

MARIO SLUGAN AND DANIEL BILTEREYST

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON EARLY CINEMA HISTORY

CONCEPTS, APPROACHES, AUDIENCES



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Concepts, Approaches, Audiences

**EDITED BY
MARIO SLUGAN AND
DANIËL BILTEREYST**

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ATTRACTION/NARRATION/ ILLUSTRATION: A THIRD PARADIGM FOR EARLY CINEMA

Valentine Robert

The challenge of rethinking the attraction-narration dialectics launched by Daniël Biltereyst and Mario Sluġan for the 2018 Ghent Conference and for this volume appeared to me as stimulating and necessary in early cinema studies. It led me to a daring proposal, which I submit here as a hypothesis, a programmatic idea rather than a conclusion, which will need future developments and verifications. My proposal is to extend the attraction/narration dialectics into a triad enlightening early cinema with a third and complementary theoretical paradigm, that I will call 'illustration' (Figure 2.1). Taking Biltereyst and Sluġan's 'theoretical challenge' as a starting point to reconceive my methodological process, this article will not provide a proper demonstration – only converging ideas, examples and lines of research. Nevertheless, I hope that the notion of 'illustration', which I identify as a complementary concept refining the dichotomy between attraction and narration in a triad, will prove to shed a new and promising light on early cinema aesthetics.

In order to make a theoretical concept out of the term 'illustration', I needed to identify a broader and historical sense, getting back to relevant uses, meanings, nuances – and 'illustration' quickly proved to be as difficult to define as 'attraction' or 'narration!' But the etymological and historical fortune of the word 'illustration' attested its theoretical potential and relevance, more significant than 'figuration', 'realization', 'monstration', 'description', 'composition' or even 'contemplation'. This article is indeed in the direct continuation of Charles Musser's writings and of what he called a 'cinema of contemplation'.¹ Nevertheless, the notion of 'illustration' tends to involve a level of analysis more similar to the one implied by the concepts of 'attraction' and 'narration', and to allow for a better triangular

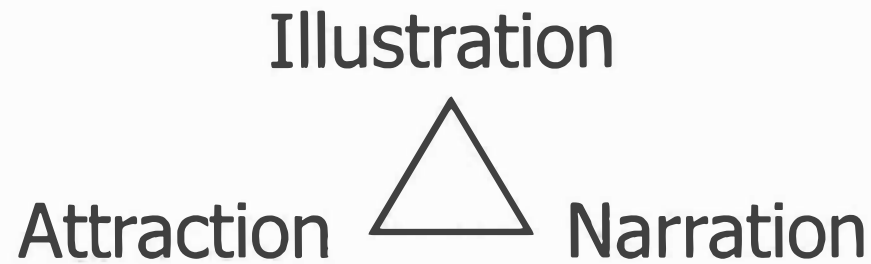


Figure 2.1 A triad of theoretical terms.

articulation. Several theoretical aspects intrinsically define the illustration, which are of great applicability for early cinema. I aim to reveal how this paradigm can be useful to analyse the part of the text, the part of the eye and the part of the tableau in early cinema. Moreover, illustration (derived from Latin *illustrat-* 'lit up') means shedding a light on something, making it clearer. Etymologically, the concept thus directly mirrors the cinematic dispositive – one can barely make it more relevant.

Furthermore, the very word 'illustration' was in use at the time of early films, which were explicitly compared to illustrated books and newspapers. For example, Edmond Benoît-Lévy, a key figure in early French cinema that could be nicknamed 'the first advocate of cinema'² longed to see, in 1907, the illustrated school textbooks be replaced by cinema sessions.³ According to Benoît-Lévy, geography and technical crafts would by this empirical way be taught instantly and far better. Instead of history textbooks, he suggested to use cinematic re-enactment of old events, and, regarding 'current history that poses before the future', Benoît-Lévy claimed that while his generation had to 'read (and misread)', 'our grandsons will have to see', 'a few films [being sufficient] to restore our era!'⁴ The comparison grew stronger with the 'illustrated newspapers that are aimed at the masses':

To show us news, the cinematograph is incomparable: we can show in the evening in Paris a fact which happened in the morning in Marseille. [...] Outdated, *Le Matin* and *L'Illustration*! [...] The cinematograph will be, and already is, the real popular newspaper.⁵

François Valleiry (who could, according to Richard Abel, be one of the pseudonyms of Edmond Benoît-Lévy himself)⁶ went further and formally proclaimed that 'the cinematograph, whose success is now as universal as definitive, has conquered the world in the same way as the image of illustrated newspapers'.⁷

I will get back to these explicit comparisons and their foundations. To end this prelude, I will quote the seventeenth-century French art critic and illustration-

devotee Roger de Piles, who made this utopian hypothesis: what if the Ancient had invented engraving? 'We would distinctly know an infinity of beautiful things of which historians have left us only confused ideas',⁸ he answered. He went on fancying how we could 'see' the magnificence of Babylon and the Temple of Jerusalem, or 'judge with certitude' the Greek and Roman ruins. We 'could have inherited the art of the Ancient builders', and Vitruve 'would not have let us ignore' all the instruments and machines that he described, the figures of which are 'lost'.⁹ De Piles' wording of this dream connected engravings with knowledge, precision and discovery, and served as a conclusion to his unsurpassed demonstration of the 'usefulness' of illustrations. According to him, the principles of these images went far beyond attraction and narration:

Among all the good effects that can come from the use of prints, we have only reported here six, which will make it easy to judge the others:

- The first is to entertain us by imitation and by reproducing through their painting the visible things.
- The second to instruct us in a more powerful and prompt way than by words [...]
- The third to shorten the time we would use to read again the things that have escaped our memory, and to refresh it at a glance.
- The fourth to make the absent things appear as if they were in front of our eyes, visible to us only through painful travel and great expense.
- The fifth to give the means to compare several things together easily, by the few places that prints occupy, by their great number, and by their diversity.
- And the sixth to form the taste for good things, and to give at least one hint of Fine Arts, which honest people are not allowed to ignore.¹⁰

Although the word 'illustration' did not exist at his time, Roger de Piles gave one of its best definitions, connecting its power to make people see a way to make them learn and remember, through concretization, empiricism, comparison, immediacy, synthesis and beauty. All principles that, as I will argue, also shaped early cinema images.

