When ‘Death Ceased To Be Absolute’:

Very early cinema’s viewing experience as a sublime aesthetic experience
When ‘Death Ceased To Be Absolute’:
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As die donker my kom haal
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en in 'n kandelaar van sterre val
begrawe my hart op Klein Tambotieboom
en strooi my as oor die bosveld-horison.

—*Die Heuwels Fantasties*
FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There is no master’s thesis that is produced without any problems, delay, a student’s mental breakdown and academic crisis. Every thesis has its day, and each thesis got its own story. Fortunately, the story of this thesis is a rather positive one. I enjoyed writing most of the days, and, what is more important, felt at home in the seemingly never ending story of the sublime. Once you throw yourself into the abyss of the sublime, the subject turns at you and takes you for a ride. Yet, this positive endeavor would not be without the help of my supervisors and other teachers. There are a few pivotal moments in the story of this thesis that I would like to address on a somewhat personal note.

First, I remember the very beginnings. Before any word was written of this thesis, this research started out as an idea—or actually a problem—that returned in several classes of my master’s degree program. Yet, this was not a clear question by then, but more a feeling that there was something to be investigated, something left in the open. For the courses on art and society, and the autobiographical documentary, I was already interested in moments of change in representational technique. By then, my questions already concerned the notion of subjectivity and theory that tried to explain these moments in experience which could not be grasped by language; the moments that remained outside understanding.

Even more important for this research project was the course on the grotesque in which we tried to explain the impact of new representational techniques in terms of aesthetic experiences. Especially when reading Noël Carroll’s essay “On the Grotesque Today”,¹ which is a very important and evocative text to explain versions of modern day television and cinema, I felt that different theoretical angles could explain aesthetic experiences at a different way. My interest by then was centered on the questions what the grotesque, the uncanny and the sublime aesthetic experiences enlighten in their own method. Therefore, be it on its own way, this thesis is very much imbedded in the Film Studies program of the University of Groningen. I am grateful to all teachers, especially Miklos Kiss, Susan Aasman, Anna Rogers and Annelies van Noortwijk, who allowed me to think different. They were always there for the right advice and an encouraging debate.

Then I remember one Friday afternoon, though it could have also been a Wednesday or Thursday. Prof.dr. van den Oever approached me whether I was interested to take part in an academic exchange program. There was practically no time to think this over, but in some instances thinking stands in the way of important decisions. This was an important decision. It sent me on a plane to an estranging country on an unfamiliar continent. My time at the University of Pretoria was not only important for my personal development, but at least as crucial for my academic maturation. Although South Africa and all of its lovely people I met received me with open arms, the constant confrontation with my material existence as a white male unambiguously brought me further towards the insight that experience is not only embodied, but that it is more complex and irrational than I ever thought. This was in harmony with the precious academic input that the openhearted department at the UP granted me. Thanks to Anjo-Mari Gouws, Rory du Plessis and Jenni Lauwrens.

Following I remember the first meeting with prof.dr. Amanda du Preez. A hearty welcome in its fullest sense, professor Du Preez introduced me to the theory of the sublime, and the philosophy of embodiment. All in the most worthy, elegant and enlightening way. At some times supported by professor Danie Goosen—who I am also very thankful for every debate—Amanda helped me a lot, to say the least. Always supportive and caring, she read and corrected this thesis as second supervisor on her own account, for which I can never thank her enough: A beautiful personality, ‘my Afrikaanse ma’ and a sublime teacher.

Back in Groningen, I remember it was time to research and write. With the extensive knowledge of prof.dr. Annie van den Oever within reach, I had the privilege to construct my research in my own direction of interest. Yet, as I explained above, this research that focuses on the impact that a new representational technology had on its very first viewers should be seen as an extension of professor Van den Oever’s work on the estranging capacities of technologies. Thereby, professor Van den Oever stands both at the beginning and at the end of this master’s thesis project. Above that, I am grateful for her activities between the beginning and the end as the first supervisor of this long and comprehensive study. I would like to thank her for the numerous consults on early film and theory as well as for the intensive supervision that she provided. A trip towards prof. Van den Oever’s office was always a trip towards a structure of though in the confusion of concepts and theories.

And now, writing at the end of this thesis, this project turns from production in the present to a remembrance in the past. And in a few years, I hope I will remember writing these hundred pages. Hopefully with pride, while still reworking the mistakes and fallacies of this and other media theory. Enjoy reading.
“Wonderful!! But, my eyes! My head!! And the whizzing and whirling and twittering of nerves, and blinkings and winkings that it causes in not a few among the spectators... It is a night-mare!”

— Response to the American Biograph in *Punch*, August 6, 1898.¹

“Here, then, is life...; but it is life which you may only contemplate through a mechanical medium, life which eludes you in your daily pilgrimage. It is wondrous, even terrific; the smallest whiff of smoke goes upward in the picture; and the house falls to the ground without an echo. It is all true, and it is all false.”

— O. Winter in the *New Review*, February 1896.²

INTRODUCTION

In the 1901 short film The Countryman and the Cinematograph, directed by R.W. Paul, we see one of the first film screens embedded in the story world of the short feature. In this film, a man dressed in a long shirt and wearing a cowboy hat, stands up and jumps while he is obviously hyped up by the movement on the screen. In his naive response to the moving images he dances ‘with’ a lady and runs away from a train that approaches the camera (figures 1 and 2). R.W. Paul’s feature seemed to be a success at its audience since Edwin Porter made an almost exact remake called Uncle Josh at the Moving Pictures Show the next year. In Porter’s feature, Uncle Josh, a comical character who was already present in some of Porter’s earlier films, watches the 1896 film Parisian Dance. In his response, Uncle Josh jumps from his box and, similar to the countryman in Paul’s feature, starts to dance with the woman in the picture. In the next scene that Uncle Josh watches, he also runs away from the train coming towards the camera in the 1896 film Black Diamond Express (No. 1). The third film that Uncle Josh watches takes his naive response to the vitascope to the limit when he wants to fight the lover of what he recognizes as his daughter in an unknown film (figure 3).

Before the rapid development of early cinema studies at the 1980s and 1990s, the responses of the countryman and Uncle Josh were held to be the primary viewing experience of cinema’s earliest spectators. Films as The Countryman and Uncle Josh contributed to this myth by deploying it as a narrative structure. However, we have to recognize that the viewers of R.W. Paul’s 1901 feature and Edwin Porter’s 1902 remake were the same as the earliest spectators present at the introduction of the different cinematic techniques only four to six year earlier. What is more, the viewers of Paul and Porter’s films were not laughing at their own previous experience. On the contrary, these spectators watching the comical characters were distancing themselves from the naive involvement in which they were dragged into the illusion of the reality effect of the new moving images.
Figure 1: Still from *The Countryman and the Cinematograph* (R.W. Paul, 1901).
The countryman dances 'with' the lady on screen.

Figure 2: Still from *The Countryman and the Cinematograph* (R.W. Paul, 1901).
The countryman afraid for the approaching train.
In the mid-1980s, when working together with André Gaudreault, Tom Gunning was among the first to revalue very early cinema from the perspective of a specific viewing experience. This was an important paradigm shift in which the very early cinema from before 1906 was not seen as primitive and inadequate storytelling, but as a specific mode of presentation that drove on the attraction of the new technique. Notably, this mode of presentation has been hailed as the ‘cinema of attractions.’ Moreover, the cinema of attractions was a “gesture of presentation” in which showmen demonstrated the powers of this new invention in a sensational show. Here, the presenter directly addressed the spectators which underscored the exhibitionist character of the cinema of attractions. At the same time, these spectators came to the very early cinema exhibitions driven by a *curiositas* and an interest in novelty. Their interest was not so much in the illusion of the screen as it was in the representational supremacy of the cinematic technique. As Gunning concludes, it was “this technological means of representation that constituted the initial fascination of cinema.”

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3 Gunning’s article “The Cinema of Attractions” was crucial in this debate as was his writing with André Gaudreault. Also, Charles Musser described how very early cinema was different from a narrative medium in his essay “Rethinking Early Cinema.” These and other crucial essays from this debate are collected in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: AUP, 2006).

It is crucial to note here that the introduction of cinema came with a different viewing position and a different viewing experience than the narrative, institutionalized cinema would develop after 1908. In contrast to the voyeuristic viewer that is absorbed by the story presented on the screen, the position of the spectator in the cinema of attractions was more that of “a gawker who stands alongside, held for the moment by curiosity or amazement.” Thereby, the presentation on the screen was not a smooth and undisturbed illusion, but confrontational and aggressive encounters that at specific moments tried to shock and astonish spectators. The attraction that seduced the urban pleasure seekers of the 1890s to enter the theater halls were the cinématographe and Edison’s vitascope were presented was not a comfortable emotion but the thrill of a negative pleasure. The method by which these thrills were aroused was one of a nearly “anti-aesthetic.” A French journalist who was present at one of the Lumière brother’s projections described this as “an excitement bordering on terror.” The entertainment of shock and thrill that was present at the introduction of the cinematic technique was driven by what Tom Gunning has described as an “aesthetic of astonishment.” Here, the spectator is torn between the illusionary realism of the screen and the “unbelievable and extraordinary nature” of the cinematic apparatus. The shock and thrill shifts our attention to the cinematic technique itself as “something that astounds us by performing in a way that seemed unlikely or magical before.”

The aesthetic of astonishment works on the surface through two contradictory emotions. On the one hand there is the curiosity for the new which works as an attraction, while at the same time there is an opposite and negative emotion that prophesies the danger of distraction. This double sentiment is present at the roots of the moving image. At the specific moment when the still image was transformed into a moving image, the audience found a delight in the recognition and pure illusion of the moving image, while simultaneously that same moving image was an alienating, invisible and dead reality, or the terror of “a phantom embrace.”

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5 The period from 1895 to 1908 is set out by Tom Gunning as the years of the cinema of attractions. However, as he recognizes, this is a gradual and unstable line since films can employ both storytelling and attraction. This last point is also argued by Charles Musser in “Rethinking Early Cinema.”
Although Tom Gunning, together with other theorists writing on the very early viewing experience in cinema, has described the arrival of cinema as an uncanny experience, I propose that there is ground to reframe the aesthetic of astonishment that characterizes the introduction of the moving image as a sublime aesthetic experience. While the theories of the uncanny (das Unheimliche) and the sublime (das Erhabene) are closely related, the difference between the two is a matter of perspective and impact. As Harold Bloom has shown, Freud’s theory of the uncanny can be seen as modernity’s major contribution to the disruptive aesthetic of the sublime.\textsuperscript{11} Due to parallels between the two, the uncanny becomes the sublime’s provoking younger cousin, or “the unruly descendant of Kant’s sublime.”\textsuperscript{12} When Martin Heidegger wrote his works on modernity, he famously moved on the border between the sublime and the uncanny. According to Heidegger, the uncanny is the shock of estrangement that comes “at the bottom, [when] the ordinary is not ordinary; it is extra-ordinary, uncanny.”\textsuperscript{13} However, as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe explains, this does not necessarily correspond with the negative presentation that is so essential to the sublime. The reason for this is that the uncanny is the estrangement of that which is presented; it is the estrangement within the familiar. The sublime, on the contrary, conveys shock through the very act of presentation itself. In the sublime, the act of presentation itself, in Heidegger’s terms “Being-in-the-world” itself is threatened by “Being-unto-death.” Thereby, the sublime experience is the more violent counterpart where one is forced to think beyond oneself, or as Lacoue-Labarthe concludes, the sublime experience is the estrangement directed at the heart of being, the overwhelming realization “that there is such a thing as the being.”\textsuperscript{14} Consequently, the sublime shocks through delivering the purest of presentation emphasizing “that there is presentation.”\textsuperscript{15} and, while presentation is the activity of ‘coming-into-presence’, the sublime aesthetic experience is as Jean-Luc Nancy writes, “nothing other than the question of existence.”\textsuperscript{16}

The invention of the cinematic technique then, had a great influence on the reign of vision and experience as being in the world. Cinema was one of the popularized techniques which made the

\textsuperscript{12} David Ellison, \textit{Ethics and Aesthetics in European Modernist Art: From the Sublime to the Uncanny} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 58.
\textsuperscript{15} Lacoue-Labarthe, “Sublime Truth,” 96.
spectator actively see, which resulted in a heightened awareness of the act of seeing. Thereby it took part in modernity’s philosophical debate on the subject’s presence in the world and how he or she experienced this.\textsuperscript{17} Notably, Walter Benjamin and Sigfried Kracauer ambiguously hailed the cinema for its distracting and discontinuous experience by which it reflected modernity’s being in the world.\textsuperscript{18} Their contemporary Georg Simmel recognized “the rapid telescoping of changing images, pronounced differences within what is grasped a single glance, and the unexpectedness of violent stimuli. To the extent that the metropolis creates these psychological conditions.”\textsuperscript{19} By delivering a new method of representation, cinema in its earliest days pre-eminently questioned presentation itself, or the grounds on which the subject experiences the world. So, if we see the very early viewing experience as a thrilling and disruptive experience that not only alienated what was presented on the screen but also put presentation itself under pressure, it makes sense to approach this viewing experience from the discourse of the sublime aesthetic experience.

