Double Dialogues

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(falling into) the space between the screen and the audience

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The following is from my presentation at the **Double Dialogues** Conference, *On Space*, at The University of Otago, Dunedin, June 3, 2006.
*[What exist here as stills, existed then as sounds and moving images.]*

There is a space *between* things, and between things there is a space – a gap.

This presentation considers the gap – that space in the cinema – between the audience and the screen. I am referring to the Cinema as an institution, and the cinema as a location. It is a space where films are screened: (often) with a screen, a projector facing the screen and an audience hovering between.

This presentation will consider two or three examples in which the cinema has sought to represent the space between the projector, the screen and the audience.

In the earliest film screenings, in Paris, images were projected from a Cinématograph. This was a camera that doubled as a projector, in much the same way that a video camera can be used to record and replay sounds and images.
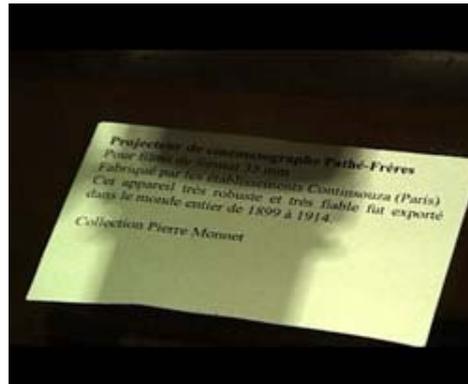
The projector and projectionist (the mechanism and the mechanic) were both part of, and within, the audience. Both projectors beamed towards the screen. The images were projected and travelled on a beam of light towards a screen, and then bounced, reflected back towards the audience.

These images were recorded in Paris at the corner of Rue Scribe and Boulevard des Capucines, in the basement of the Hotel Scribe, where once the Jockey Club stood.

This is where I entered (for the first time) the place that others once entered (for the first time) to see moving images. Once this was a café; now it is a café. This was once a cinema; now it is a shrine – a sacred space for those born of the Cinema.
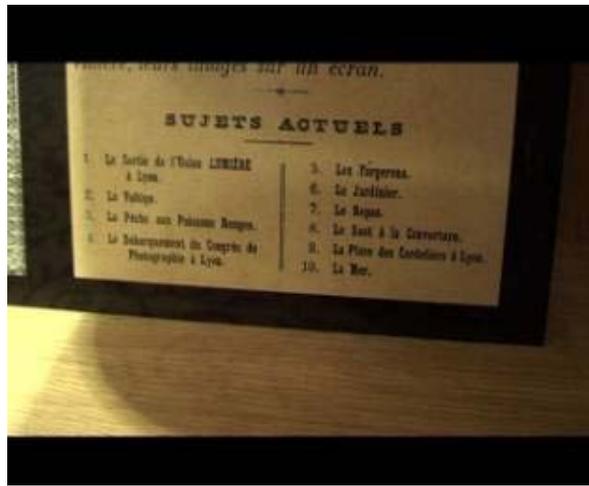
And what once was a famous poster, advertising the screenings at the Grand Cafe, is now a serving tray. The cinema reflexively imagines its culinary origins.

The programme is in the form of a menu, offering filmic actualities sandwiched between other performances.
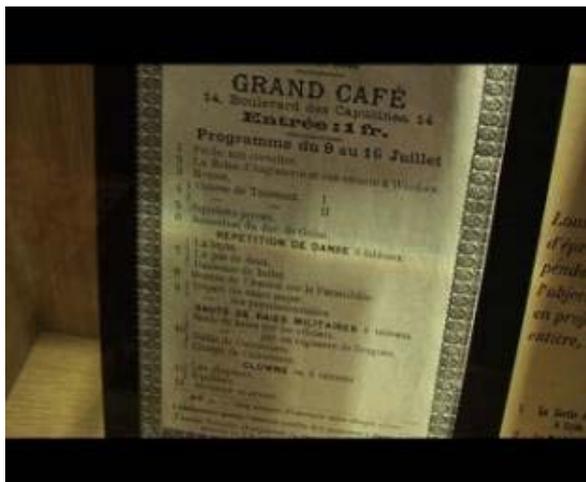
The two main dining rooms are named in homage to the founding brothers. There are claims that this is where the world's first public cinema screening occurred on December 28, 1895. Public screenings; yes: the *first* public screenings? non.