The part of the text

An illustration mainly consists in a visual transcription of a textual material. It is an image rooted in a text, referring and interplaying with 'the many kinds of writing around it'.¹¹ The understanding of the picture requires the knowledge of this textual context. The most concrete meaning of the word 'illustration'

thus designates the images decorating a book, an album, a newspaper or any written medium. Such illustrations are created and watched in conjunction with the surrounding text, should it be a tale, an article, a description, a poem or even a psalm. This concrete pictorial significance precisely appeared during the nineteenth century, leading to an era called the 'Golden Age of Illustration':

During the Romantic period, French publishing underwent a real revolution with the improvement of the presses and paper manufacturing, along with the development of new audiences, that publishers decided to conquer by lowering book prices. The image as an instrument of seduction invaded the world of print, books, newspapers or posters, and overturned practices. Its massive presence signals the birth of a new profession: that of illustrator. [...] 'Illustration,' 'illustrator,' 'illustrate' are new terms in English, French, German and Italian in the 1820s.¹²

The massification and industrialization of illustration described here by Philippe Kaenel led to the rise of new formats of illustrated books and magazines, which shifted the balance between text and image. Traditionally, the text structured the edition, being continuous with illustrations 'popping' here and there as punctual and discontinuous supplements. But the 'elegant thumbnails' are increasingly considered 'indispensable', to quote the editor of Dumas' *La Dame aux camélias* in 1858.¹³ Images tended to take more and more place and even overshadow the text, whose function changed: 'Initially intended to better grasp the meaning of the text, the illustration ended up occupying most of the surface of the book, the text being reduced to the role of an explanatory caption.'¹⁴

A good example of this phenomenon is the Bible illustrated by Gustave Doré. The first traditional version included the complete Bible text 'with the drawings by Gustave Doré', as alleged on the cover.¹⁵ The illustrations appeared approximately every five pages, and were clearly a supplement to the continuous, autonomous, 'holy' and untouchable text. But the same illustrated plates were soon edited without the Holy Scriptures. In these more popular editions, the text had changed and shrunk to become no more than captions of the images, which now structured the book. The Doré compositions were indeed compiled to constitute every right-hand page in a visual continuity, supplemented by a discontinuous text. This all-illustrated version was significantly called 'The Bible Gallery illustrated by Gustave Doré',¹⁶ and became commonly titled 'The Doré Bible Gallery'¹⁷ – the illustrator's name shining as prime author of this 'Bible'. The pictures still referred to the 'greatest story ever told', and remained the reference in the light of which the images were deciphered, but without the text being entirely written alongside. The Holy Scriptures were only partially quoted and evoked on the left-hand page. Selected and extracted in significant and

evocative fragments: the text itself functions as an illustration. The biblical story has been abstracted, 'internalized' by the reader-beholder.

We thus find in these Bible Galleries exactly what Noël Burch, André Gaudreault and Tom Gunning described about early cinematic Passion Plays, which can be extended to all early literary or historical adaptations: a succession of images relying on 'external referents',¹⁸ with an 'extrinsic narrativity'.¹⁹ Tom Gunning established it in these terms: 'The goal of the Passion Play was to illustrate and recall a well-known story rather than create a self-contained diegesis with narrative flow.'²⁰ Gunning precisely used the word 'illustrate.' Focusing on the narration-attraction dialectics, he did not develop the notion – letting it to be our task, focusing on a complementary illustration-theory.

This extrinsic narrativity of early cinema was most of the time embodied by the lecturer (in French *le bonimenteur*). New Cinema History has shown that early cinema cannot be understood ignoring this figure, who was standing next to the screen and whose speech accompanied moving pictures. Before the advent of intertitles, the visual frames of early film were linked to a textual discourse, delivered directly during the screening.

This configuration of the early moving picture show derived from a tradition explicitly called the 'illustrated lecture'. The screen was indeed, before and at the time of early film, used as a framework for so-called 'illustrations' of a lecturer's speech. They consisted of lantern slide projections, amazing the audience with their impressive size and radiance on the big screen. These lectures were incredibly popular at the end of the nineteenth century. Touring like big shows, they could gather five thousand people in a single amphitheatre.²¹ To compare these screened images with paper illustrations was commonplace, consistent with the very title of 'illustrated lecture'. Lecturers such as Alber claimed that the lecturer's speech should be a sequence of oral 'captions, accompanying not engravings in a book, but projected images'.²² The succession of slides was compared to the 'turn of albums' leaves'.²³ Guillaume-Michel Coissac (often erroneously called Georges), the major early 'minister' for slides and films who founded and led the catholic production company La Maison de la Bonne Presse and the forerunner corporative journals *Le Fascinateur* and *Cineopse*, was one of the most explicit in this comparison:

In short, projection is to the lecture what engraving, illustration is to the book. [...] Some lecturers first treat their subject completely and then, when they are done speaking, turn off the lights and display all their views continuously. This process could be compared to a publisher who would place all his illustrations at the end of the volume. [...] A second process consists in displaying the views at the same time as speaking. [...] This is engravings in text.²⁴

This illustrative use of the screen was really defining for early cinema. Charles Musser identified two reasons for this. First, because 'illustrated lectures were perhaps the dominant form of screen practice before moving pictures'.²⁵ Screening was thus basically associated with an illustrative technique. Second, because 'soon after the emergence of moving pictures, magic lantern showmen began to integrate them into their lectures'.²⁶ Indeed, thanks to lecturers like Alexander Black,²⁷ Lyman Howe and John Stoddard,²⁸ as soon as moving pictures became available, the illustrated lectures combined slides and films, naturally considering early film in the same illustration paradigm.