The discourse on the sublime then, describes an experience very much similar to the terminology of the viewing experience of very early cinema. Where Gunning distinguishes an aesthetic of astonishment as guiding principle for evoking a strong emotional response with early cinema’s audience, a similar astonishment is decisive in the sublime aesthetic experience. To Edmund Burke astonishment is the moment where “the effect of the sublime [is] in its highest degree.”\textsuperscript{20} Immanuel Kant delivers a more transcendental view on the astonishment present in the sublime, stating that this is “a shock that the mind receives from a representation and the rule given through it being incompatible with the principles already grounded in the mind, and that accordingly makes one doubt one’s own eyes, or question one’s judgement.”\textsuperscript{21} Similar to the double sentiment that was awakened when the still images started to move, the sublime experience moves between attraction and repulsion by which it

\begin{itemize}
  \item Tom Gunning describes the awareness of seeing in “‘Now You See It, Now You Don’t’: The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions,” 11. The argument that cinema took up on modernity’s discourse on the experience of a being and the world and the accessibility of movement and the present is described by multiple theorists, for instance by Mary Ann Doane in \textit{The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002) and Leo Charney in “In a Moment: Film and the Philosophy of Modernity,” in \textit{Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life}, ed. Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 279-294.
  \item Miriam Hansen has written important analysis on Benjamin, Kracauer and modernity. Her writings are collected in the recent publication \textit{Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno} (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012).
  \item Edmund Burke, \textit{A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful} (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 57.
\end{itemize}
gives way to a negative pleasure which “only arises indirectly.” What Gunning describes as “a nearly anti-aesthetic” can be explained in the sublime discourse as what Kant already defined as “a delight, looked at from the aesthetic side (in reference to sensibility) is negative.” Jean-François Lyotard, specified this on the level of aesthetics towards what he calls the “negative aesthetic” or “radical aesthetic.” Here, the object before the viewer does not please or comfort him. On the contrary, it discomforts and ontologically destabilizes the viewer by presenting something that is incomprehensible and denies to be grasped by imagination and understanding and remains formless. Still, according Burke and Kant, while the terror and uncertainty holds back pleasure for a few moments, this is followed by an all more powerful moment of relieve which evolves to a sensational delight, or, as Burke writes, the “delightful horror which is the most genuine effect and truest test of the sublime.” Kant goes one step further and describes that in this moment, the mind turns away from imagination to the more powerful domain of Reason and absolute Ideas. By going beyond the normal routine of imagination and understanding the subject gets the elevated feeling of reaching beyond itself and beyond the human limits towards the supersensible.

Although the sublime aesthetic experience as presented by Burke and Kant has been primarily reserved for objects in nature, there has been a renewed interest to apply this structure to our apprehension of technology. When in modernity “technology becomes our second nature... man’s immortal self is no longer mirrored in nature, but rather finds reflection in the vastness and magnitude of his technological designs.” Yet, where the sublime has been brought up to explain the amazement and astonishment present at the introduction of modern techniques as the railroad, electricity and skyscrapers, analysis of the introduction of the cinematic technique through the discourse of the sublime seem to be underexposed.

This research is an attempt to revisit and consequently rethink the viewing experience of very early cinema as a sublime aesthetic experience. I believe that this viewing experience, which is labeled by Gunning as an “aesthetic of astonishment,” holds a close relation to Kant’s description of the

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22 Ibid., 75-76.
23 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 84?. check
26 According to Kant “the mind can come to feel the sublimity of its own vocation even over nature,” in *Critique of Judgement*, 92.
negative pleasure involved in experiencing the sublime. Not only is it historically relevant to frame the experience of a late nineteenth century popularized novelty as a technological sublime experience, the medium’s representation of movement and time can be seen as ontologically disruptive for the viewer. I argue that the shock that is present at the introduction of the moving image can be seen as a negative pleasure. Consequently, the astonishment and attraction present in cinema’s very early viewing experience can be correlated to the “stupor” and “dumbfounded” impact of the sublime aesthetic experience.29

This main argument is constructed alongside three chapters that each provides a smaller argument. The first chapter argues that it is historically correct to approach the impact of the cinematic technique at its spectators as a (technological) sublime aesthetic experience. The cinématographe and the vitascope were introduced as novelties in a specific time and context of the late nineteenth century western modern world. This was an era when the technological sublime reigned supreme.30 Modern techniques in which humanity surpassed its own limitations were popularized and celebrated. A strong enthusiasm for technology and an impatience for innovations were marks of a period in which the technological sublime became mankind’s new manifest destiny. It is in this context that demonstrations that presented the cinematic techniques could flourish as attractions that were characteristic for the modern experience. As these spectators were with the words of Yuri Tsivian “medium-sensitive viewers,” these audiences were sensitive to the estranging capacities of the medium itself.31 In the specific context of the late nineteenth century these spectators were sensitized to feel the at that time’s dominant emotion of the technological sublime.

The second chapter focuses on the specific moment when the image changed from stillness to motion. In the aesthetic of astonishment this is an essential moment. As Gunning in a later text explores, movement arouses “bodily sensations” and “a nearly magical sense of presence.” This is an irrational power of cinema that “we feel in our guts or throughout our bodies.”32 As Laura Mulvey explores in her book Death 24x a Second, the transition from stillness to movement is a moment that moves between life and death. At the instant of movement, the cinematic technique is the central issue by which it unveils that we are watching only a mere illusion of moving and animate bodies though we recognize it

29 Jean-François Lyotard follows Kant when he describes “stupor” and “dumbfounded” as the impact of the sublime, in Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime, 69.
as life-like. Moving in what Lyotard calls “the zone between life and death” the sublime “tries to present the fact that there is something unrepresentable.”33 The shock of movement in cinema, then, moves us between the life-ness of movement and the death of stillness; between our own carnal body and our encompassing mind. In so doing, the shock of movement interpreted as a sublime aesthetic experience short-circuits representation and backfires at presentation itself. Subsequently, it is the subject’s presence which comes into question in this experience.

The third chapter deals with the disruptive impact of time with the introduction of the cinematic technique. Again, the starting point is Tom Gunning who describes that the temporal aspect of the attraction is characterized by “a sudden burst of presence” and the promise of “a pure present tense.”34 Thereby the viewing position that comes with the introduction of cinema drives on its potential of presenting an immediate presence to the viewer. In her book The Emergence of Cinematic Time, Mary Ann Doane writes how early cinema was ascribed an almost magical power to capture the instant of time itself. Instability at the side of the viewer or subject was caused by the “fascination with an impossible instantaneity [which] is still with us.”35 While we as human beings are limited to living in the flow of time, cinema was seen as the superhuman technique which promised to access the present. Although the instant is impossible to represent, luring towards that terrible moment interrupts the natural flow of time.36 Thereby, it confronts the viewer with time itself, and in doing so, with existence itself. This confrontation with the limit whispers that there is a beyond the limit. According to Jean-Luc Nancy and Lyotard, this is a sublime moment, in which we feel “that presentation takes place.”37

The common idea shared between these three chapters is that all three deal with the distraction of cinema that moves from a representation (the illusion on the screen) towards presentation and presence. Critics may claim here that the influence of cinema is overstated, but I am convinced that the introduction of a visual culture and in specific moving images should not be underestimated. As Jonathan Crary has shown, from the nineteenth century onwards, techniques of vision abstracted human vision from the senses by which was crucial for the modern subject.38 Moreover, the influence of

34 Gunning, “‘Now You See It, Now You Don’t,’” 6-7.
35 Mary Ann Doane, The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 106.
36 See Leo Charney in “In a Moment: Film and the Philosophy of Modernity,” 279-294.
representational technologies to the realm of presentation has been studied by Paul Virilio. Not only does he describe the acceleration of time and perception through techniques of modernity, in his writings he ascribes to the cinematic technique of the moving image an impact on our general processes of seeing and presentation. By moving from re-presentation to presentation, the artificial or the technological intervenes on the level of the subject’s presence. A hundred and fifteen years after the introduction of the cinematic technique, this is recognized by film theorists as well as neuroscientists. At the moment of introduction of this new representational technique the disturbing impact of this new medium was quickly recognized by presenters who created an attraction based on the astonishing aesthetic experience. My aim is imbed the astonishing experience present at the earliest cinema viewings at the level of presentation and presence by reading this in terms of the sublime aesthetic experience. In the first chapter I argue that this is historically correct, while the second and third chapter supply an in depth argument on how this estrangement at the level of presence took place.

The starting point of this essay is, as I have outlined above, the writings of Tom Gunning who described in detail the viewing position of very early cinema. Though revolutionary for film theory at the time, I take his writings as a starting point while attempting to reframe his notions into the current debate on presence in representational techniques. At first instance, my reading of the sublime departs from the classical works of Burke and Kant. However, I hold that Lyotard’s studies into the radical aesthetics and Nancy’s study into the concepts of presentation in the sublime of Burke and Kant are valuable for this research.

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But it’s a wonder really
How the constant flood of life
O’er the screen keeps moving freely
Full of action- stir and strife.

– Anonymous poem in *The British Journal of Photography*, December 1896\(^1\)

CHAPTER ONE:

THE INTRODUCTION OF THE CINEMATIC TECHNIQUE IN TIMES OF THE TECHNOLOGICAL SUBLIME

The invention of the cinematic technique was not an isolated incident. It emerged from a continuous line of previous inventions that all promised the newest and most life-like representation of reality. As many early accounts already advertised, the then called cinematograph was the latest in the line of representational attractions preceded by photography, the magic lantern, Eadweard Muybridge’s zoopraxiscope and Thomas Edison’s kinetoscope. As The Times wrote in early 1896, “the cinématographe, which is the invention of MM. A. and L. Lumière, is a contrivance belonging to the same family as Edison’s kinetoscope and the old “Wheel of Life’, but in a rather higher state of development.” At the end of that same year, The British Journal of Photography proclaimed that the Lumière brothers won the first place in the “living picture craze.”

So, as Charles Musser argues, we should not treat the introduction of cinema as an isolated event but as a novelty that came up from a specific context. Time wise, this context is marked as a period in which a strain of novelties was introduced to the big audience. Thereby, the cinematograph and its American equivalent the vitascope had to compete with other novelties and innovations often operating on the same city streets. In many instances, scientific innovations as the telephone and the X-ray were adjusted for the theatre to become a public spectacle. This specific moment of introduction,

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2 For an overview of preceding representational technologies see Charles Musser’s chapter “Toward a History of Screen Practice,” in The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907 (New York: Scribner’s, 1990), 15-54.
4 The chapter “Toward a History of Screen Practice” tells that cinema does not occur from out of nowhere, but from the specific context of representational inventions and tricks. See Musser, The Emergence of Cinema15-54.
or the “novelty period”, was a crucial time for the new technique. In the rapid circuit of novelties, the real value of ‘newness’ lasted only for one or two years. It is at this first moment of the audience’s early confrontation with cinema that the novelty of the cinematic technique aroused astonishment at the spectator’s side.

Cinema then, both the vitascope as well as the cinématographe, occurred as an astonishing novelty in a period that was characterized by a stream of popularized inventions. The spirit of this invention was somewhat ‘in the air’ when R.W. Paul in England and Max Skladanowsky in Germany came up with similar techniques in the same months. Moreover, the years in which the cinematic technique was introduced, from 1895 to 1897, can be placed in the larger context of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. In this time span of 150 years, the value of technological inventions expanded from its usability toward publicly popularized celebrations of modernity and humanity’s progress. While technology became humanity’s new ‘Manifest Destiny’, new innovations were rapidly popularized and showcased for an audience that could not get enough of these attractions. In doing so, the new technology was distinguished as humanity’s next triumph over nature and bodily limits. In this chapter, I will argue that we should situate the introduction of cinema in the context of sublime experiences with technology. As David Nye argues, late nineteenth and early twentieth century inventions were surrounded by an aura of superhuman powers; as mankind reaching beyond its limitations. Thereby, the confrontations with new inventions were advertised and popularized as sublime experiences. Therefore, I would argue that it is historically correct to interpret the very early cinema’s viewing experience as described by Tom Gunning as a sublime aesthetic experience. The central argument in this chapter is a rather historical one. My interest here is not how the sublime is invoked but that the sublime aesthetic experience is aroused in the specific context of late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as part of modernity and its urbanization. In this sense, to specify in the terms of Peter de Bolla, my argument treats the introduction of the cinematic technique as part of the discourse of the sublime. Thereby it functions in relation to other discourses of meaning making, for example on technology and modernity, in politics, and in the arts or in theology. This allows us to identify the sublime aesthetic experience within a historical context through which it verifies to be the right angle to ‘read’ or frame the introduction of the cinematic technique.

