictures programs that Jack W. McCullough sets up in his book *Living Pictures on the New York Stage* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1981), most quote their sources, such as the program for "Madame Warton's tableaux vivans" [*sic*] (pompously claimed to be "under the patronage of the Royal Academy"), which lists every original title of the works and every artist's name (43). Concerning the struggle living pictures had always waged with censorship, the best example is the Victorian one, well described by Joseph Donohue, *Fantasies of Empire: The Empire Theatre of Varieties and the Licensing Controversy of 1894* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005).
19. This precious document was discovered by Maurice Gianati, commented on in his chapter "Alice Guy a-t-elle existé?" in *Alice Guy, Léon Gaumont et les débuts du film sonore*, ed. Maurice Gianati and Laurent Mannoni (New Barnet, UK: John Libbey, 2012), 14–15.
20. See Bernard Vouilloux, *Le tableau vivant. Phryné, l'orateur et le peintre* (Paris: Flammarion, 2002), 245–56.
21. The Biograph series of living pictures is heterogeneous (composed of various subseries made several years apart with different directors, models, sets, and modalities), and the explicit listing of the original artists occurs only for one section of the series, filmed by Arthur Marvin in August 1900. *Biograph Catalogue* (New York, 1902), 61.
22. These living-pictures films are even said, in the catalog introduction, to be the most representative of this "vaudeville" section, staged "with as great care as . . . any of the largest productions of this order"—reflecting the success and reputation of the music hall contemporary productions of *tableaux vivants*, such as Kylanyi's. *Biograph Catalogue* (New York, 1902), 54.
23. The question of the movement or stillness of these cinematic living pictures is fundamental but highly complex and cannot be treated in the limited scope of this paper. See Robert, "L'origine picturale du cinéma," 304–60; and Valentine Robert, "Filming Stillness: The Movement of Living Pictures," in *Archaeology of Movement*, ed. Benoît Turquety and Maria Tortajada (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, forthcoming).
24. Victor Hugo, translated by E. H. Baltimore and A. M. Baltimore, in *The Essential Victor Hugo* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004), 176.
25. Zola, *Ecrits sur l'art*, 182.
26. See Alison Smith, *Exposed: The Victorian Nude* (London: Tate, 2001), 90.
27. The appearance of the flesh in early films was an immediate issue for actors and cameramen, related to film-stock sensitivity (the blue-sensitive film that dominated the production until the 1920s rendered flesh tones darker and suspiciously dirty). Makeup strategies were developed to whiten the filmed skin, and stage conventions were redesigned. See James Bennett, "Early Movie Make-up," Cosmetics and Skin, May 15, 2016, http://www.cosmeticsandskin.com/cdc/early-movie.php.
28. We can, however, be almost certain that the original copies had that much contrast. The illustration is indeed an official still photograph, and the contrast of the copies and duplicates I have seen in archives was even stronger, to the point of being almost indecipherable.

29. Dominique Bonnaud, "Enquête sur le Renouveau du Café-Concert," *La Renaissance: politique, littéraire et artistique*, February 7, 1914, 16–17.

30. Richard Brown and Barry Anthony, *A Victorian Film Enterprise: The History of the British Mutoscope and Biograph Company, 1897–1915* (Wiltshire, UK: Flicks, 1999), 223.

31. Ibid., 99–100.

32. This men's lavatory story raises again the issue of the female viewers' status. Brown and Anthony, as well as Dan Streible, showed that the exhibition of mutoscope pictures to women was condemned as of 1899 as pure indecency, and the Rhyl "male" measure was precisely meant to avoid offending any women or girls. See Dan Streible in "Children at the Mutoscope," *CINéMAS* 14, no. 1 (2003), 91–116. But, except in Rhyl (where, sarcastically, the most feverish toilet visitors seem to have been youths from twelve to fifteen years old), girls had access to these licentious attractions. Neither must one forget that the first ad for the mutoscope presented a feminine spectator. Certainly, this starlet, Anna Held, known to strip on stage and to initiate Ziegfeld Follies, held out the promise of a foxy undressed show, but she also associated the mutoscope with the woman's gaze, outside of the smoking concert.

33. Brown and Anthony, *A Victorian Film Enterprise*, 102–7.

34. See Kaveh Askari, *Making Movies into Art: Picture Craft from the Magic Lantern to Early Hollywood* (London: British Film Institute, 2014), 44–70.