Early film projectors were most of the time created by the same production companies as magic lanterns (which were called 'Stereopticon' in the serious realm of the nineteenth-century illustrated lectures, the 'magic' terminology being mostly restricted to children's shows). Still and moving image projectors were distributed in the same catalogues, aimed at the same public. It is thus not surprising to discover an advertisement promoting moving pictures projectors and 'the finest films' under the same headline as stereopticons and slides, i.e. 'Illustrate your lectures!' (Figure 2.2).

Studying the early cinema lecturer's practices in early cinema, André Gaudreault, with François Albera and then Philippe Gauthier, have distinguished two different tendencies: the 'lecture-with-screening' (*conférence-avec-projection*) and the 'screening-with-comment' (*projection-avec-boniment*).²⁹ We thus discover the same empowerment of the image in early film shows as in illustrated texts, supporting the similar paradigm. This illustrative conception therefore seems indispensable to shed light on the hybrid and multimedia quality of countless early cinema shows. It is also decisive by fundamentally connecting early film to early comics. Indeed, the emancipation of the illustrated image led to the marketing of autonomous engraved plates, to the growing independence of the

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Figure 2.2 McAllister Advertisement published in *Lyceumite and Talent*, no. 52 (January 1908) reproduced by Terry Borton, 'The Professional Life of "Magic Lantern" Illustrated Lecturers', *The Magic Lantern Gazette* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 15.

illustrator, and to pioneering comics experiments. As Donald Crafton summarized, 'comics and moving pictures flourished together in the age of technological innovation and the rise of mass consumers', cultivating 'formal influence, content influence, individual interactions, and a shared social milieu'.³⁰ To identify an illustrative paradigm in early cinema makes these links necessarily apparent, and urges film historians to benefit from illustration and comics studies. These fields have indeed developed fascinating theoretical concepts around illustration, which can be of groundbreaking use for early cinema aesthetic analysis, and highly enrich the attraction/narration dialectics.

The part of the eye

As Philippe Kaenel underlined, the illustration shaped new aesthetic standards internationally.³¹ The industrial reproduction and diffusion of printed images expanded in Europe as well as in the United States from the 1840s and generated a global circulation of images. French journalists of the second half of the nineteenth century, for example, were amazed to find Epinal prints (glorifying Napoleon, Geneviève of Brabant or Hop-o'-My-Thumb) not only in French homes but also on the walls of 'the wooden houses of the American pioneer', Madagascar 'huts', Amerindian 'wigwams' and Inuit igloos.³² What is diffused is not only the content of the illustrations (with its ideological impact, as highlighted by Georges Sadoul).³³ Their graphic style also crossed borders, formatting representations and vision.

One of the essential features of this illustrative style was precision. Dedicated to what Alan Male called 'immense visual scrutiny and research', Victorian Age illustrators and engravers imagery epitomized 'precision, delicacy and attention to detail', which were at the time associated with 'authoritativeness'.³⁴ Moreover, the very principle of the illustration, as a visual transposition of a text, is to make the verbal description accessible to the eye in all its visual aspects and details. This research and taste for visual precision is at the very basis of the process, and part of its specificity. This praise for detail went hand in hand with the technological improvements of xylography after 1840. The replacement of long-grain-woodcut by end-grain-wood-engraving and the development of mechanical transfer techniques in relief (thus compatible with typography) entailed and valorized a constant refinement of the line.³⁵

This evolution of etching style interrelated with the academic standards of the time, praising authenticity and exactitude through meticulously realistic and 'licked' paintings – that Émile Zola mockingly said were made only to be printed.³⁶ The painter aptly named Detaille was a master of this academic style: in front of his paintings, viewers marvelled at the 'prodigy' of this 'total truth

placed exactly, equally, in all parts of the canvas'.³⁷ The public of the nineteenth century nourished indeed a real passion for pictorial detail, which represented the touchstone of this 'century of observation'.³⁸ Even the founder of naturalism was exasperated:

Why does the public pounce with such fury on Meissonier's paintings? [...] The truth is that viewers are infatuated [with the fact that the artist] delineates the buttons on a vest, the charms on a clock chain, [...] that he paints little figures four or five centimeters high, requiring a magnifying glass to be properly seen – this is what raises the crowd to a white heat of enthusiasm and makes even the quietest spectators delirious. They are flattered in their most childlike instincts, in their admiration of the overcome difficulty, in their love of the well-drawn and above all well-detailed little pictures.³⁹

These ultra-detailed images which made the crowd 'delirious' (!) can be called photorealistic, and it is no surprise that the illustration practices of the time directly met and merged with photography. Even before the photographs could be printed directly and mechanically on paper (around 1880–90), they were used as sources for illustrators. From the 1840s, indeed, in newspapers such as the *Illustrated London News*, *Eigen Haard* or *L'illustration*, engravers manually copied photographs on woodcuts, which were then printed.⁴⁰ And for many years after the advent of photogravure, the illustrators still retouched photographs manually, in particular to keep the same level of detail.⁴¹

This aesthetics of detail, as we could call it, implied other features than the sharpness of the line and precision of the forms. Another highly exploited element was what Thierry Smolderen called the 'swarming effect'.⁴² We might be tempted to amusingly rename it the 'Where's Wally effect', as these illustrated books by Martin Handford have become the very symbol of a type of composition so rich and saturated that identifying Wally (however unmistakable) represents a challenge. According to the comics historian, the main founder of this technique, whose images will inspire most of the nineteenth-century illustrators (long before Handford in the 1980s), was William Hogarth:

Prints depicting fairs and bazaars [...] strove to reproduce 'in miniature' the euphoria of a leisurely stroll at a fair, where one's gaze can joyfully move from one subject to another in the disorderly chaos. Hogarth based a new mode of reading on this principle. All of his engravings invite a variable, zigzagging circulation of the reader's gaze. Occasionally they directly refer to the space of the fairground, as in the *Southwark Fair* (an engraving from 1733). [...] Instead of the fluid, quasi-automatic reading [we have] a slow read, one that invites the eye to lose itself in the details and to return to them in order to generate

comparisons, inferences, and endless paraphrases. Hogarth's series demand genuine interpretive effort, even detective work, on the part of a reader.⁴³