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I will begin my argument by sketching an outline of the context from which the cinematic techniques arose. As David Nye and Thomas Hughes—both historians working on the cultural impact of technology—describe, this was an era of technological enthusiasm in which the discourse of the sublime was drawn from nature towards man-made technological objects. Furthermore, I will situate the invention and introduction of the cinematic technique in this context by drawing upon the writings of Charles Musser and Tom Gunning, as they are the principal authors who re-interpreted very early cinema not as a primitive and inadequate story-telling medium but as a specific attraction. Subsequently, I will arrive at the conclusion in which Yuri Tsivian’s concept of “medium-sensitivity” is introduced to elucidate how the viewer of the late nineteenth century was culturally sensitized to feel the disturbing impact of this new technique of representation. In the specific context of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century we interpret this impact as a technological sublime experience.

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY AS A TIME OF THE MODERN SUBLIME

The cinematic technique came up at the end of a century that was overflown with inventions, innovations, new techniques and progress. The nineteenth century started out with a Romantic sublime in which nature was seen as God’s second scripture. Mankind could understand God, and move closer towards him, by diligently watching, feeling and understanding nature. Still, since God is almighty, he has a magnitude and a power which was believed to be too great to conceive. As the mirror of the divine power, nature was thought to have sublime spots which were similarly unconceivable. In one of the first descriptions of nature in this manner, Thomas Jefferson famously begins to describe the Natural Bridge in Virginia by measurements. However, it is as if he feels he is missing the power and the impact the bridge is having on him in his own description. He then introduces his feelings from viewing the bridge writing about a “painful sensation” that is followed by a relief. Moreover, he categorizes this emotional state as a sublime experience, writing that,

It is impossible for the emotions, arising from the sublime, to be felt beyond what they are here; so beautiful an arch, so elevated, so light, and springing, as it were, upon to heaven, the rapture of the Spectator is really indescribable!  

Jefferson, writing twenty years after Edmund Burke’s publication on the sublime and the beautiful, must have been familiar with the discourse on the sublime. The language of the sublime gained major popularity in Romanticism and Transcendentalism. Yet, for the leading figure of this movement, Ralph Waldo Emerson, the sublime as described by Immanuel Kant was more inspirational than the description that Edmund Burke provided in his *Philosophical Enquiry*. For Emerson the sublime in nature was not only a painful delight but more the source and a departure to transcendence and elevation. Through the sublime, the human can step across its own boundaries, using his own “unconscious powers,” toward a unity of the self and the universe. Emerson writes that in the New World, where there is both nature and progress, “I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.”

In contrast to contemporary environmentalism, the natural sublime that Jefferson and Emerson experienced did not necessarily contradict the progression of humanity cultivating the landscape and nature’s powers. Although the typical Romantic encounter with nature was a solitary experience with an untouched countryside, civilization and progress gradually ran into the frame as is literally the case with Jasper Francis Cropsey’s painting of the Starrucca Viaduct in Pennsylvania (figure 4). As David Nye explores in his study on the American technological sublime,

The sublime was inseparable from a peculiar double action of the imagination by which the land was appropriated as a natural symbol of the nation while, at the same time, it was being transformed into a man-made landscape. One appeal of the technological sublime in America was that it conflated the preservation and transformation of the natural world.

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Figure 4: Jasper Francis Cropsey, *Starrucca Viaduct, Pennsylvania*, (1865).

Figure 5: John Gast, *American Progress*, (circa 1872).
In this perception, the triumph over nature was equally celebrated as nature itself. Thereby, the viaduct and the railroad in Cropsey’s painting stand on equal level to the sublime valley that it crosses over.¹⁴ As Donald Pease states, “in the ideological American rendition, the sublime was not man’s but Nature’s discourse . . . Some order beyond Nature seemed to command man to get in touch with Nature’s higher will and to obey the implicit command to move beyond Nature.”¹⁵ In this manner, man-made technologies became part of the same sublime that was previously experienced in nature. Moreover, the overcoming of nature by sublime technologies became modernity’s Manifest Destiny, as is famously portrayed in the popular painting American Progress by John Gast (figure 5).

Inventions and large scale manufactures were cheered in the language of the sublime. In the first half of the nineteenth century the western world had welcomed the railroad. To the people, it had a divine power to reduce distance and unite nations.¹⁶ This was a machine that exceeded human powers and redefined the relationship that man had with nature. The train disrupted the unity of man and nature while “technology stands triumphant in the wilderness.”¹⁷ In specific, it changed ideas on movement, motion and time (as I will explain further in chapter three). The railroad was the starting point of many exultant inventions that radically altered humanity’s position in relation to nature. Supreme man-made objects as bridges and skyscrapers were welcomed with the same language of the sublime. The enthusiasm for technology reached its peak in the second half of the nineteenth century when urban life and industrialism intensely accelerated.¹⁸ In July 1896, at the same time when Edison’s vitascope as well as the cinématographe were running in New York theatres, Edward W. Byrn, an author for the Scientific American, celebrated the preceding fifty years as:

an epoch of invention and progress unique in the history of the world . . . It had been a gigantic tidal wave of human ingenuity and resource, so stupendous in its magnitude, so complex in its diversity, so profound in its thought, so fruitful in its wealth, so beneficent in

¹⁴ In Cropsey’s painting “the railway enters into a modern dialectic with the natural scenery” as described by Andrew Wilton and Tim Barringer in American Sublime: Landscape Painting in the United States 1820-1880 (London: Tate, 2002), 140-141.
¹⁷ Ibid., 77.
its results, that the mind is strained and embarrassed in its effort to expand to a full appreciation of it.\textsuperscript{19}

In the fifty years the author was writing about, he had witnessed radical changes in urban life varying from the building of skyscrapers and bridges to the enlightening of these cityscapes by electricity while the transport through these cities accelerated as a result of cable cars and other rapid transit. Thereby, technology and the technological sublime were pre-eminently part of the modern experience. The view that holds that technological innovation forms “the truly distinctive feature of modernity” has been famously hold up by Martin Heidegger.\textsuperscript{20} As the German philosopher writes, technology stands for the expansion of the ratio for humans to control the world. In modern society this rationalization becomes inescapable. However, the danger is that this technological supremacy which surpasses human power by far “threatens to slip from human control.”\textsuperscript{21} Heidegger echoes the fear that these powerful human inventions will live their own life without restriction.

So within modernity, technological inventions are at once vivaciously celebrated while feared with terror at the same time. This is a dual logic that resonates Burke’s “awesome terror” and Kant’s “negative pleasure” present in the sublime aesthetic experience. Already with the railroads there was an opposition stating that the power and the speed of the locomotive would drive people insane.\textsuperscript{22} Similar resistance was faced with the introduction of skyscrapers and electricity. While these innovations extended human control to previous undreamed-of territory, it also directed individuals to their bodily insignificance and inabilities.\textsuperscript{23} To Immanuel Kant, this contradiction is at the heart of the sublime when he writes on the negative delight in this experience:

\begin{quote}
In this way it gains an extension and a might greater than that which it sacrifices. But the ground of this is hidden from it, and in its place it \textit{feels} the sacrifice or deprivation, as well as its cause, to which it is subjected. The \textit{astonishment} amounting almost to terror, the horror and sacred awe, that seizes us when gazing upon the prospect of mountains ascending to heaven, deep ravines and torrents raging there.\textsuperscript{24}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{22} Nye, \textit{The American Technological Sublime}, 54.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 285.
So, in the sublime aesthetic experience we are confronted with our bodily limitations that subject us to the greatness of the sublime object, while at the same time our rational being transcends these restrictions through ratio to an unforeseen level of presence. This contradictory emotion of the sublime made new technologies hard to grasp and shocking for the spectator. Framing and understanding all these new inventions was problematic for the late nineteenth century spectator. Moreover, as Leo Charney summarizes the writings of Walter Pater, Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, and Jean Epstein, “the post-1870 transformations of modernity generated a perceptual climate of overstimulation, distraction, and sensation.” However, this illogicality of negative pleasure did not prevent people from new stimuli through modern technologies. On the contrary, in modernity it is what Helga Nowotny calls a “quest for innovation” itself—a mission characterized by an attraction and distraction of the new—which becomes the main narrative. Instead of a prediction of what will happen in the future we are confined to the unstable and sole prophecy that some form of progress will take place.

Thus, although technological innovations destabilized their audiences, their arrival was widely praised. Moreover, the distracting impact of new technologies was exploited to create a sensation that would last with the viewer. Thereby characteristics of modernity were set in action to establish “popular sensationalism.” Through the disproportionate technological enthusiasm of the late nineteenth century the sublime aesthetic experience became an occasion for a popular attraction. The rise of tourism brought people closer to the natural sublime while at the same time the technological sublime was brought to the general public with the rise of (quasi-)scientific theatre shows, exhibitions, and popular world fairs.

THE INTRODUCTION OF THE CINEMATIC TECHNIQUE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE MODERN SUBLIME

As stated at the opening of this chapter, the cinematic technique by means of Edison’s vitascope and the cinématographe were introduced as an attraction in the realm of popular scientific theatre shows. The


vitascope premiered on April 23rd, 1896 at the Koster & Bial Music Hall in New York while later that year it spread to many of America’s major cities in the following theatrical season. The introduction of this Edison-licensed invention was predominantly aimed toward public attention and commercial exploitation. Previously in France, the cinématographe was introduced in a more combinatory realm of public and scientific interest. While the first screenings were organized for professionals and people interested in technology at the Society for the Encouragement of National Industry, within a year the Lumière brothers arranged public screenings throughout Europe, reaching England in February 1896 and the United States four months later. Similar to the vitascope, the cinématographe followed a path through city theatres. The Lumière brothers’ invention premiered in a similar New York theatre named Keith’s Union Square Theater, a place that mainly programmed vaudeville shows. The presentations of the cinematic techniques were most of the time programmed for a few weeks to a few months before pursuing its way to the next city while the following novelty set up its equipment on stage. At amusement parks and some entertainment streets as at Coney Island, film became a continuous attraction.

At the same time there was also an interest in the cinematic techniques at the largest and most prestigious stages where technological novelties were presented. In the second half of the nineteenth century, in the realm of technological enthusiasm, progress and modernity, the world’s fairs became the platform where the man-made sublime was ultimately exploited. Starting from 1890, these expositions “displayed cinematic and protocinematic devices, both as examples of new technologies and as attractions for visitors.” When it was still in a state of development, Edison’s secretary arranged an exhibition site at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago to commercially introduce the kinetoscope. A page in the magazine The Phonogram announced Edison’s next invention at the Columbian Exposition as an almost supernatural creation, stating that,

When it stands forth before the world, [the kinetoscope] will make such gigantic strides as were never previously witnessed. At the opening of the Columbian Exposition there will appear a dual instrument, two steeds of almost infinite capacity.