From the program listing, here are some of the films screened by the brothers: *[As a reminder, these are stills from what were screened both at the Conference (and in Paris) as moving images.]* In both of these examples, humans move with dynamic purpose towards a fixed and recognised camera. Later, we will see characters moving in the opposite direction – towards the screen.
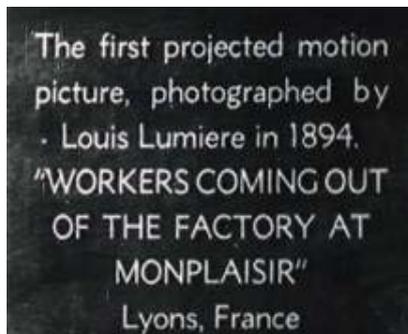
Lumière Brothers, *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* (1894)
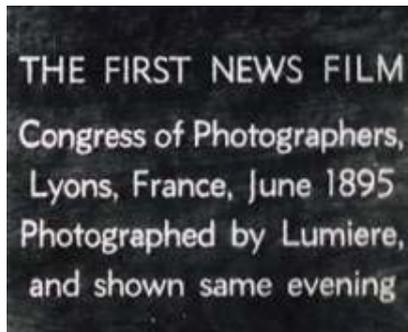
Lumière Brothers, *Arrival of Congress Members at Neuville-sur-Saone* (1895)

On the same program, we can see the beginnings of two distinct genres: the slapstick comedy and the al fresco home movie. Later we will see how these formative genres were fused through montage and mise en scène. *[As a reminder, this is the film that became the poster that transformed into the aforementioned serving tray.]*
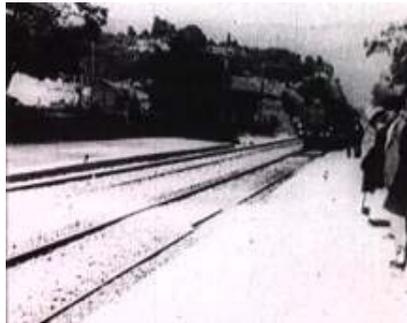

Lumière Brothers, *The Sprinkler Sprinkled* (1895)

Lumière Brothers, *Feeding the Baby* (1895)

Although widely quoted, the apocryphal legend is that on seeing this train arriving, audiences unfamiliar with the Cinema ran screaming from the café.

Lumière Brothers, *Arrival of the Train at La Ciotat Station* (1895)

According to Martin Loiperdinger (2004: 89), Helmuth Karasek wrote the following in *Der Spiegel*: 'One short film had a particularly lasting impact; yes, it caused fear, terror, even panic.... It was the film *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de la Ciotat (Arrival of the Train at La Ciotat Station)*....'

*

There was a time when Jean-Luc Godard was more quoted than seen. I saw Godard's early films (in black and white) before I read about him or read his own writings. By the time I wrote my first University essay (on him), I had seen and already mis-understood about ten of his films.

I was always of the opinion that Godard had said that 'meanings do not exist *on* the screen or *in* the audience, but *between*'. Perhaps I had mis-heard one of his quotes; perhaps I had hoped that he had said this. But what Godard has been quoted as saying was: 'what is alive is not what's on the screen but *what is between you and the screen.*' (Clouzot 1968: 114.) He was addressing a gathering of students at Berkeley, who had hoped that the characters in *La Chinoise* (1967) would be closer to their own version of revolutionary struggle, rather than the capricious *enfants terribles* seen playing in the sandpit of political activism. Godard was also speaking of the way in which actors are often mis-recognised as if they were 'alive' and 'made of flesh and blood' (Clouzot ibid.). Whilst the shadows on the screen are always representations and less alive than we might have hoped for, what *is* alive in the cinema is the relationship between the audience and the screen.

In *Les Carabiniers*, Ulysseys and Michel-ange are conscripted into a war. The younger Michel-ange is a naïve angel in a *very* foreign world – like all conscripts to war. He is promised the world; they give him postcards, which he sends home with stories from the new worlds he is sent to.

Jean-Luc Godard, *Les Carabiniers* (1963)
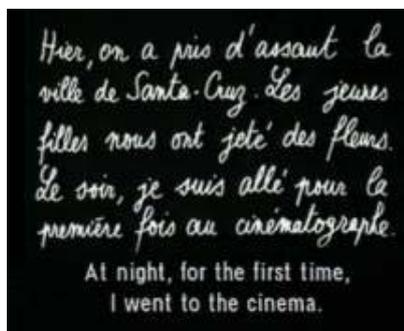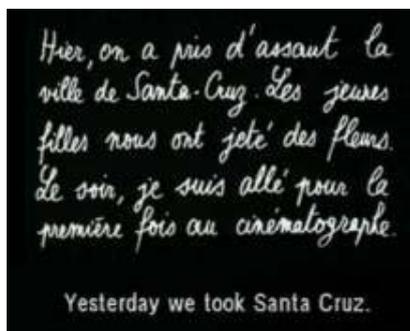
For the reflexive Godard, re-making cinema histories, this is another image of the cinema, in the cinema.