This depiction of the eye path, namely the 'scattered labyrinth',⁴⁴ drawn in the prints by Hogarth and his nineteenth-century successors, is completed by wise comments about the visual culture of the time. Smolderen recalled that the faithful, 'objective and documentary' reproduction of 'visible reality' was then neither ideal nor natural.⁴⁵ The standard mode was the 'schematized illustration', in which the artists eliminated any 'unnecessary details' to convey only the 'most significant aspects': the purpose was not to 'transmit visual information (in the realistic, photographic sense of the term)' but to 'stabilize visual signification (most often in relation to the accompanying text)'.⁴⁶

It turns out that we find exactly the same principles in early cinema aesthetics. One of the best-known reactions to the first Cinematograph screenings in 1895, showing Lumière's baby eating at a garden table, was the famous comment that 'the tree leaves were moving'. And among the sources written by the first viewers of the early Lumière films, we discover accounts like this:

All the details can be seen: the waves of the sea breaking on the beaches, the quivering of the leaves under the action of the wind, etc. We should mention all of these little genre paintings that deservedly arouse curiosity.⁴⁷

Early film images were explicitly compared to pictorial illustrations, and people marvelled at their moving details, even the tiniest in the distant background. As Richard Crangle explained, the moving pictures echoed the 'use of photography or pseudo-photographic detail' in illustrated magazines – to the point where it even appeared as an 'achievement' of theirs.⁴⁸ And the connection goes further. Noël Burch was one of the first to define the style, which he called the 'mode of representation', of early cinema, and here is the main aesthetic feature he identified:

The long shot 'crammed with signs' [continued] until 1906. This is a kind of picture whose content can only be exhausted – sometimes even simply read – by a modern spectator, at any rate, after repeated viewings. [It] demanded a topographical reading by the spectator, a reading that could gather signs from all corners of the screen in their quasi-simultaneity, often without very clear or distinctive indices immediately appearing to hierarchize them. [T]he lecturer represents the first attempt to linearize the reading of these pictures, which were often both too 'autarchic' to be spontaneously organized into chains and too uniformly 'centrifugal' for the eye to pick its way confidently through them.⁴⁹

This description totally mirrored the swarming effect described by Smolderen in graphic art. Burch analysed the early cinema 'crammed' and 'topographic' images exactly like Smolderen analysed nineteenth-century Hogarthian illustrations. He even acknowledged the key role of the lecturer's text (the complementarity of which is our first argument to compare the film images to illustrations) to enable the linear 'reading' of the pictures sequence, and to appreciate the sinuous and complex path of the gaze in each frame.

The attraction/narration dialectics is absolutely crucial, but not sufficient to properly comprehend these multiple visual 'readings' of the early moving image, how it was shaped and looked at. It must be remembered how illustrations had then, as Jean-Pierre Dubost stated referring to Roger de Piles, the 'status of objects of perception and knowledge'.⁵⁰ This scholastic conception of the contemplation was in line with the developments, in the end-of-nineteenth-century education system, of what has been called 'teaching by aspect', considering that 'by seeing, one observes, judges, remembers, imagines, reasons', and promoting to 'educate the senses first, then exercise judgement through reasoning that engraves knowledge in the intelligence'.⁵¹ At the dawn of the twentieth century, audiences observed early moving images as illustrations, in a similar empirical relationship, with a playfulness (with which all *Where's Wally* fans are familiar) connected to the stimulation of perpetual discoveries (both visual and intellectual) and the repeated pleasure of seeing things already known in a new and better way. This illustrative paradigm thus sheds an essential light on the way early cinema spectators enjoyed these big moving swarming images, in the contemplation of which they immersed themselves. Marvelling at details grasped in an unrestricted scopophilia, they could rediscover their everyday world as well as faraway lands, groundbreaking scientific imagery as well as adaptations of well-known stories.

As one of the best examples of this 'topological reading' required by early cinema, Noël Burch provided the first shot of *Tom Tom the Piper's Son* (1905, Billy Bitzer, Biograph) (Figure 2.3). For today's eye, this swarming shot of almost two minutes is totally indecipherable. The frame is overrun by around thirty people going about their business without any cohesion or convergence. It is only by seeing the scene again and again, and already knowing what must happen that we can barely spot Tom Tom, and the pig, and the larceny.⁵² Even an acrobat dressed entirely in white showcasing on a wire above the crowd goes almost unnoticed. Since no one is looking at her, she does not undertake the density of a visual centre for the spectator. Her function and all the 'crammed' frame's aesthetics seem essentially decorative. It will prove to be properly *illustrative*.

Burch didn't know it, yet this iconic swarming shot is what I call a *tableau vivant*, i.e. the precise living 'realization' (to use Martin Meisel's concept)⁵³ of a painting or, like in this case, engraving. And not just any print. This shot is an accurate



Figure 2.3 Still from *Tom Tom the Piper's Son* directed by G. W. Bitzer © American Mutoscope & Biograph 1905. All Rights Reserved.



Figure 2.4 William Hogarth, *Southwark Fair*, 1734 (etching and engraving, 36.5 x 47.5 cm, Metropolitan Museum, New York).

imitation of William Hogarth's *Southwark Fair* engraving from 1734: the very illustration Thierry Smolderen identified as icon of the swarming effect (Figure 2.4)! So, beyond narrativity or attractivity, this early-film-frame-staging directly involves theories and practices of illustration. This aesthetics is particularly informed by the ideal of Hogarth to 'lead the eye a wanton kind of cha[s]e'⁵⁴ that Smolderen connects with freedom, curiosity and knowledge, diversity and free association, recreation and fascination. The transmedial issues are also essential, and the playful game of transposition of the same object (from the song to the engraving to the film) illuminates itself deeply in the historical perspective of illustration. The sentence of Hogarth praising how 'the eye is rejoiced to see the object turn'd, and shifted, so as to vary this uniform appearance'⁵⁵ takes a special resonance in light of the destiny of his own composition, which would still challenge the eye of early cinema viewers of 1905, 'turn'd and shifted' in moving pictures.