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28 Musser, Before the Nickelodeon, 60.
29 Musser, The Emergence of Cinema, 111.
30 Ibid., 135-137.
31 Ibid.
33 Nye, The American Technological Sublime, 199.
in their special powers, whose performances it will tax the human eye and ear to follow.\textsuperscript{35}

It must have been a huge disappointment for the visitors not to see the actual kinetoscope at the exhibition since Edison thought the prototype too valuable to send.\textsuperscript{36} Nevertheless, it showed that the moving pictures—as many of Edison’s inventions—were thought to be on the right stage at the Chicago Fair, a World Exhibition that specifically presented the “city of the future” with a focus on urbanization and modernity.\textsuperscript{37} In short, the moving images had an early place in this “sublime version of America.”\textsuperscript{38}

The Lumière brothers had to wait a few years before their cinématographe was showcased at the world fair. At the Paris Universal Exposition in 1900, the “Lumière Grand Cinématographe” was presented on massive screen that measured twenty-one by sixteen meters (figure 6).\textsuperscript{39} There it attracted 1.4 million spectators over the six months at the world fair.\textsuperscript{40} According to Emmanuelle Toulet, the Lumière brothers’ invention was successful in drawing the attention of a large audience that enjoyed its attraction. The spectators celebrated the size of the projection and the variety of subjects showed. However, in its revolutionary technique the cinématographe did not stand alone but was part of a larger movement of visual attractions that celebrated modernity and technology.\textsuperscript{41} Thereby it heralded an emerging visual culture which was closely linked to the distraction of the city streets, as later formulated by Benjamin and Kracauer. This function of film as the visual attraction of modernity was repeated at the world fair in St. Louis, 1904.\textsuperscript{42}

The introduction of cinematic techniques as the cinématographe and the vitascope were especially advertised as the newest invention that brought a new sensation (figure 7). As part of the late nineteenth century social atmosphere of technological enthusiasm the people behind the technological innovation were seen as enchanted creators who could generate and control the supernatural powers of

\textsuperscript{35} Article published in Musser, \textit{The Emergence of Cinema}, 74.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 75.
\textsuperscript{37} Nye, \textit{The American Technological Sublime}, 98 and 147-149.
\textsuperscript{39} Tom Gunning, “The world as object lesson: Cinema audiences, visual culture and the St. Louis world’s fair, 1904,” \textit{Film History} 6, (1994): 422.
\textsuperscript{40} Emmanuelle Toulet, “Le cinéma a l’Exposition universelle de 1900,” \textit{Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine} 33, 2 (April 1986): 188.
\textsuperscript{41} Toulet, “Le cinéma a l’Exposition universelle de 1900,” 207-208. Thereby the grand cinématographe was not thought to be the most spectacular attraction at the Paris world fair. For instance ‘la Salle des illusions (the room of illusions)’ surpassed the cinématographe in number of visitors by more than a million.
\textsuperscript{42} Gunning, “The world as object lesson,” 423.
Figure 6: The "Lumière grand cinématographe" at the 1900 Paris Universal Exposition.

Figure 7: Advertisement for “Edison’s greatest marvel – the Vitascope,” 1896. The text box includes a quote from the New York Herald, “Wonderful is the Vitascope. Pictures life size and full of color. Makes a thrilling show.”
the invention. This craze for the inventor was particularly present in American society, since the idea of progress through technology had a stronger nationalist sentiment here than in other western countries. As Gunning writes on the American reception of the moving images, “[F]or many journalists the invention of motion pictures was a source of national pride, since the machines that they first saw were either American inventions or direct offspring, so they believed, of the kinetoscope invented by Thomas Edison...”

Inventors received recognition for their work in newspapers and gained great fame with the audience. Nikola Tesla for instance, working on electromagnetism in a mysterious laboratory outside New York, was nicknamed “the magician.” More than any other inventor at his time, Thomas Edison enjoyed an aura of genius. As “the Wizard of Menlo Park” the popular audience pictured him working in solitude, away from the busy city, “when the last rays of the evening sun shrouded the laboratory in a mysterious glow, as a Faustian figure brewing exotic substances and mastering powerful forces.” At the presentations of his inventions, he excitedly played the role of wizard who directed powers that were ungraspable for normal people. However, while his work on a projecting device remained unsuccessful, he turned to an invention by Francis Jenkins and Thomas Armat. In a collaborative project the Edison Company decided to work with Armat’s technique of the “Phantoscope” and to bring it to the audience as Edison’s Vitascope. The businessman Norman Raff, who exploited the vitascope, wrote that “in order to secure the largest profit in the shortest time, it is necessary that we attach Mr. Edison’s name in some prominent capacity to this machine.” Although, in the official reading, Armat and Raff wanted “to keep with the actual truth,” the vitascope was immediately received and celebrated as Edison’s own invention and “the ingenious inventor’s latest toy.” Moreover, as Charles Musser writes on the first vitascope projection, Edison did more than stick his name to the machine: “The ‘Wizard’ not only attended but played the role of inventor assigned to him... Like the hypnotist Svengali in Trilby, the inventor seemed to command every move and gesture produced by the dancing girls on the screen.

The role of the presenter was of major significance with the first projections. Screenings where the creator himself presented the technique to the audience must have reinforced the astonishment

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43 As David E. Nye argues, both technological progress as well as the sublime experience become part of a patriotic myth in the U.S., See The American Technological Sublime, 24-26.
45 Hughes, American Genesis, 13-53.
46 Ibid., 29.
47 As quoted in Musser, Before the Nickelodeon, 58.
48 The New York Times’ response as quoted in Musser, Before the Nickelodeon, 60.
49 Musser, Before the Nickelodeon, 60.
with the audience because of the cult of the inventor. After the inventor was gone, his place was filled in by the theatre presenter. As the British filmmaker George Pearson recollects the presenter at his first cinema experience, “[H]is peroration was magnificent... “You’ve seen pictures of people in books, all frozen stiff... you’ve never seen pictures with people coming alive, moving about like you and me.”  Just as Edison did at his presentation, the showman in the theatre did not disguise the estrangement of the cinematic technique. On the contrary, he pointed to the thrilling, spectacular and monstrous nature of the attraction. As the showman presented an image which began with a still frame and started to move, which was a dominant strategy at the earliest exhibitions organized by the Lumière brothers, it was not the naturalness of the motion pictures that was exploited but the unnaturalness and artificiality of the technique.

Accentuating the artificiality of the new technique—as set apart from the natural world—emphasized the cinematic techniques position as another technological sublime invention. Thereby, the force of the cinematic apparatus itself was presented to the viewer above the mere illusion of reality on the screen. Behind this miracle of technology was the human ratio that once again surpassed the limits of nature. This supreme human ratio, often in the form of the inventor(s), had invented a technology that aroused a new sensation. The public enthusiasm for this new invention and the astonishment that it aroused at its spectators testifies that the cinematic technology at the time of its earliest introduction was heralded as the next chapter in modernity’s technological sublime narrative. The audiences were well aware to recognize the cinematic technique as a bewildering new invention and subsequently did not hesitate to be astonished by it.

THE MEDIUM-SENSITIVE VIEWER WITHIN THE MODERN SUBLIME

As many theorists agree, cinema emerged in a specific historical context. In this manner, the stability of the screen as we know it nowadays is historical specific. This allows us to investigate the introduction of the moving image as the unstable start of a modern visual screen practice. The viewer at the end of

52 See Tsivian, Early Cinema in Russia and its cultural reception, 136.
the nineteenth century had a radically different experience than today’s filmgoer has. As Yuri Tsivian convincingly argues, “going to the cinema in those years always had something of the same sense of adventure that flying has for us.”53 Thereby the spectator’s experience was influenced by his ideas and involvement in technology and modern life. As specific for these years, the spectator in western modern society was caught between a strong technological enthusiasm and a rising visual curiosity. Consequently, the very early cinema spectator was conscious of the screen and the apparatus that created the illusion of reality. Above all, the viewer of the earliest projection was what Tsivian describes a “medium-sensitive viewer.”54 This spectator was not passively immersed in the illusion projected on the screen but was conscious of the apparatus and the medium that created the illusion. This kind of technological awareness was considered as a form of cultural sophistication that belonged to the urban thrill-seeker.55 As R.W. Paul’s The Countryman’s First Sight of the Animated Pictures (1901) and Edwin Porter’s Uncle Josh at the Moving-Picture Show (1902) portray, only yokels and louds from the countryside would completely surrender to the illusion. The modern man, on the contrary, was more impressed by the technique behind the illusion and was thereby more interested in the medium itself.

The medium-sensitive viewers were astonished by the capabilities of the apparatus itself. They were astounded by an “unbelievable visual transformation occurring before their eyes.”56 Moreover, the plain fact that this machine could portray something which was recorded at a different time and place could already gave way to an aesthetic experience.57 The whole presentation of the technique was aimed to evoke a maximum sensation from this attraction. The novelty of the attraction was crucial in this experience. As Gunning distinguishes, this runs against the pleasure of a beautiful aesthetic experience. He explains,

By tapping into a visual curiosity and desire for novelty, attractions draw upon what Augustine called [...] curiositas in his catalogue of ‘the lust for the eyes.’ In contrast to visual voluptas (pleasure), curiositas avoids the beautiful and goes for the exact opposite ‘simply because of the lust to find out and to know.’58

Gunning’s analysis gives way to indicate the aesthetic experience of the audience as a different experience than a beautiful aesthetic experience. Rather, the experience that the early cinematic

55 Musser, The Emergence of Cinema, 19.
57 Tsivian, Early Cinema in Russia and its cultural reception, 159.
technique aroused was “a nearly (...) anti-aesthetic” that he famously distinguishes as an “aesthetic of astonishment.” The difference that Gunning makes between the pleasurable aesthetic experience that comes with the beautiful and the opposite astonishing or almost anti-aesthetic that comes with the introduction of the cinematic technique follows closely Immanuel Kant’s difference between the beautiful and the sublime. In Kant’s perspective, the beautiful is that which pleases immediately since it recognizes form in the object. Thereby, beauty brings with it a concept of understanding. As a result, the aesthetic judgement of the beautiful leaves the mind “in restful contemplation.” In the sublime aesthetic experience, on the contrary, the mind is “set in motion”. This motion is, as Kant explains, a shuddering between repulsion or refutation and attraction that feels as an on-going roundabout of imagination “like an abyss in which it [the subject] fears to lose itself.” Or, as Kant writes in another passage, “the mind is not simply attracted by the object, but is also alternately repelled thereby, the delight in the sublime does not so much involve positive pleasure as admiration or respect, i.e. merits the name of a negative pleasure.”

In the sublime this double movement is characterized by the negativity and uncertainty that comes with the loss of form and understanding while at the same time there is the pleasure in recognizing that there is something more to the senses which reaches beyond form, beyond the limit, and toward the “absolutely great”. As opposite of the pleasure that beautiful arouses, this double movement between the destabilizing unsettlement while still attracted to experience more from the object is what binds Gunning’s aesthetic of astonishment to the sublime aesthetic experience.

Moreover, the double movement of negative pleasure was very much part of the nineteenth century perception of new technological inventions. As David Nye observes, the basic structure of the sublime that “disrupts ordinary perception and astonishes the senses, forcing the observer to grapple mentally with its immensity and power,” was “culturally inflected” to become a widespread experience that came with witnessing new technologies. Thereby, the aesthetic of astonishment that Gunning designates at the introduction of the cinematic technique can righteously be situated in this discourse of the technological sublime that was popularized at the nineteenth century.

Although I will explain in the following chapters in more detail how the sublime aesthetic experience was precisely aroused with the introduction of the new cinematic technique, we can already indicate that the astonishing impact of the moving image was due to an emotion that differed drastically

60 Kant, Critique of Judgement, 88. Original emphasis.
61 Ibid., 76.
62 Nye, American Technological Sublime, 15-16.
from the “restful contemplation” of the beautiful experience. Rather, as Gunning outlines, this aesthetic drives upon a shock-and-thrill principle. On the one hand there is the amazing quality of the new medium, while at the same time a confrontation with this technique is shocking. The earliest writings on cinema indicate that there is terror and fear involved in the experience while, simultaneously, the new technology is received with excitement. Tsivian adds that this terror at the side of the viewer is not the death-fear of a truly naive spectator, as someone who is for the first time ever confronted with representational technology. Rather similar to the cultural shaping of the technological sublime, the fear that the early cinema spectator experienced can be seen as a “sophisticated, ‘cultural’ kind of Angst prepared and mediated by rich layers of pre-cinematic culture.”

Moreover, within the larger context of the modern technological sublime in which the introduction of cinema took place we can distinguish the fear of the early spectators as integral part of this sentiment where new technologies came with the contradictory feeling of cheerful splendidness while at the same time terror emerged that pointed towards the insignificance and mortality of the human body.

In both the technological sublime experience as well as the astonishing experience of the very early cinematic technique, the spectator was culturally ‘prepared’ for a strong and rapturous multiple layered experience that contained both fear and pleasure. Therefore, we can specify the medium-sensitive viewer of the late nineteenth century as a viewer who was sensitive to the specific aesthetic experience of the modern technological sublime. The spectator was living in a rapid changing world in which technologies changed his relationship to time and movement. This was the fundamental condition that the discourse around the technological sublime provided. Moreover, these technologies altered the union between humanity and nature. In short, this whole experience of modernity prepared the viewer to be truly astonished by new technologies and feel the double movement of the sublime aesthetic experience. In short, the context of the late nineteenth century sensitized the viewer to feel the cinematic technique—as the next episode in the on-going chain of stunning innovations—as a sublime aesthetic experience.