Michel-ange is then seen entering the cinema (as if) for the first time, searching with his hands for a seat in an almost empty theatre.

This scene is as much an homage to the Lumière Brothers, as it is a premonition of Godard's future audiences. When asked in 1968 about why the film had no real distribution, Godard answered: 'Neither in Europe or France. Nowhere. When it opened in Paris there were only two or three people in the theatre. The day after there was no one. So that might explain why it didn't get worldwide distribution.' (Sterritt 1988: 35)

Michel-ange is hovering in a space between the audience and the screen. The only reason we can see him is because he is illuminated by the light reflected from the screen. As he stumbles over the few members of the audience already seated, he cannot avert his eyes from the screen. (As a bumpkin becoming a spectator, how does he know that his role is to find a seat?) At no point does he look down; his moth eyes are transfixed by the flickering light and the flickering screen. In a conventional point-of-view cut, we see him looking, and then see what he is looking at.

It is a version of the Lumière Brothers' *Arrival of the Train at La Ciotat Station.* (At his first film, he is seeing a version of one of the first films ever screened.) As a 16 year old, Albert Juross is also performing in his first full-length film. He only performed in one other film, as a poacher in Luc Moullet's *Les Contrebandières* (1967). As the train approaches the station at high speed, he covers his eyes and braces himself against the inevitable.

This homage to the Lumière Brothers stretches things a little. The train is obviously not the same vintage, nor is the station. It is not in the county but in the city. This train hurtles past the station; the original stopped to let passengers alight. In Godard's version, there is the screeching sound of the train whistle; in 1895 the images were (supposedly) accompanied by a screeching audience. (Did sophisticated Parisians *really* run out screaming?)

Michel-ange is a character and an archetype: he is a representative of, and a reference to, the first county bumpkin films. (For example, Robert William Paul's *The Countryman and the Cinematograph* (1901). This film is also referred to as *The Countryman's First*

Sight of the Moving Picture Show.)

After surviving his first virtual collision, there is the release of tension that only a domestic pie-in-the-face drama can achieve.

You fascist brat, eat that bloody cream!

You fascist brat, eat that bloody cream!

Godard, here, has combined August Lumière's domestic family feeding ritual with the naughty child genre.

Michel-ange is now introduced to the idea of on-screen and off-screen space.

Through traditional point-of-view editing, we see Michel-ange craning his neck,

and then we see what he is looking at.

He ponders,

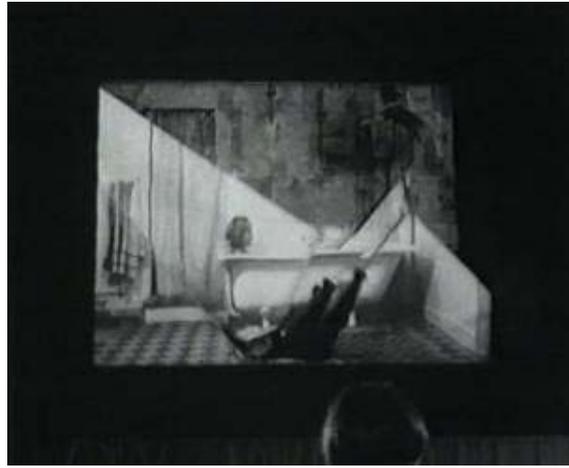and dreams of entering another space.

He stands,

approaches the screen,

and attempts to looks over the edge of the bathtub.

He then goes one step further:
trips, falls and almost fulfils his desire of entering the screen world.

When he fails and looks back at the audience from the stage,
he is caught in the projector's headlights.

*

In the cinema, the representation of the screen is always many things: a window; a rear
window; a passage, a pathway, a portal – a *way* of entering another space, or at least,
an attempt to enter another space. For Michel-ange it was not possible. For others, like
Jean Cocteau, the dream world behind the looking glass was a fascination.