The part of the tableau

The aesthetics of early cinema staging and framing is now commonly called 'tableau-style', making a theoretical concept out of the historical name of the film frame.⁵⁶ Before being defined by the *decomposition into shots*, cinema was indeed shaped by the *composition of the shot*, considered as an 'autonomous and self-sufficient tableau', to use Gaudreault's words.⁵⁷ Most historians who have studied this tableau-style explored the transition, the way in which films moved from one to several shots. The advent of editing, relying mostly on the development of the narration paradigm, is at the centre of these studies. In the *Encyclopaedia of Early Cinema*, 'tableau-style' even appears as a subcategory of 'editing',⁵⁸ defining itself as a style of *montage* rather than a style of *image*. An illustration paradigm could broaden these approaches and fully disclose the pictorial dimension of the early film *tableaux*.

André Gaudreault himself associates the two notions, explaining that early films 'used a series of "tableaux" to *illustrate* a story whose temporal and narrative scale would normally require an even longer length'.⁶⁰ The concept of illustration implies indeed a principle of exemplar selection and crystallization. William Uricchio and Roberta Pearson have analysed this synthetic quality of the tableau-style in the Vitagraph productions labelled 'Quality Films'. They discovered that these films were based less on the original texts (literary, historical or biblical) than on popular versions that were already reduced, cut and illustrated.⁶⁰ These early motion pictures therefore refer to what Pearson and Uricchio call 'key scenes', 'key moments' and 'key images' – which could exist in the concrete form of a series of illustrations and directly model the film frames, as we will demonstrate.

As pointed above, the word 'illustration' is part of historical terminology. The occurrences are countless in the official catalogues of the production companies promoting how this film or that one 'illustrates' such story, subject, theme or adventures.⁶¹ The term might be used for documentary pictures, such as *Catching Turtles* (1909, Pathé) which, to quote the *Moving Picture World*, 'illustrates' the turtle catching, 'as only the Pathes can illustrate such a subject'.⁶² The educational connotations of the term are highlighted in the explanation which follows: 'the scenes give a clear comprehension of how this is done'.⁶³ The word is often used for fictional content: 'the photographer did his work well [...] to *illustrate* the story'⁶⁴ can be exemplarily read in early cinema corporate press of the 1900s. A close examination even led me to identify a certain overlap between the word 'illustration' and 'adaptation'.⁶⁵

Alain Carou has indeed shown that, following the tradition of popular theatre and variety shows which radically cut classical plays to keep only two or three scenes shown autonomously, the literary adaptations of early cinema were far reduced, based on a visual selection approach much more than on narrative transposition.⁶⁶ This phenomenon is likely proclaimed in the title of the 1897 Pathé film *L'Assommoir de Zola – Scène du lavoir*, in English *L'Assommoir by Zola – Laundry Scene*. It openly warned the audience that only one isolated scene was taken from the novel, more specifically a very visual one, often illustrated because of the spectacular, erotic as much as comical quality of this hot (in every sense of the word) women's duel. The catalogue description of the first film version of *Quo vadis* (1901, Ferdinand Zecca and Lucien Nonguet, Pathé) is even more explicit: the production explained that 'to follow the book in its entirety would have been pretentious and impractical. So we tried to extract the most interesting parts of the book, which we were able to group together in a single strip'.⁶⁷ This fascinating depiction acknowledged the technical context of the films short duration and their screening as successive tableaux. It can equally serve as a definition for the illustrations in a book, carefully selected and treated as a series – or even autonomized in a succession of pictures simply

captioned, as we described. It would therefore not be surprising that these 'most interesting parts' were precisely modelled on the illustrations of Sienkiewicz's novel. In any case their illustration-like quality was clearly a determining element. Sidney Olcott's 1907 *Ben Hur* was on this point unambiguous. The promotion of the film stated: 'Illustrations adapted are those shown in the story by Gen. Lew Wallace'.⁶⁸ A terminological research needs to be thoroughly done (with all the precautions it requires), but this sentence seems to indicate that the very notion of 'adaptation' appeared in the cinema field not to describe the transposition of a literary narrative into a film, but the reproduction of book illustrations into cinematic shots! What is certain is that the word 'illustrations' applies here absolutely equally to the book images and to the film frames, and that, visually, the book plates directly modelled the shots' composition.

These concrete examples, where illustration proved to have been a direct model for early cinema, will constitute my final – and illustrated! – argument. Studying the Vitagraph film in two parts dedicated to Napoleon (*The Life Drama of Napoleon Bonaparte and the Empress Josephine* and *Napoleon, The Man of Destiny* [1909, J. Stuart Blackton, Vitagraph]), Uricchio and Pearson recognized in it many 'key images' realizations:

Vitagraph publicity for the Napoleon films also referenced a whole array of imagistic intertexts, containing what we term *key images*, that is, widely circulated visual renditions of events in Napoleon's life, reproduced so exactly that 'anyone at all familiar with art will recognize them at once.' (*Film Index*, 10 April 1909) [...] Famous paintings realized [...] include: Napoleon's crowning of Josephine, by David; the Battle of Friedland, by Meissonier; the marriage to Marie Louise, by Rouget.⁶⁹

The references listed, such as David's huge painting of the *Coronation* hanging in absolute autonomy in the Louvre, may seem to epitomize high art and have nothing to do with popular illustrations. But most of these paintings were famous precisely because they were reproduced and disseminated as illustrations. You could thus find David's *Coronation* not only in the museum but also published in newspapers, printed in historical books and school textbooks, engraved in plates and postcards series, copied in Epinal prints, mimicked in Victorian cartoons and satirized in caricatures. Vitagraph even compiled and cited sources such as historical memoirs in their production and promotion work.⁷⁰ The illustration paradigm thus permits to apprehend this intermediality, the general links of early films with its broader cultural and artistic context, and the propensity of early cinema to revive pre-existing images.