When we are fully aware of the context from which cinema aroused, we can interpret the “aesthetic of astonishment” as a sublime aesthetic experience. The shock and awe strategy that the early exhibitions pursued give evidence that the inventors and presenters of the newly invented cinématographe and vitascope actively tried to tap into the aesthetic experience of the sublime that was already popularized. The dazzling experience that this new stimulus offered and the ontological instability it awakened when projecting grey shadows caught between life and death, are all traces of

the restless movement that characterizes the sublime.\textsuperscript{64} Moreover, the medium-sensitive viewer, who was skilled in the sublime aesthetic experience, has not only problems with understanding the new technique; he feels it “throughout his body and in his guts.”\textsuperscript{65}

\textbf{CONCLUSION}

In this chapter I have tried to draw the outlines of the context wherein the introduction of film occurred. As a specific moment in time, this era was characterized by technological enthusiasm in which the sublime aesthetic experience was relocated from nature to man-made technology and thereby became a popularized attraction. At the same time, these new technologies and innovations indicate the era of modernity at the late nineteenth century when urban life was rapidly changing. In the modern city, time and movement were accelerated and concentrated. This was a time of distraction and hyperstimuli in which humanity gained permanently a different and position in the world.\textsuperscript{66} As Richard Shusterman concludes when reading Benjamin and Adorno, in the realm of powerful distractions of modern life, it was rather logical to turn to the heightened tension and the stronger emotion of the sublime aesthetic experience to arouse a lasting aesthetic encounter.\textsuperscript{67}

When we are examining the introduction of the cinematic technique as a disruptive moment in media history, we have to bear in mind that this disruption was part of a larger historical context. In that sense, experiences are culturally shaped by the time and situation in which they occur. These emotions appear in a certain discourse with the surrounding society. Moreover, in presenting itself as the newest technique which promised the most life-like illusion of reality, film was introduced using the same sublime language as other contemporary technological attractions. Thereby, the cinématographe and the vitascope took up the popular sensational aesthetic of that time. Since the viewer was sensitive to


\textsuperscript{66} See Singer, “Modernity, Hyperstimulus, and the Rise of Popular Sensationalism,” who draws upon the writings of Kracauer and Benjamin.

the technological sublime aesthetic experience, the exhibition of cinematic technique offered an experience of astonishment that is located within discourse of the technological sublime aesthetic experience. Although I have tried to indicate in this chapter that there is ground to re-visit Gunning’s “aesthetic of astonishment” from the perspective of the technological sublime aesthetic experience, the way in which this sublime aesthetic experience is evoked is not yet in focus. So, while the focus so far was on the mere indication that the sublime is present in this experience, an analysis of how the sublime is evoked by the cinematic technique will become the objective for the following two chapters.
“Film is a new age for humanity.” — Marcel L’Herbier

“When these cameras are made available to the public, when everyone can photograph their dear ones, no longer in a motionless form but in their movement, their activity, their familiar gestures, with words on their lips, death will have ceased to be absolute.”

— French journalist in *La Poste*, December 30th 1895.

“It is life itself, it is movement caught on the fly. Photography has ceased to fix immobility. It now perpetuates the image of movement.”

— French reviewer at the first Lumières exhibition

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CHAPTER TWO:

THE MOVING IMAGE AND THE IMPOSSIBLE PRESENCE OF LIFE

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the cinematic technique was introduced as a spectacular attraction in the realm of the technological sublime innovations. In this chapter I will explore in detail how the sublime is evoked with the cinematic technique at the moment of its introduction. Thereby, I will focus on the characteristic of movement. As early accounts from the first spectators testify, cinema was the attraction of the moving image. An anonymous poem in *the British Journal of Photography* praised the cinématographe’s wonderful quality of a “Constant flood of life / O’er the screen keeps moving freely / Full of action-stir and strife.” At the same time, a journalist witnessing the presentation of Edison’s vitascope in Koster & Bail’s Music Hall in New York wrote that, “the most trifling movements could be followed as accurately as if the dancers had been stepping before the audience in proper person.” While the characteristic of movement gave way to a ‘life-like’ representation that was recognized by the audience, there was also a feeling of absence of reality. The same New York journalist continued his story stating that “the representation was realistic to a certain degree.” Endlessly inspiring for film theorists working on early cinema is Maxim Gorky’s account of the cinématographe of the Lumières in Paris. He famously described the ghostly character of the cinema where the people portrayed were caught in a grey parallel world. Gorky stated that “their smiles are lifeless, even though their movements are full of living energy and are so swift as to be almost imperceptible. . . Before you is a life of surging, a life deprived of words and shorn of the living spectrum of colours-the grey, the

6 Ibid.
soundless, the bleak and dismal life.”7 Reading these various early accounts, we witness that the cinematic technique was paradoxically received as both full of life due its moving images, while at the same time deprived of life for its dissimilarity and strangeness to the real world.

As Laura Mulvey explores in her book *Death 24x a Second*, the confrontation with movement situates cinema between life and death; between the past and the present. It was this confrontation with movement that was consciously exploited at the moment of introduction of the cinematic technique. For Tom Gunning, this moment when the apparatus is started in front of the audience and when the representation starts to move is the key moment when the astonishment kicks in. In a later article he explains that movement arouses “bodily sensations” and “a nearly magical sense of presence.” Yet, this presence is not the same as cinema’s claim to realism or life-likeness. Moreover, as Gunning explains, this is an irrational power of cinema that “we feel in our guts or throughout our bodies.”8 The moment of movement then, unveils the apparatus itself and the illusion of life. From a phenomenological and tactile perspective, the confrontation with movement itself disturbs the “ceaselessly flowing [of] ‘real life’” and thereby directs us to our own carnal embodiment.9 In this chapter I will argue that this moment of movement evokes a sublime aesthetic experience. This instant takes in Edmund Burke’s delightful horror and Immanuel Kant’s negative pleasure in which the sublime directs us to our own human and embodied existence. Furthermore, as Jean-François Lyotard explains Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* with some Burkean inspiration, in “the zone between life and death” the sublime “tries to present the fact that there is something unpresentable.”10 Thereby, the start of the cinematic apparatus in front of the audience, which is a crucial moment in Gunning’s “esthetic of astonished” in very early cinema, evokes a sublime aesthetic experience.

The first part of this chapter continues Gunning’s argument that the presentation of movement was crucial for the very early viewing experience. Drawing on film historians, we can conclude that something so habitual to us nowadays, namely the plain fact that the image was moving, was an astonishing attraction for the late nineteenth century audience. Therefore, my argument holds that it was the celebration of pure movement itself that had an astonishing impact on early cinema audiences.

7 Maxim Gorky, “Last night I was in the Kingdom of Shadows [1896],” in *In the Kingdom of Shadows: A Companion to Early Cinema*, ed. Colin Harding and Simon Popple, 5.
Subsequently, this chapter investigates what movement meant for the late nineteenth century audiences. As Gunning reminds us, this is a strongly embodied or tactile experience. Drawing on the phenomenological notion of embodiment as described by Vivian Sobchack and Jennifer Barker, I will argue that the confrontation with pure movement was an embodied shock that comes as an astonishment aroused by witnessing something pure and unrepresentable; an idea that comes before images, concept and form. Thereby, it runs parallel to the rapturous sublime experience. From this knowledge, the chapter continues to frame the astonishing impact of movement as a sublime aesthetic experience, drawing on a contemporary French reading of the Kantian sublime.\textsuperscript{11}

This reframing of the early viewing experience in terms of a sublime aesthetic experience allows one, as I have argued in chapter one, to revalue the introduction of cinema in the specific context of the late nineteenth century as a time that was characterized by previously unimaginable innovations and a popular technological sublime. As I argue in this chapter, a reframing centered on the attraction of pure movement allows us to reframe the astonishing impact of very early cinema as a sublime aesthetic experience. As a close analysis of the attraction of movement\textsuperscript{12} from the theory of sublime will show, the new cinematic technique subverted the regime of representability and the visible. It thereby altered more than the mode and content of what was represented.

The astounding new method of representation was cutting through the representability axis by which it stirred the reign of vision and the subject’s presence in the world by subverting representation. Moreover, in disrupting representation, the astonishing new technique delivered an emotion to the level of pure presentation. In Kantian terms, the sublime is the confrontation with this level of presentation. Here presentation (Darstellung) is the raw experience of material before the subject has any power over this material through his schemas. Thereby, presentation in Kant is opposed to representation (Vorstellung) in which meaning and understanding is involved. Representation, derived from the Latin re-praesentatio, thereby means “to allow something to present itself.”\textsuperscript{13} Following, it is


\textsuperscript{12} The notion of ‘attraction’ I derive from its use in early cinema studies, as introduced by Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault. This notion of ‘attraction’ is a conceptualization of Sergei Eisenstein’s montage of attractions which has as its objective the creation of maximum impact on its audiences. See André Gaudreault and Tom Gunning, “Early Cinema as a Challenge to Film History,” and Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attractions,” in The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: AUP, 2006), 365-380 and 381-388.

\textsuperscript{13} Martta Heikkilä, At the Limits of Presentation: Coming-Into-Presence and its Aesthetic Relevance in Jean-Luc Nancy’s Philosophy (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2008), 191-195.
presentation which precedes representation and precedes the subject. Presentation is the very sensible exposition of the object before the subject orientates through meaning.\textsuperscript{14} Thereby, to derive on the notion of presentation as central in the writings of the Kantian philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, presentation is the ‘coming-into-presence’ and ‘coming from disappearance’.\textsuperscript{15} Presentation is therefore, though I am hesitant to involve Heidegger in this debate, the fundamental first step before the subject’s being-in-the-world. Therefore, presentation in the sublime is in essence sensuous and material, and embodied. A reframing from the aesthetic theory of the sublime promises a revaluation of the introduction of the cinematic technique by focusing on how this rapturous moment played on the subject’s presentation by taking on the paradoxical shocking attraction (as negative pleasure) in representation. Thereby, my argument can be seen as a contribution to situate the introduction of the moving image in the current discussion on presence in film studies and philosophy on representation.\textsuperscript{16}

Before opening my argument, one last remark needs to be made on the notion of movement. Movement in my argument does not directly relate to speed or acceleration in the sense of Paul Virilio or other cultural theorist. Rather, my notion of movement refers to the movement on the screen and of the cinematic apparatus. These are, after all, the moving images. In this sense, the ‘celebration of pure movement’ is not the acceleration of the world to establish an own time. My use of the term ‘celebration of pure movement’ refers to the strong disruptive experience that was part at the moment of movement. The word ‘pure’ here refers to presentation and the material or sensuous experience that occurs before the subject’s schematizing powers of implying concepts, meaning, and understanding. In

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{14} See Alison Ross, \textit{Aesthetic Paths of Philosophy: Presentation in Kant, Heidegger, Lacloue-Labarthe and Nancy} (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).
  \item \textsuperscript{15} This is Martta Heikkilä’s reading of Jean-Luc Nancy, \textit{The Birth to Presence}, trans. Brian Holmes and others (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993). See Heikkilä, \textit{At the Limits of Presentation}. Moreover, we could interpret ‘presence’ in the sense that it constructed by the subject’s sensible presentation which is a matter of appearance and disappearance. In short, Nancy states, the ‘offering’ of presentation part of the sublime moves to the realm of presence in the sense that the sublime proposes “the question of existence.” See Jean-Luc Nancy, “Preface to French Edition,” in \textit{Of the Sublime: Presence in Question}, 1-3.
\end{itemize}
this sense, we can say that the representational technique delivers a disruptive experience on the level of presentation, and embodied and affective, experience.

THE ATTRACTION OF THE MOVEMENT MACHINE

As Tom Gunning describes in his article “An Aesthetic of Astonishment,” there was a specific moment when the attraction vigorously kicked in. This was the moment when the apparatus was started and the still image started to move. At the first moment when there was a still photograph projected on the screen there was “nothing new” while at the next, when the movement started, “all at once the image ... stirred itself and came alive” as a spectator at an early Lumière exhibition testifies. Here, the spectators were astonished by the representation of movement that occurred. The audience was amazed as much with the representational technique itself as with the representation or the content of the screen. The artificiality of the slowly starting moving image worked against the reality of the representation. As Gunning concludes from the moment of movement, the spectator was “astonished by its transformation through the new illusion of projected motion.”

What this moment of first encounter with movement promised was a confrontation with the double nature of the cinematic technique itself. It was this specific essence of the technique which was so unfamiliar to the spectator that it left the viewer dumbfounded sitting in his chair. While the representation, specifically with the cinématographe, included familiar images of people leaving the factory or rough waves at the coast of Dover, the fact that the new technique could represent those familiar scenes in movement was stunning. As Gunning observes, “that bits of everyday life should be so fascinating undoubtedly owes most to the phenomenon of reproduced in motion, the operational aesthetic of the apparatus itself.”