Jean Cocteau, *Le Sang d'un Poète (Blood of a Poet)* (1930)

Of film and the possibilities of entering another world, Cocteau has said that he always
used film as a poetic medium for what he could not say. In Edgardo Cozarinsky's
biographical documentary, *Jean Cocteau: Autobiography of an Unknown* (1985),
Cocteau says:

'If I say "a man walks through a mirror",
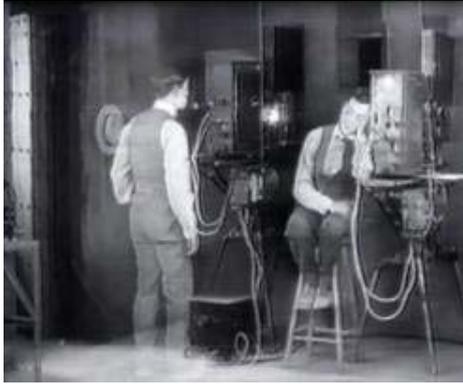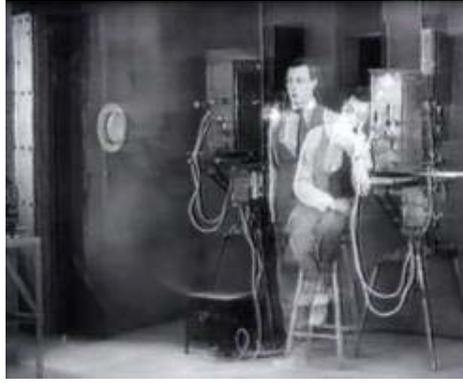you might shrug your shoulders.
But if I *show* it ….'
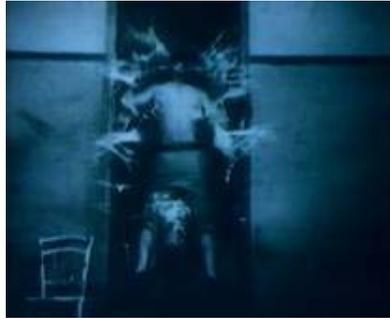
For Jean Cocteau, the mirror was very fluid;
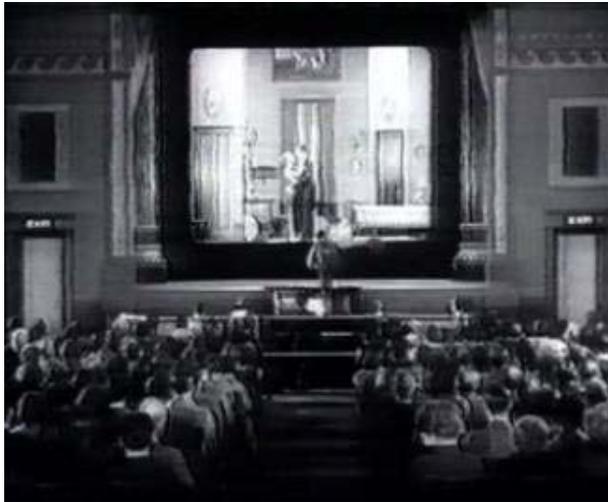it was a *very* possible portal to another world.

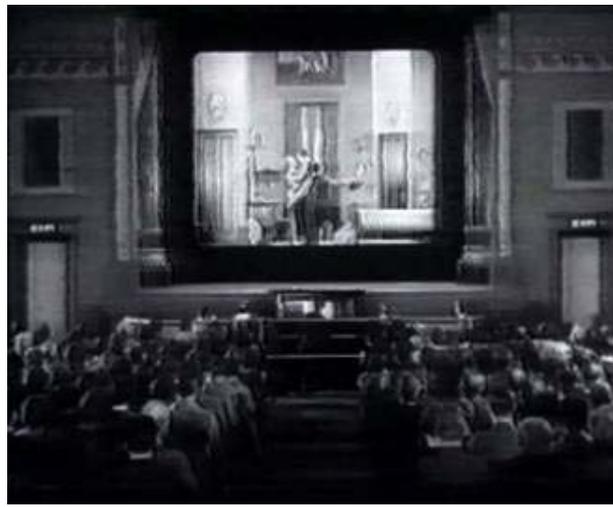In *Sherlock Jnr.* (1923) Buster Keaton is another dreamer,

dreaming of entering the world of the screen – the world of the reel.