Among the tableaux vivants of early cinema, many were based on images existing only or primarily as illustrations. The films listed in the category of what was called 'Reenacted Newsreels' stand out as emblematic, like the

Assassinat du ministre Plehve (*Assassination of the Russian Minister Plehve*, 1904, Lucien Nonguet, Pathé). An illustration of this true story of July 1904 had been published, shortly after the event, in the *Petit Journal*, more precisely in the illustrated weekly Sunday supplement of this newspaper that was the first to feature colour illustrations, with an unprecedented popular success (one million copies were printed every week in 1895).⁷¹ The film was produced by Pathé about one month after the *Petit Journal* illustration, which acted as an essential reference for the decorator:

I reconstructed the so-called 'real' part of the set with in hand the document that had already impressed the public: the image of the *Petit Journal Illustré*. [Then, I asked] to find in a knacker's yard two horses, recently dead, similar to those harnessed to the carriage [...] and in a depot of cars, an old carriage from the year 1900.⁷²

The imitation is not so obvious in the film (which survived) because of the fantasy composition of the illustration, depicting the very detailed moment of the explosion, which is swallowed up in a smoky trick on the screen. But this quote attests that Laurent created his film's set by reproducing the popular illustration with the precision of a tableau vivant. The notion of illustration proves to be really useful to understand not only this film but all the genre of early cinema re-enacted newsreels, which could seem so paradoxical to us today (traumatized as we are with fake news). But it all becomes clear if we take the illustrated press of the time as a paradigm, made up of drawings or touched-up photo engravings not pretending to be the authentic document but a conscious and didactic pictorial re-composition, detailed, meaningful, made to be contemplated and remembered in the collective imagination.

One of the most famous and documented example of the genre is *Le Couronnement du Roi Édouard VII* (*The Coronation of Edward VII*, 1902) made by Georges Méliès and commissioned by Charles Urban, financed and distributed by the Warwick Film Trading Company. Acknowledged by Richard Abel in terms of 'tableau vivant style',⁷³ this re-enacted newsreel was actually pre-enacted, created entirely in studio before the official ceremony in order to be ready to be sold and screened the very day of the 1903 Coronation. Méliès modelled his film on a whole set of documents and pictures of coronations and of Edward VII, at the head of which were prints from the *Illustrated London News*. Urban sent them to Méliès with these comments:

I send you this day a copy of the Coronation Number of the *Illustrated London News* which is certainly a work of art. You will note that the uniform the King will wear for the Coronation is a Field-Marshal's uniform, red coat,

sash, and decorations, white trousers and high boots. This costume I have had confirmed by a gentleman in charge of the ceremony and therefore final. The prints sent you previously showing the King in other costume than this have been merely unauthorized fancy pictures. There is also an illustration showing King Edward taking the Oath, and another depicting the Archbishop crowning His Majesty. These pictures should decide us in our reproduction.⁷⁴

Urban and Méliès were not only looking for accuracy but also for 'art'. The English producer asked Méliès to make this film his 'masterpiece'⁷⁵ and explicitly aimed for the most sumptuous reproduction, not only truthful but also beautifully arranged and staged, directly imitating illustrations considered as pictorial 'works of art'. The result was openly promoted as a 'a representation of a rehearsal of the coronation', praising the 'elaborate setting of a representation of' Westminster Abbey and the 'most impressive and dignified manner' in which the figures were 'impersonated by accomplished actors and actresses in every detail'.⁷⁶ Following the model of documented but redesigned newspaper illustrations, the re-enactment in early newsreel was therefore not an element to hide but on the contrary a selling point.

Finally, the realization of illustrations reigned over the first adaptations. As Bryony Dixon established, like 'plethora of fairy tales based on book illustrations in editions of the brothers Grimm or Charles Perreault', early film adaptations were 'often adapted from sources via their illustrations rather than their text'.⁷⁷ And the film staging and framing could be so faithful to the illustrations which already cut, synthesized and visually transposed the literary content, that film frames would become proper tableaux vivants. The Milano Films version of Dante's *Inferno* in 1911 provides a good example, following Gustave Doré's design in such detail that the screen seemed to become a 'living illustration' (Figure 2.5 and 2.6).

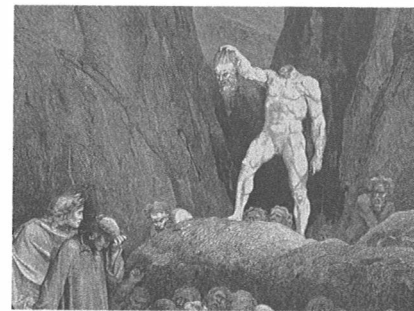


Figure 2.5 Gustave Doré (design), A. Pontenier (engraving), *Bertrand de Borne*, 1865, published in *L'Enfer de Dante Alighieri* (Paris, Hachette, 1865), Ch. XXVIII, v. 123, Plate 58 (detail).



Figure 2.6 Still from *L'Inferno* directed by Francesco Bertolini, Adolfo Padovan and Giuseppe De Liguoro © Milano Film 1911. All Rights Reserved.

Conclusion

To conclude and epitomize all the dimensions of our illustration paradigm, we will consider a culminating example: the early Jesus films, which around 1900 represented a proper genre, commonly called 'Passions' in reference to the Passion Plays. But the theatre was clearly not the only model for these pictures.