The moving images were an attraction based on the characteristics of the technique itself. Remarkably, the Lumière brothers introduced the cinématographe at the end of an exhibition which was centered on the presentation of colored photography. Only as an extra at the end of the presentation they showed their newest technology which could capture movements and represent them to the

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The Lumières were caught by surprise to see that this motion invention proved to be such a powerful attraction to the Lyon audience. Quickly they realized the double nature of the attraction in which scenes that were thought to be so normal and every-day could be transformed into an unnatural spectacle.

That photography can be seen as the foundation of cinema is a familiar argument but a closer look at photography in the nineteenth century enforces us to acknowledge that the specific tradition of instantaneous photography was the true predecessor of the cinema. Both the Lumière family as well as Thomas Edison were strongly influenced by this effort in photography. Thomas Edison’s interest in capturing and representing movement was sparked by Eadweard Muybridge who came to Edison’s laboratory after presenting his zoöpraxiscope in New Jersey. In Europe, Edison had already met Étienne-Jules Marey from whom he learned the success of chronophotography and technique of shooting a continuous film strip with a single lens.

Auguste and Louis Lumière also envisioned themselves as kindred spirits to Muybridge and Marey, be it from a more scientific and technological approach. The brothers were directly inspired by the ambitions of instantaneous photography to capture the instant. Before they invented the cinématographe the brothers already made contributions to the field of amateur still photography. One of Louis Lumière first innovations was a technique of dry plate processing which was inexpensive and extremely sensitive to light. It allowed amateur photographers to capture an object in motion in normal daylight. The Lumière brothers then demonstrated this technique and following improvements by publishing instantaneous photographs of Auguste Lumière jumping off a chair and a recreational swimmer diving into the water (figure 8 and 9). Like many of their contemporaries, the brothers had a strong faith in the scientific value of photography. Pictures became an important prove of a visual investigation of the world. The visual recording became “an indisputable gathering of evidence and a control over everyday laws of time and motion which could guarantee a new identification of knowing.

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21 Mary Ann Doane, The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 33-68.
22 Musser, Before the Nickelodeon, 29-32.
23 Although both Edison and the Lumières were technological innovators it can be argued that Edison was keener than the Lumières to develop commercialized attractions. This is evident with the introduction of the vitascope from which he licensed the invention from Francis Jenkins and Thomas Armat. See Musser, Before the Nickelodeon, 57-60.
with seeing."\textsuperscript{24} In this manner, there was a truth to be uncovered behind the movement of the isolated bodily as well as the motion of every-day life on the city streets.

For both Edison and the Lumière brothers, the recording and representation of movement was the logical next step in the evolution of visual techniques. A series of perfect instants could result in the representation of movement from the real world. Thereby, the vitascope and the cinématographe were introduced in the tradition of “movement machines” which were attractions that were inspired by the modern mission to capture and represent the movement of real life by means of man-made technology.\textsuperscript{25} The astonishing impact of the cinematic technique springs from the fact that it promised the representation of something that was thought to be unrepresentable before. As Gunning argues, cinema came up “within a welter of new inventions for the recording or conveying of aspects of human life previously felt to be ephemeral, inaudible, or invisible.”\textsuperscript{26}

However, I would argue that this innovation and popularization of techniques that discovered realms in movement and time that were unimaginable before was typical for the technological sublime and not, necessarily, for the uncanny experience, which is the interpretive framework applied by Gunning himself. While the cinematic technique expanded the scope of vision, it altered the line between the visible and invisible. Although the products of that may be estranging or uncanny images, the technique that vulgarly and purposefully crosses that line of visibility can righteously thought to be sublime. For, as Jean-Luc Marion recognizes with the invisible entering the realm of visibility, a paradoxical shock occurs both in the mind and in the senses that, “far from fulfilling or satiating them [the subject], its very excess of visibility injures them.”\textsuperscript{27} Innovations as the telephone and the phonograph did that to sound, the X-ray to the physical body and the cinematic technique to movement. In specific, by presenting the shock of the moving image the cinematic technique redirected attention to motion itself.

\textsuperscript{24} Gunning, “New Thresholds of Vision,” 83.
\textsuperscript{26} Gunning, “Moving Away from the Index,” 35.
Figure 8: Auguste Lumière leaping over a chair.

Figure 9: Photograph by the Lumière brothers of a recreational swimmer jumping in the water.
As Lynda Nead observes, the new medium film claimed to be “the pure art of motion,” and the attraction that cinema offered was the “sensation of motion, [and] the spectacle of movement.” While the spectators were astonished by representation of movement, the showmen and presenters who popularized and commercialized the attraction were quickly aware of the kinaesthetic experience that came with this new medium. Already the name of Edison’s invention (‘vita’ as Latin for ‘life’) promised a lively presentation of moving and living subjects. When they promised their audiences “perfect reproduction of noted feminine figures and their every movement,” the presenters were consciously aware that the representation of movement laid at the core of the audience’s fascination for cinema.

The audience’s astonishment with movement became visible already at the opening night of the vitascope in New York. While most of the films presented that night were recorded in the Black Maria studio, there was one actuality film in which the movement was not limited to human bodies before a background, but was widespread all over the big screen. This was Rough Sea at Dover, a two-shot film from 1895 that was directed by Birt Acres and produced by R.W. Paul (figure 10 and 11). The film was an account of the coast of Dover under harsh weather conditions. By far the most fascinating film of the evening, a critic wrote “The wirr of the machine brought to view a heaving mass of foam-crested water. (..) The thing was altogether so realistic and the reproduction so absolutely accurate, that it fairly astounded the beholder.” According to Charles Musser, the early screening of Rough Sea at Dover made clear the spectacular potential of the medium to aggressively confront the audience by using only plain recording.

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29 This is how the New York Journal advertised the first tests from Edison’s vitascope, as quoted in Musser, Before the Nickelodeon, 61. There is definitely a voyeuristic undercurrent and fascination for the sexualized moving body in very early cinema. For an interesting analysis see Lynda Nead, “Strip: Moving Bodies in the 1890s,” Early Popular Visual Culture 3, 2 (September 2005): 135-150.
30 As quoted in Musser, Before the Nickelodeon, 63.
31 Ibid.
Figure 10: Still from *Rough Sea at Dover* (1895). The movement of the water is omnipresent over the screen.

Figure 11: Second shot from *Rough Sea at Dover* (1895) which also portrays the rapid movement of water.
Earlier, at the other side of the Atlantic, a similar lesson was learned by the Lumières. Already at their first demonstration of the cinématographe as an extra to the presentation of colored photography, they realized that the audience was fascinated by the mere prospect of movement itself. At the following early shows, the viewers were presented the actuality films as Sortie d’usine (1895) and Repas de bébé (1895). With both these short features, the spectators were thrilled with seeing the representation of movement itself. Although one should expect from that the viewers with Repas de bébé (figure 12) were involved in the family scene of the parents proudly feeding their baby, the true spectacle for the viewers was an overwhelming and unpredictable movement in the background where leaves were stirred by the wind. André Gaudreault concludes from the early Lumière screenings that there is a specific paradigm to be distinguished at the introduction of the cinematic technique. Within the cinema of attractions, the very first films did not need the attraction of monstration or narrative. Rather, it is the technique itself with its capability to capture and restore movement taken from real life that becomes the spectacle.

While the presenters and showmen were aware of the fact that movement was a key attraction of the earliest cinema screenings, they intensified this spectacle by emphasizing the different possibilities of movement in the medium by both restoring the recorded reality as well as alienating that same life-like representation. As Nead writes, “in its first years, film and its audiences were fascinated by the medium’s kinetic possibilities. Film took motion as its subject matter and exploited the technology itself to play with velocities: forward and reverse projection, repetition, acceleration and retardation.” This is particularly present in the Lumières film Démolution d’un mur which was released in 1896, a year after the invention of the cinématographe (figure 13). The film standardized the play with movement and temporality which was normally reserved for the act of presentation by incorporating a reverse presentation of the events to the film. These moments of intensified confrontation with movement mark the viewing experience at the introduction of the cinematic technique as a particularly kinaesthetic experience. While the viewer was impressed with the technologized movement by the apparatus, the spectator was at the same time involved actively seeing and experiencing movement itself due to its central position in the attraction.

Figure 12: Still from *Repas de bébé* (1895). In the background and behind Auguste Lumière’s head the leaves are stirred by the wind.

Figure 1: Still from *Démolition d’un mur* (1895) which standardized the play with time and movement, an activity previously done by the presenters of the show.
I would argue that the activity of watching movement itself being presented was an astonishing attraction for the early audiences of cinema. What was presented here was a convincing gesture towards pure motion in itself, or, in Kantian terms, the Idea of movement that falls outside form and language. While the earliest screenings of the cinématographe and the vitascope presented a “zero degree of filming” in which the act of selecting, directing and telling through images was absent, these short movies had an astounding impact on its audiences. The astonishment of the movement machines derives from their promise to represent the movement, spontaneity and presence of the world in its purest and most direct form, without the interference of language or representational system. As Dai Vaughan enthusiastically concludes, a “doubling-back of the world into its own imaginary, a denial of the order of a coded system: an escape of the represented from the representational act.”

Consequently, in contrast to Tom Gunning, we can argue that the viewer was not so much enthralled by the representation of movement as illusion or magic trick. Furthermore, the uncanny or estranging experience that would be aroused by an illusion or magic trick happens inside the realm of representation and meaning. However, the very early cinema spectator was astonished by the shortcut that the cinematic technique took through the representational system. With its presentation (as the material or sensuous experience opposed to representation) of pure movement it alluded to the Idea in absence of form and language, which is, as I will argue further on in this chapter, a prime characteristic of the sublime. Thereby, the cinematic technique crossed the line between representable/unrepresentable and visible/invisible, while subsequently destabilizing the directions of presentation. Through presenting movement on the level of presentation and thereby delivering a glimpse of pure movement, the cinematic technique promised an incongruity in representation by arousing a heightened sense of presence in absence and at a distance.

THE EMBODIED PARADOXICAL SHOCK OF MOVEMENT

What Lynda Nead recognizes is that while cinema was an attraction of movement, watching and experiencing this new machine at work was particularly spectacular because it delivered a stimulating embodied experience. As she concludes, “The viewing experience no longer involved a static object viewed by a passive spectator, but could be defined as a dynamic activity involving an act of vision and a

35 Gaudreault explains the absence of directing in very early cinema as the “zero degree of filming” in Film and Attraction, 58.
viewing body.”

For instance, the arrival of the train at the station in *Arriveé d’un train en gare à La Ciolat* (1895), followed by the chaotic scene of the platform being crowded by numerous moving people, was a moment that “addressed the gut, not the intellect.” As stated above, Gunning agrees with Nead on this when he states that, “We do not just see motion and we are not simply affected emotionally by its role within a plot; we feel it in our guts or throughout our bodies.” After the institutionalization of cinema in the early twentieth century by which representational order was restored, it was the avant-garde who recognized the capabilities of affecting the viewer both physiologically and emotionally by returning to the core of cinema to capture and restore motion. Filmmakers as Sergei Eisenstein, Jean Epstein and Germaine Dulac celebrated the art of movement and rhythm. The latter explained that the real power of cinema was in its “arranged movements in which the shifting of a line or of a volume in a changing cadence creates emotion without any crystallization of ideas.”

Sitting in the theater and watching the screen change from still to moving image, the first film spectators were also astonished by the unforeseen attempt toward a pure presentation of motion. This specific moment distinguishes Gunning as the aesthetic of astonishment in optima forma. The interesting question remains why the impact of this moment is so big on its spectators. The first reason for this is the argument of the technological sublime aesthetic experience which holds that cinema represented something that was previously been thought to be unrepresentable by which it destabilized representational order.

As argued above, through instantaneous photography the Lumière brothers got fascinated with the representation of movement. As Mary Ann Doane writes, especially the earliest films in cinema which were filmed by the Lumières themselves were centered on “the sheer celebration of movement for its own sake.” Diagonally staged, the train in *Arriveé d’un train en gare à la Ciolat* was caught on film with a maximum span of movement. Likewise, *Sortie d’usine* (1895) also exploited the impact of represented motion with an entrance space before the factory that goes from completely empty to a crowded place filled with dozens of moving workers. By staging the scene in depth, the contrast between the empty, stable image at the beginning and the chaotic and living scene in the middle where men, women, bikes and even a playful dog populate the screen, was maximized (figures 14 and 15).

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37 Nead, “Strip: Moving bodies in the 1890s,” 139.
38 Ibid., 144.
40 Germaine Dulac as quoted in Gunning, “Moving Away from the Index,” 38.
41 Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 177.
Figure 2: Still from *Sortie d’usine* (1895) where the shot transforms from an empty street to a chaotic and lived scene.