Keaton also plays with 'the gap': with the crevices between frames, between the edits, and like Michel-ange in *Les Carabiniers* falls – between his dreamy desires and the hard realities he has to wake up to.
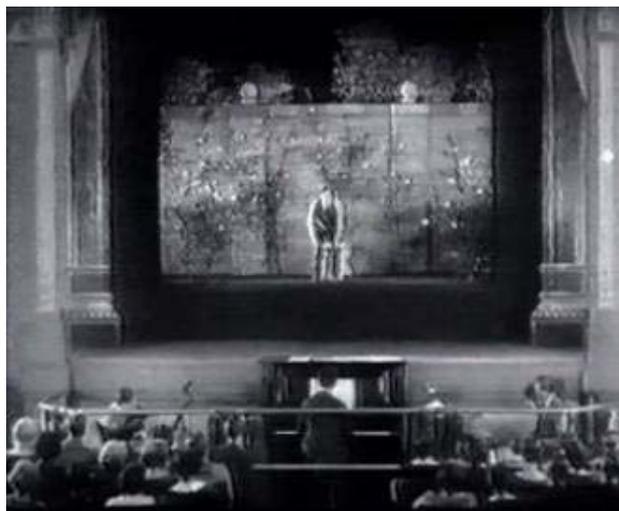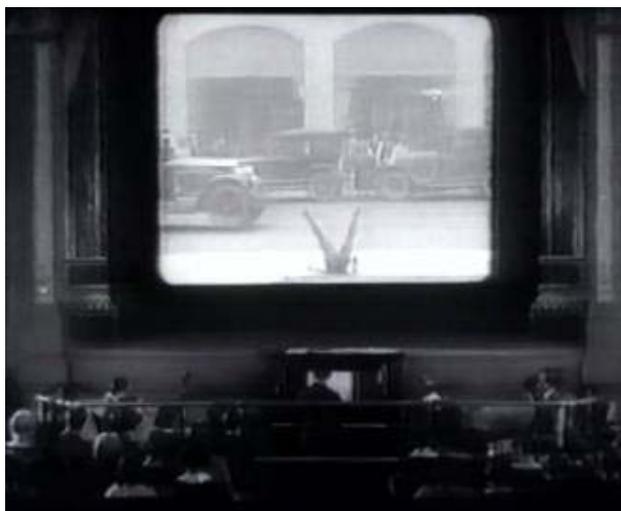
He fails and falls,

and falls again.

He literally falls between a rock

and a hard space.

Keaton falls in his projected dream(s) or dream world; Michel-ange falls in the space between the screen and his role as a spectator. Gloriously naïve and untrained in the sophisticated manners of theatrical spectatorship, Michel-ange is unrestrained and active – especially after a long day at war, where every rule of civilization has been stretched and broken – from bombs to firing squads.

How laughable is Michel-ange's attempt to interact with and
enter the alluring world of the screen?

How laughable is it for Cocteau's Artist in Wonderland
to fall into the abyss on the other side of the liquid mirror?

How laughable is it for Sherlock Jnr.
to dream of entering the world of his projections?

For these three characters from cinema history, it *is* possible to imagine, enter and
inhabit other spaces – on the screen and through the screen.

In the space between the screen, and where *we* politely sit, there is also room for *us* – to imagine, enter and inhabit other spaces. And if at times, we feel tied down and bound by convention, at least our imagination stands up (for us), and like Michel-ange, attempts to engage with the life forces on the screen.

We can interact.
We can be performative.
We can create.
Our meanings are full … 'of sound and fury' or full of hot air.
We can breathe life into our meanings.
Meanings inspire; eventually they expire.
We can exchange meanings.
We can engage in the Dialogue and the circulation of meanings:
　floating meanings;
　　bouncing to and from the audience;
　　　bouncing from and to the screen.

In the cinema, the sounds emanate from the speakers and travel as waves, bouncing from wall to wall to wall, and to and through our bodies.

In the Cinema, we can engage in the Dialogue and the circulation of meanings. These are floating meanings – bouncing to and from the audience – bouncing from and to the screen. The sounds emanate from the speakers and travel as waves, bouncing from wall to wall to wall, and to and through our bodies. The images emanate from the (film or video) projector, and travel as beams of light, illuminating the moon-dust, as they bounce back from the lenticular beaded (one time silver) screen, towards us. Meanings bounce and circulate in much the same way (as sounds and images).

With Godard's *Les Carabiniers* and the image of Michel-ange entering the cinema (as if) for the first time, dialectical meanings playfully hover in a space between the audience and the screen. In this way, and in his own way, Godard reminds us of the power of sounds and images to generate ideas, meanings and movement. By not offering narrative closure or finality, he also ensures that the meanings produced by sounds and images are in a constant oscillation. In Godard's idea of the cinema, those meanings are alive as an alternation of interactivity *between* the audience and the screen.

In the interstices between the projector and the screen, there is room for the imagination to move. There is room for the interactive and performative creation, exchange and circulation of meanings.

Sounds, images and meanings in the cinema exist neither on the screen nor in the audience, but between – in a space between the audience and the screen
– *alternating* between the audience and the screen
– in a space where meanings are in *transit.*

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