The illustration paradigm was explicitly used in the debates about the potential blasphemous nature of these cinematic representations of the Christ. 'There can be no objection' to such moving pictures, proclaimed for example the Reverend Putnam cited by Charles Musser: 'One might as well object to the illustrations of Doré and other artists in the large quarto Bibles.'⁷⁸ This explicit comparison is not only captivating in likening the film images and the plates of illustrated Bibles but also in pointing to the question of the format. The parallel between the big screen on which the shots follow each other and the large-format illustrated pages that overlap one another infers the same contemplation, where the eye dives into the image and wanders through all its details. A third term underlies this analogy, which is the illustrated lecture, or more precisely the illustrated sermon. The biblical illustrations (especially those by Doré) had indeed been given a second life on the screen in the form of magic lantern slides, which were used and developed as a predilection tool by religious circles. The specific film advocated by the Reverend quoted above, which was the Passion produced by Hollaman and distributed by Edison in 1898, actually knew a hybrid diffusion, in the form of a show of half-still, half-animated images,⁷⁹ intertwining slides and films and giving the cinematic tableaux a clear status of animated illustrations. Moreover, the Passions had the specificity to be sold shot by shot, by piece, each tableau independently, exactly like illustrative plates. Like plates, they could be bought in black and white or in colours (the whole practice and technique of colour in early cinema directly related to the illustration field).⁸⁰ Like plates, they aimed to be collected and watched again and again (Passions were the most repeated screenings, systematically projected each Christmas and Easter, every year).

This conceptual comparison between Jesus films and illustrations proved to be justified and concretized: early biblical films directly modelled their shots on Bible illustrations. *La Vie et la Passion de Jésus-Christ (The Life and Passion of Jesus Christ)* released in 1902 by Pathé provided great examples of tableaux vivants,⁸¹ especially reproducing Gustave Doré's Bible illustrations – or even more certainly the *Doré Bible Gallery*. To rival this Pathé Passion, Gaumont produced a film titled *La Vie du Christ (The Birth, Life and Death of Christ, 1906, Alice Guy)* which they based on the rival illustrated Bible! Instead of Doré's Gallery, Alice Guy took the *Life of Jesus* by James Tissot as a model and followed its illustrations even more explicitly than Pathé followed Doré. Guy explained in her memoirs that 'Tissot had published a very beautiful Bible illustrated after

the sketches he had made in the Holy Land', and that she used it as 'ideal documentation' for her Passion (in particular for the decors, costumes and local customs).⁸² 'Guy borrowed and appropriated Tissot's composition', clarified Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, and 'instructed Henri Menessier to construct twenty-five sets after Tissot's Bible'.⁸³ So, like Doré's and many Bible illustrators' pictures, Tissot's drawings were disseminated on the screens not only as slides in illustrated sermons but as tableaux vivants in early cinematic Passion Plays. Tissot's re-enactment will especially be brought to its climax by Sidney Olcott in 1912, who will consider the illustrations series almost like a storyboard to faithfully realize and revive.⁸⁴

These Passions even took our illustrative paradigm one step further since they generated illustrations themselves. These films were indeed so successful and meticulously staged that postcards or promotional illustrations were derived from their images. Most of the time the chosen composition was the culminating moment of the tableau vivant, most similar to the pictorial source, in an effect of illustrative eternal return. Pathé even published a booklet to be distributed to the exhibitors with the film, which looked like what could be called a mini-*Pathé Bible Gallery!* The layout was very similar to the *Doré Bible Gallery*, proposing next to the immobilized photograms (some of which directly re-enacted the illustrator's compositions) a small text, with the very same letter ornament. Thus, Pathé really 'translated' back and forth their biblical film frames into illustrations.

This last example finishes proving, I hope, that rethinking early cinema in the light of the concept of illustration leads to new theoretical horizons and obliges to fully consider the visual aspect, style and uses of the film images. One of the main criticism made toward the attraction/narration dialectics, in particular by Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs, was the 'over-emphasis on the development of editing technique in the history of early film', at the expense of the pictorial dimension.⁸⁵ I do believe that this gap could be overcome if, in the theoretical dual equation of *attraction/narration* (which primarily relates to sensation and comprehension, and not contemplation, to montage, and not image), we add the third term of 'illustration'.

The complexification of a binary system (\rightleftharpoons) in a triangulation (Δ) allows to consider the poles in a relationship of balanced combination more than of mutual exclusion, and as complementary components more than as substitutes to each other. André Gaudreault's recent works precisely nuanced the 'contradiction' between attraction and narration by emphasizing that they 'can go hand in hand'.⁸⁶ Tom Gunning insisted from the outset on setting the attraction/narration dialectics as a bipolarization instead of an opposition, with films 'pointing in both directions'.⁸⁷ Expanding the reading grid in an equilateral triangle with three symmetric paradigms should accentuate balanced approaches and combinatorial analysis, and definitely prevent temptation for any exclusive duality. Not unlike three-point lighting, where one light source is only conceived

in relation to the others, this theoretical three-poles system allows for a whole range of nuances that promises to be highly operative.

Lastly, this triangular modelling enables to fully assume the necessity of a third term, which appeared somehow in Gaudreault's writings with the intermediary concept of 'monstration', mostly associated with the notion of attraction but nevertheless distinct. The theoretician who most clearly stated this need for broader analysis was Charles Musser:

Cinema of attractions is one way to look at and describe some important aspects of early cinema. There are not only other perspectives, there are other aspects that need to be assessed and reassessed. [...] To Gunning's cinema of astonishment and the spectator as gawker, I would now counterpose a multifaceted system of representation and spectatorship that also includes 1) a cinema of contemplation; 2) a cinema of discernment in which spectators engage in intellectual active processes of comparison and judgement; and 3) finally a reaffirmation of the importance of narrative and more broadly the diachronic sequencing of shorts or films.⁸⁸

It appears that the illustration paradigm I have presented here addresses all of these aspects:

- 1) The 'sustained, attentive contemplation'⁸⁹ Musser recognized as encouraged by some early films, and which he, too, related to the way audiences were 'meant to look at paintings',⁹⁰ is perfectly materialized in the 'swarming effect' and aesthetics of detail.
- 2) The 'critically active' and 'discerning spectator', which Musser claims was invoked by early films (not necessarily in an opposite, but possibly simultaneous way to 'states of astonishment or contemplation'),⁹¹ ideally connects with the intermedial comparisons implied by the illustration paradigm. I could not put it better than Musser when he says that 'a film was not merely of interest "in itself"'. It was an image that spectators were meant to enjoy in relationship to other films, other images such as – precisely! – 'paintings', 'postcards' and 'newspaper illustrations'.⁹²
- 3) Finally, Musser's questioning of the 'narrative' and his proposal to make it a more flexible concept, merely defined as a 'diachronic organization' and a 'sequencing of images',⁹³ fully matches with the way 'illustration' made us revisit 'narration', to focus on the selection and imaging processes, transforming narrative adaptation in a succession of 'key images'.