Figure 3: Still from *Sortie d’usine* (1895) with the dozens of people (and a dog) moving through the frame.
A similar tendency to portray movement itself in the representation and thereby exploit the medium’s own newly invented quality can be recognized in R.W. Paul and Paul Acres’ earliest films. The two pioneers, who also worked on techniques of moving pictures themselves, organized their short features around the very possibility of movement. Their 1895 film *The Derby* portrays a horse race in all its velocity while after its finish thousands of moving people populate the screen when celebrating the winner. *Rough Sea at Dover* (1895) and *A Sea Cave near Lisbon* (1896) drive on the overwhelming movement of endless waves. With its unpredictability, randomness, and infinity, the movement of the sea proved to be a beneficial subject for portraying the power of the moving pictures itself. Together, these very early films can be distinguished as celebrations of the cinematic technique of representing movement itself in its most direct way.

In one of his few writings on cinema, Jean-François calls this play with pure movement the “Acinema.” Here, cinema’s ability to write with movement is not deployed in favor of something else, such as narration (or “ideology” or “politics” in Lyotard’s vocabulary), and thereby works against the representational system while being unproductive. In this unproductive state, motion is relished for its own possibility. It is as if “a child strikes the matchhead to see what happens—just for the fun of it—he enjoys the movement itself, the changing colors, the light flashing at the height of the blaze, the death of the tin piece of wood, the hissing of the flame. He enjoys these sterile differences leading nowhere, these uncompensated losses.”  

By neglecting the act of direction, in the sense that directing the moving picture divides and normalizes the representation axis, the pure representation of movement runs against the “good, unifying and reasonable forms.” Rather, it proclaims a “perverse pleasure” of watching the very boundaries of what is representational. However, as Lyotard concludes, there is a price to be paid for “going beyond this [the representation] and disfiguring the order of propagation” which is “the most intense agitation. . . [and] intense emotion.”

The “Acinema” that Lyotard describes is one that is found at the far limits of cinema. These are moments of stillness and of intense motion. As Gunning designates, there was a “heightened impact at the moment of movement.” The shock that followed was not one of naive belief in the illusion but rather amazement for the cinematic technique itself. Thereby, it affirms the spectator’s interest in the act of representing movement itself. Just as the child who plays with matchsticks and is thrilled by the

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43 Ibid., 357.
flame itself, the very first cinema audiences were endlessly fascinated by the representation of movement itself.

While they differ in methodology, both the aesthetic philosopher Lyotard and the film historian Gunning seem to agree that that the confrontation with movement in the representation arouses an intense feeling with the spectator. Writing before his studies on the sublime aesthetic experience, Lyotard underlines a “paralyzing attack on the victim,” while the latter describes this as “bodily sensations of movement.”\footnote{Lyotard, “Acinema,” 358. The French original dates from 1973 whereas the first essay collected in The Inhuman was published ??? And Gunning, “Moving Away from the Index,” 45.} The embodied response that Gunning describes is one that occurs with the double temporality that occurs when starting or stopping the image. Laura Mulvey theorized these two opposites at work at the moving image. First, there is the “then-ness” of the still which, as a photographic image, refers to a scene which \textit{has been}, in past tense, before the camera. However, when the image starts to move, this “past-ness” is covered with a “now-ness.” The movement of the image animates the inanimate to something that \textit{is} happening before the viewer in present tense.\footnote{Mulvey, \textit{Death 24x a Second}, 30-32.} It is this blending of temporalities, in which the past of the picture does not disappear but is temporally overruled by the present, which sends the spectator into a sensation of uncertainty.

Gunning emphasizes that the confrontation with movement is a phenomenological and embodied experience. Vivian Sobchack, writing on the remarkable moment in Chris Marker’s \textit{La Jetée} (1962) when the photographic image gradually comes to life, writes on bodily experience of this “radical shift in the ontological status of the image.”\footnote{Vivian Sobchack, \textit{Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and the Moving Image Culture} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 145.} At the moment when the image changes from photograph to moving image, the ontology of the moment itself changes. Whereas the photograph is abstracted from the flow of life into a separate and essentialized moment, this moment “cannot be inhabited... [as] it keeps the lived body out.” Yet, when the cinematic apparatus transforms the still photograph into a moving image, the status of the moment changes from “a scene to be \textit{contemplated}” towards “a scene to be \textit{lived}.” As Sobchack continues, “the \textit{moving picture} is a visible representation not of activity finished or past but of activity coming into being and being. Furthermore, and even more significant, the moving picture not only visibly represents moving objects but also—and simultaneously—presents \textit{the very moment of vision itself}.”\footnote{Ibid., 146. Original emphasis.} What she observes then, is that the viewer does not passively observes the images coming into motion but that he or she is actively and bodily involved in this experience.
The important conclusion that Sobchack draws is that cinema gives its spectator at once a representation since it is not reality, as well as a presentation because the film is experienced through the senses of the body. Moreover, these two are closely overdetermined as she writes that cinema “simultaneously represents experience through dynamic presentation (the always verb-driven and ongoing present tense of sensory perception, that through technology, constitutes and enables the film for us and for itself)—and also presents experience as representation (the post hoc fixity of already-perceived and now expressed images that stand as equivalent to noun forms). What this holds is that the shock that representation of pure movement causes, as a shock that short-circuits the system of representation, is not only felt in watching, but also in the subject’s own presentation in the world. Thereby, the embodied reading of the impact of movement on the viewer gives way to the sublime aesthetic experience, since this is where the activity of viewing is so overwhelming that it addresses the level of presentation as the raw material experience before the subject has any comprehensive or understanding power over it. In so doing, the embodied impact brings presentation itself (as the constitution of the subject’s presence in the world) into question.

Steven Shaviro, drawing upon the writings of Deleuze and Guittari, emphasizes that we make sense in the world through an embodied experience which is erects from “primordial forms of raw sensation; affect, excitation, stimulation and repression, pleasure and pain, shock and habit." Therefore, presentation is not a solid flow but rather a discontinue succession of embodied thrills. While we most of the time try to minimize the impact of these thrills, at specific instants we can be overwhelmed by the “raw sensations” that attack our stable subject position and remind us of our fragile being in the world. Jennifer Barker recognizes a certain disruption when the temporal structure of the representation of the screen, be it the past tense of the still image or the present tense of the moving image, is destabilized by the contamination of the two. Moving beyond the stability of the photograph as well as disrupting the continuity of the moving image, the moment of movement in cinema reminds us "of the fundamental fragility of our own bodies [that] is always with us, however suppressed, as we move through life." As she continuous, “The film reminds us of our own tenuousness, bringing us with it as it teeters on the precipice between life and death, movement and stillness. The experience is ambivalent to say the least, at once titillating and terrifying." What the

49 Sobchack, Carnal Thoughts, 74.
51 Barker, The Tactile Eye, 135.
52 Ibid., 135.
moment of movement at the very early screenings of the cinematic technique provided then, was “an intimate look not only inside the film but also inside ourselves.”

I would argue that the “raw sensation” of a confrontation with pure movement is an embodied shock that, by short-circuiting representation itself, happens at the level of presentation before concept, form and understanding, and thereby before the images and recognition that are crucial for the uncanny experience. Although this needs research that exceeds the limits of this thesis, I believe that the embodied shock of motion can be seen as what Brian Massumi distinguishes as the affect localized in the event. As a “system of the inexplicable” or the “potential” that follows a different logic than understanding, this is a shock that refuses words and language, and happens before emotion. When impact is centered at a moment, when it is “punctual”, the affect localized in the event happens as a paradoxical shock that at once delivers “the sudden interruption of functions of actual connection” while, at the same time, “is nothing less than the perception of one’s own vitality, one’s sense of aliveness, of changeability (often signified as ‘freedom’).” Along these lines, we can distinguish the astonishment that came with the confrontation of pure movement as an embodied shock that ran counter to the common conception of representation and actually preceded the system of presentation that delivers concepts and understanding. The paradoxical shock that deconstructed normal presentation allows us to interpret the astonishing impact of movement as a moment when “presentation itself is at stake,” as a vital disorientation of the subject’s presence in the world. As a result, we can distinguish the shock of movement that was popularized at the 1890s exhibitions, and was presented as an “astonishing moment” that “startled [its] audiences,” as a sublime aesthetic experience.

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54 I particularly like Massumi’s use of the word ‘punctual’ here since, at least for visual studies, reminds us of Roland Barthes’ *punctum*. Massumi’s affect that becomes punctual should be read as the point of focus, the maximum impact on the minimal surface. Similarly, Barthes’ *punctum* is “that accident [a detail or glance in the photograph] which pricks me (but also bruses me, is poignant to me).” The *punctum* is the “sting, speck, cut” that pokes through the surface of representation arousing maximum emotion by the minimal effort of detail. See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 26-27.
THE UNREPRESENTABLE REPRESENTED IN EARLY CINEMA

Compared to Edison, the Lumières were more fascinated by the worldly representation of movement than the isolated motion of the body. Whereas the American inventor recorded his subjects primarily in the realm of the limited space of his studio the Black Maria, the subject of the Lumière brothers was the movement of the world with all its various moving elements. Moreover, where the spectacle of movement in Edison’s films was limited to the foreground, the in-depth focus applied by the Lumière brothers to record the movement of the outside world, “transformed daily life into a spectacle.” Thereby, it altered the limit or the “threshold” of the visible. By so doing, the cinematic technique did more than duplicating reality. As Maxim Gorky pointed out, the cinématographe presented something that was at the same time familiar and acquainted while being deeply unfamiliar, other worldly, and ghostly. Another witness of an early Lumière screening, an English writer who went under the pseudonym O. Winter, similarly wrote not only on how real the representation was, but also described an unnatural and dark other side of cinema that he explained as “the terrifying effect of life, but of life with a difference.” He continues, “It is wondrous, even terrific. . . It is all true, and it is all false.” To O. Winter, the disturbing element of the cinematic technique is that it mechanically records reality instead of involving the human intellect. This apparatus promises a reality but according to O. Winter, this is a mechanical reality which lacks a human focus. The human eye “picks and chooses from nature” while the “vulgarity” of the photographic plate in motion presents everything at once in focus without selection. We need the “unreality” of human selection for a plain presentation of reality will break the harmony.

Both early spectators O. Winter and Maxim Gorky testify of a discomfort in watching the moving image. Instead of being only lifelike, the moving image denotes something unreal within the reality. As O. Winter observes, “Although you know that the scene has a mechanical and intimate correspondence with truth, you recognize its essential and inherent falsity.” What the cinematic apparatus promised was an “unreliable reality” in which there was something deeply strange and distorted from the reality

59 Gorky, “Last night I was in the Kingdom of Shadows [1896],” in In the Kingdom of Shadows: A Companion to Early Cinema, 5-6.
61 Ibid., 294.
that the people conceived in everyday life. What Gorky emphasizes is that this estrangement of reality stroke not with the still image, but principally when the apparatus was started and the image started to move.

The introduction of the cinematic technique was surrounded by an air of mystery and magic otherworldliness. As Gunning argues, when we really want to get a fair grip on how cinema was introduced a hundred-fifteen years ago, we have to take seriously the uneasy and terrifying feeling that paradoxically coincided with the attraction and technological enthusiasm for the medium. The paradox of the very early moving images of cinema was that it was both real and unreal. As Gunning writes, “cinema has always pirouetted about the poles of providing a new standard of realist representation and (simultaneously) projecting a sense of unreality, a realm of impalpable phantoms.” While movement was a visual illusion impressing the viewer with “life-like” representations of the highest degree, it thereby also created a frightening world caught in shadows, as if there existed a ghostly realm behind our own reality.

In her chapter “Uncertainty: Natural Magic and the Art of Deception,” Laura Mulvey aligns the introduction of the cinematic technique with the human fascination for the impossible and the supernatural. The audiences of the 1890s doubted human vision and mind, and were enthralled with the belief that there was something to be unveiled behind the reality perceivable with the human eye. Already the reception of the earliest films were influenced by this fascination. The magical but ghostly world that was animated by the moving image functioned as a surplus to the realism of the representation. Together with other optical techniques as the stereoscope and Muybridge and Marey’s instantaneous photography, the cinematic technique also alluded to capture something which exceeded common sense and the perceptual capacities of the human eye. As Mulvey writes, “it is impossible to see the Lumière films as a simple demonstration of new technology; every gesture, expression, movement of the wind or water is touched with mystery.” The mystery that the cinematic technique alluded to was essentially the belief that there was something spiritual yet invisible present in the world. Moreover, the idea that “death was not final” and the conviction that optical techniques were able to uncover a state between life and the supernatural afterlife was crucial for the very early cinema

64 Ibid., 323.
65 Mulvey, Death 24x A Second, 36.
experience. With its double temporality, it is the moment of movement, or rather the optical technique happening before the audience’s eyes, that appeals to the “human fascination with the unnatural, the impossible and, ultimately, the supernatural.”