35. I was put on the track of a *tableau vivant* and discovered the link with Hyde's *The Artist's Model* thanks to Tim Batchelor, who suspected that the film was "probably inspired" by another Frank Hyde painting called *The Eton Boy*. Tim Batchelor, "The Nude in Early Film," in Smith, *Exposed*, 179.

36. "The Lantern Record," *British Journal of Photography* 46, no. 2057 (October 6, 1899): 73.

37. The opposite assumption could have been made. For example, Kaveh Askari assumed that "the exhibition format [and] sustained viewing [of these looped *tableaux vivants* films] might have encouraged the same kind of gaze that art-appreciation groups sought to cultivate at the turn of the century." Askari, *Making Movies into Art*, 50. But as soon as nudity is concerned, voyeurism comes into play.

38. This excuse was also used in photography (at least on the French legal market, where nude photographs were only authorized to be published and sold for so-called artistic use, in particular in reviews such as *Le nu esthétique* [Paris, 1903–1905] pretending to be read by artists and connoisseurs only). And this alibi will last for decades in the film industry. Some nude films of the 1940s produced by Criterion Films or Candid Cinema [*sic!*] still carry the warning "This picture has been produced exclusively for the use of classes in graphic arts, art students and others who are using motion pictures instead of living models for study. It is not intended for public exhibition." (Quotation of the title appearing as a "Foreword" of *The Fabulous Figure*, *The Body Beautiful*, *Doctor's Office*, *Bed Time*, and other short films of a series produced by Criterion Film, 1940s, private collection.).

14 Paul Capellani

The Body Put to the Test by Cinema

Sébastien Dupont-Bloch

Translated by Timothy Barnard

"How an actor uses the kinematograph to make sculpture." This was the title of an article appearing on July 3, 1909, in the weekly magazine *L'Ilustration* devoted to *L'Enlisé*.[1] Not the Pathé film *L'Enlisé du Mont Saint-Michel* (*Caught in Quicksand on Mont Saint-Michel*), released in early 1908—the article does not even mention its title—but rather *L'Enlisé* (*Caught in Quicksand*), a sculpture by Paul Capellani (brother of film director Albert Capellani) on exhibit at the 1909 Salon des Artistes Français. And yet the article claims that this sculpture was, indeed, *based on* the film, or more precisely what we might call a *study of the filmed body.*

According to the article, reprinted by the daily newspaper *L'Ouest-Eclair* on July 12 of that year, Paul Capellani wanted to experiment and film himself sinking into the ground. He wanted to "synthesize the movement of the projected figure" so as to understand and better transcribe the expression of these near-death moments in order to create a sculpture.[2]

Photographs taken by Charles Gerschel illustrate the article, showing the actor actually sinking into the ground on the film shoot, and the sculpture being completed. These mirroring pictures demonstrate how *Enlizé*[3] embodies an astonishing act of intermediality. Capellani had, in fact, transformed a cinematic shot, a dynamic object without depth, into a sculpture, a static object without time. He had transformed flat yet animated images into a three-dimensional static object. In this way, a body was projected from one expressive space to another by substituting quantifiable parameters that could not be confused with artistic interpretation. The sculpture was presented as the sought-after product of a drama that the artist experienced himself, as Paul Capellani did not want to simulate the action by using a model, or by acting, as he himself was an actor. According to the article, the film shoot almost cost the artist and his crew their lives. When the actor and then the equipment began sinking into the ground, the crew had to call for emergency assistance, which arrived "just in time."

FILM & MEDIA

Corporeality in Early Cinema inspires a heightened awareness of the ways in which early film culture and screen praxes overall are inherently embodied. Contributors argue that on- and offscreen (and in affiliated media and technological constellations), the body consists of flesh and nerves and is not just an abstract spectator or statistical audience entity.

Audience responses from arousal to disgust, from identification to detachment, offer us a means to understand what spectators have always taken away from their cinematic experience. Through theoretical approaches and case studies, scholars offer a variety of models for stimulating historical research on corporeality and cinema by exploring the matrix of screened bodies, machine-made scaffolding, and their connections to the physical bodies in front of the screen.

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Cover illustration: Still from *La Table à rallonge* (Pathé, 1913). Courtesy of the Danish Film Institute.

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