The theoretical triangulation of attraction/narration/illustration seems thus a way to make linkable the concepts which could have first appeared antithetical,

and to encompass all the aspects so aptly pointed by Musser without losing the theoretical achievements of Gaudreault and Gunning.

Naturally, my theoretical proposal may be rejected, but even in their refusal, early cinema and illustration seemed to be linked. Mallarmé provides the ultimate example of it. Desperate to see literature invaded by the image, the poet indeed traced, as disgusted by this perspective as we are excited about it, a direct and inexorable continuity from the illustrated plate to the early screen:

I am in favor of—no illustration [...] why not go straight to the cinematograph, the unfolding of which will replace, images and text, many a volume, advantageously.⁹⁴

Acknowledgements

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Notes

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- 2 A lawyer by training (also the brother of the painter Jules Benoît-Lévy and the uncle of the educational filmmaker Jean Benoît-Lévy), Edmond is the founder of the first permanent movie theatre, the Omnia-Pathé in Paris, and the editor-in-chief of one of the first corporate magazines, *Phono-Ciné-Gazette*, in which he tirelessly pleaded the educational and artistic cause of films.
- 3 Edmond Benoît-Lévy, 'Causerie sur le cinématographe', *Phono-ciné-gazette* 63 (1 November 1907): 381–3.
- 4 Ibid., 382. All translations from French are by the author unless otherwise noted.
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- 6 Richard Abel, 'Booming the Film Business', in *Silent Film*, ed. Richard Abel (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 123.
- 7 François Valleiry, 'Droits d'auteurs', *Phono-Ciné-Gazette* 54 (15 June 1907): 230.
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- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid., 7.

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- 12 Philippe Kaenel, 'Illustration', in *Dictionnaire mondial des images*, ed. Laurent Gervereau (Paris: Nouveau Monde, 2010), 786.
- 13 Gustave Havard, '[Editorial]', in Alexandre Dumas, *La Dame aux camélias* (Paris: G. Havard, 1858), n.p.
- 14 Noëmi Blumenkranz, 'Illustration', in *Étienne Souriau: vocabulaire d'esthétique*, ed. Anne Souriau (Paris: PUF, 1990), 855–6.
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- 16 *The Bible Gallery illustrated by Gustave Doré* (London and New York, NY: Cassell, Petter and Galpin, 1880).
- 17 *The Doré Bible Gallery* (Philadelphia, PA: Henry Altemus, n.d. [c. 1883]); similar editions were also published by other companies c. 1890, including John W. Lovell Co. (New York), The National Publishing Co. (Philadelphia), Belford-Clarke & Co. (Chicago and New York, 1891), etc.
- 18 Noël Burch, *Life to Those Shadows* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 146.
- 19 André Gaudreault, *From Plato to Lumière: Narration and Monstration in Literature and Cinema* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 31 ss.
- 20 Tom Gunning, 'Passion Play as Palimpsest', in *An Invention of the Devil? Religion and Early Cinema*, ed. Roland Cosandey, André Gaudreault and Tom Gunning (Lausanne/Sainte-Foy: Payot/Presses de l'Université Laval, 1992), 107.
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- 23 Unkapupa, 'Burton McDowell's lecture on "Samoa"', *The Lyceumite* (December 1903): 8.
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- 26 Ibid.
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 - 31 Philippe Kaenel, 786.
 - 32 H. De La Madeleine, *Le Temps* (7 April 1866), cited by Georges Sadoul, *Ce que lisent vos enfants: la presse enfantine en France, son histoire, son évolution, son influence* (Paris: Bureau d'éditions, 1938), 6.
 - 33 Ibid.
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 - 35 See Jean-François Tétu, 'L'Illustration de la presse au xx^e siècle', *Semen*, no. 25 (2008), <http://journals.openedition.org/semen/8227> (accessed 4 November 2021).
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 - 37 Louis de Fourcaud, '1894: Salon des Champs-Élysées', *Le Gaulois* (30 April 1894): 4.
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 - 48 Richard Crangle, 'Illustrated Magazines', in *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema*, 309.
 - 49 Burch, *Life to Those Shadows*, 152, 154.
 - 50 Jean-Pierre Dubost, 'Écriture et illustration: une compossibilité paradoxale', in *Penser et (d)écrire l'illustration: le rapport à l'image dans la littérature des XVIII^e et XIX^e siècles*, ed. Joanna Augustyn, Jean-Pierre Dubost and Sarah Juliette Sasson (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses universitaires Blaise-Pascal, 2019), 17.
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 - 52 Ken Jacobs, an experimental filmmaker committed to film micro-analysis, has taken this shot as experimental ground. He proposed to analyse and recut it: his film

- reframes the image, stops it, zooms in, zooms out, slows down, dissects the film, examining in detail what happened in this shot, and finding what Noël Burch called the 'narrative center of the image, but also all the signs around it' (Burch, *Life to Those Shadows*, 166).
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- 61 One example among many: we count forty-four occurrences of this word's use – declined in 'illustration(s)', 'illustrate(s)', 'illustrating', 'illustrated' – in the *Revised List of High Class Original Films Made by Gaumont, Urban-Eclipse, Théophile Pathé, Carlo Rossi, Ambrosio and Other Foreign and American Companies* (s.l.: s.n., 1908), <https://archive.org/stream/revisedlistofhigh00unse#mode/2up/search/%22illustrate+the+story%22> (accessed 4 November 2021).
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