The paradox that the cinematic technique presented something both so real and yet unreal was also fostered by the imperfection of the technique and the impossibility of movement. These early exhibitions of the cinematic apparatus were characterized by a flicker and a vibration on the screen because of its unstable light source. The flicker destabilized the present tense narrative of the representation by moving between light and darkness, visibility and invisibility, and movement and stillness. Thereby, it drew the viewer back to the moment of movement and repeated the shock of motion over again. Moreover, the flicker in these early shows can be seen as what Paul Virilio defines as a “controlled trance … [or] an epileptic process.” Drawing on G.E.R. Lloyd’s work *Magic, Reason and Experience*, he concludes that is was precisely this epileptic process that fascinated the late nineteenth century audience since it considered “the advent of the absolute dichotomy between the magical and the scientific.” Thereby, the flicker of the early apparatus both interrupted the illusion of movement while at the same time luring towards the apparatus magical quality to record and uncover an important unfamiliar dimension of reality.

This stretch of the representable world had a significance to it that was far more than an astonishment of a magic trick or illusion. As Dai Vaughan praises the Lumières technique, its impact centered on a whole new level of representation as something that exceeded the standing representational order and thereby “transcended the cosy world of illusionism altogether.” More than being fooled by an illusion, the astonishment of the very early cinema spectators was the victimization of the witnessing a new method of seeing and making visible.

What the cinematic technique emphasized was that there was something present in the world that exceeded human normal perception. Popular techniques that took on the subject of vision aimed to investigate and play with fallacies in human vision. Thereby the invention and introduction of the

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66 Ian Christie as cited in Mulvey, *Death 24x A Second*, 46.
69 Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 205.
71 Ibid.
72 Vaughan, “Let There Be Lumière,” 64.
73 This is one of the main premises in Jonathan Crary’s important study *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990). Crary continues his argument that this led to a project of “radical abstraction and reconstruction of optical experience,” p. 9.
cinematic technique was part of an important tradition—or rather a quest—of modernity in the nineteenth century. In this narrative of vision in modernity the human perception is contrasted to the observing qualities of techniques. In specific, the cinematic apparatus juxtaposed human perception to the quality of a machine that could record and represent the world’s movement. As Gunning explains, while the cinematic technique was introduced as the latest attraction in the rich tradition of nineteenth century optical toys, it continued the scenario that “the eye is deficient and weak, while the machine is powerful.”

I believe that it is crucial for the understanding of the impact of the cinematic technique to get in focus the narrative so typical for modernity which promised that an invention could transcend the human senses, and vision in particular, to a realm of the previously non-sensible and invisible. The introduction of the cinematic technique thereby fits into the popularized narrative of the technological sublime of late nineteenth century.

The astonishment of the viewing experience of very early cinema is precisely that it represents something which was previously considered to be unrepresentable. Moreover, it is a technique, a man-made machine, which delivers this unforeseen representation. As argued above, the earliest films by Lumière, Edison and R.W. Paul centered on the pure representation of movement itself. Besides, the moment of movement and the flicker of the screen both highlighted the moving image as well as the technical nature behind the illusion. With these earliest cinématographe and vitascope exhibitions, the viewer was presented a paradoxical experience that underscored the unbelievable nature of the cinematic technique. Thereby, the astounding quality that this apparatus represented the unrepresentable was underscored and foregrounded to maximize the astonishing experience with its audience. As I will argue below, this experience indicates the essential feeling of the sublime by the fact that it “alludes to something which can’t be shown, or presented (as Kant said, dargestellt).” To acknowledge the rapturous experience that comes with making the unrepresentable and the unrepresentable felt will provide insight in how the cinematic technique astonished the early film spectator not only at the level of representation and destabilizing regressive images, but also, and more specifically, at the level of what precedes the imagery (as the realm of the sublime aesthetic experience), namely the subject’s own vital presence.

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75 Lyotard, The Inhuman, 89.
THE SUBLIME AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE OF THE MOVING IMAGE

In Lyotard’s reading of the Kantian sublime one of the central premises is that the sublime aesthetic experience can be seen as a negative pleasure that derives from a confrontation with the far limits of presentation. The sublime is the realm of the formless and limitless presentation. This is the realm where imagination and form fail to deliver; what apparently triumphs is the pure aesthetic Idea. The absence of form is experienced as a paradoxical shock of pain and pleasure. The realm behind representation is experienced as emptiness; a void and the “ground-zero where the synthesis of concepts is suspended.”\textsuperscript{76} As Lyotard continues, the negative pleasure that Kant identifies in the sublime is of an “abyss that repels and attracts an imagination is enjoyed to present the absolute.”\textsuperscript{77} Moreover, this “delirium in the absolute” is a negative presentation; a presentation of something that is “never there,” a presentation in absence.\textsuperscript{78}

I would argue that the cinematic representation can be seen as an attempt to materialize this negative of presentation. Since we are dealing with an (embodied and material) experience of movement emerging from still images, the cinematic technique represents movement which is never there. At the outer limits of what is to be represented and presented, the aesthetic of astonishment at the earliest exhibitions was driven by what André Gaudreault calls a “zero degree of filming”, or the “acinema” in Lyotard’s terms, in which movement itself was the subject, like the child lighting a matchhead. As Jennifer Barker describes, the experience of the twenty-four frames per second that race before our eyes makes us want to slow them down or stop them altogether, but then we are losing movement itself.\textsuperscript{79} This paradoxical drive is typical for the sublime as the aesthetic experience that reaches toward the presentation of Ideas. What is presented in the very early viewing experience is movement itself, or better, the Idea of movement. Yet, this cannot be comprehended and brought to understanding as it remains on the level of presentation. On the contrary, overwhelmed by the Idea, it enforces the subject to \textit{think} about it, while we cannot \textit{cognize} it.\textsuperscript{80} Just as the central presentation of movement in the cinematic technique arouses the enigmatic desire to both play and think in freedom as


\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 24.

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 150.

\textsuperscript{79} Barker, \textit{The Tactile Eye}, 135.

well as to stop and comprehend, the sublime aesthetic experience is found in that realm between a freedom of thought which allows us to think the infinite or Idea, and a desire to stop this movement and come to understanding.

To come back to Mulvey and Gunning, we recognized that the astonishing impact was made at the specific instant when the representation on the screen transformed from still to moving image. Hovering between the two temporalities of past and present and thereby corrupting the two separate domains of death/inanimate and alive/animate, the very early cinema spectator was moved into the uncertain and irrational realm between life and death. Thereby, the cinematic technique did not only offer the celebrated illusion of “life itself”; it also brought along the inexplicable essence of life which directs us to our own carnal existence and the “presence of death in life.”

This cinematic experience that was exploited in very early cinema’s viewing experience leads us to the sublime aesthetic experience in which the subject is confronted with its own small existence in contrast to the magnitude and infinity of nature. While Gunning characterizes the shock and thrill experience of the confrontation with movement with the cinematic apparatus as an astonishing experience for its audiences, Edmund Burke describes astonishment as the sublime at its peak. Furthermore, the astonishment that Burke designates in the sublime shows important parallels with how Mulvey describes the viewer’s confrontation with movement. Burke’s study in the sublime aesthetic experience of which astonishment is part of is characterized by a “delightful horror.” In this emotion, the observer is confronted with its own finite and small existence by witnessing the infinite dimension of nature in all its magnitude and power. According to Burke, the sublime emotion includes a “fear or terror, which is an apprehension of pain or death, [which] exhibits exactly the same effects, approaching in violence to those mentioned in proportion to the nearness of the cause, and the weakness of the subject.” Yet, Burke’s emphasis is on the act of viewing. The necessary condition to experience the sublime is that the natural object that overwhelms the observer with its power and magnitude does not form a direct physical threat; the terror and fear for death is only felt by a resemblance of actual pain. Thereby, Burke’s delightful horror parallels to the astonishing and confrontational viewing experience of the moving image that Mulvey and Gunning describe since, as the

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81 Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, 53.
83 Ibid., 119.
latter describes, the aesthetic of astonishment is not just the death fear for the train on the screen running towards the public but rather a fascination and interest, or possibly a delight, in the thrill itself.

Vivian Sobchack and Jennifer Barker agree with Mulvey that the confrontation with movement itself in cinema reminds us of our own fragile and carnal existence, and thereby echoes the presence of death.\(^\text{84}\) However, as argued above, they supplement this discussion with the embodied experience of cinema. Thereby, this shock becomes a physical reminder of our fragility. Correspondingly, while emphasizing the sublime as a viewing position, Burke’s description of the sublime aesthetic experience is felt in both the mind and the body.\(^\text{85}\) Similar to the fact that there is no physical threat to the body in cinema but that the experience has an impact on the body anyway, the terror part of the sublime is acted upon the body through the mind. As Burke writes, “things that cause terror generally affect the bodily organs by the operation of the mind suggesting the danger.”\(^\text{86}\) The sublime aesthetic experience is this moment “that a long exercise of the mental powers induces a remarkable lassitude of the whole body.”\(^\text{87}\) Thereby, the delightful horror of the sublime corresponds with the confrontation of movement that causes astonishment in very early cinema’s viewing experience. Not only is the subject in both experiences directed to its own fragile existence, in both cases the impact is made on both the mind and the body.

Although Burke describes the delight that comes with the removal of the threat and pain as the uplifting feeling of the sublime experience, Lyotard’s focus is more on the disruptive promise of the sublime aesthetic experience. He writes that, “certain ‘objects’ and certain ‘sensations’ are pregnant with a threat to our self-preservation, and Burke refers to that threat as terror: shadows, solitude, silence and the approach of death may be ‘terrible’ in that they announce that the gaze, the other, language or life will soon be extinguished.”\(^\text{88}\) Lyotard’s description of terror almost invites us to read this in the context of the introduction of the cinematic technique. Undeniably, Maxim Gorky’s account has been crucial for the reinterpretation of very early cinema and its experience. In his account of an early Lumière presentation, he writes of a world deprived from life. This is “not life, but its shadow;” a kingdom “as though condemned to eternal silence and cruelly punished by being deprived of all the colours of life.”\(^\text{89}\) As argued above, this world is a threatening world since it runs against the stability of

\(^{84}\) Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 141.


\(^{86}\) Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 120.

\(^{87}\) Ibid., 122.

\(^{88}\) Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 84 (original emphasis).

\(^{89}\) Gorky, “Last night I was in the Kingdom of Shadows [1896],” 5.
reality and life. Instead, it is a hidden world, a realm of ghosts that moves between life and death reminding the subject of the presence of death in life, acting as modernity’s technological memento mori. In short, the astonishing experience of early cinema functions here as an embodied, affective and thereby ‘before language’ shock that reminds the subject of his or her fragile position in the world and in doing so, ontologically destabilizes the subject’s own vital presence.

While refuting Burke’s empiricist stand, Immanuel Kant did not dispute Burke’s argument on the paradoxical impact of the sublime aesthetic experience and its delightful horror. Similar to Burke, Kant recognized in the sublime a moment of “painfulness” that leads us to the “recognition of our physical helplessness as beings of nature.”90 As Julian Young concludes from this passage, Kant’s point in the negative and painful moment of the sublime is that this emotion directs us to the real object of fear which is our own inevitable death.91 If we read this with an absence of theological dimension, as Lyotard and Jean-Luc Nancy require, the sublime forces the subject to face the void of existence that shows us our limited being; “a generous nothing.”92

A glance into the void of existence means a deep destabilization of the subject. As Amanda du Preez states, “[V]erging on the brink of the abyss, the modern subject loses his/her footing and plunges into an ‘ontological free-fall.’ ”93 At first, the sublime comes with a feeling of loss; a loss of coherence and of self, like Gorky experienced the world through the cinématographe as an estranged world deprived from life, populated with souls “condemned to play cards in silence unto eternity.”94 Moreover, one is not sure what to expect from that world and how to frame it. The early cinema apparatus represented people in motion by which it represents life and yet this was a grey, silent, and lifeless life. Caught between animate/inanimate and life/death, the observer is left in uncertainty on the ontological status of the representation. A similar loss of coherence in the world is expressed by O.Winter who described the chaotic, unfocused representation of the world that led to nowhere. While the cinematic technique was able to record and represent the world mechanically with everything in

90 Kant, Critique of Judgement, 92.
94 Gorky, “Last night I was in the Kingdom of Shadows [1896],” 5.
focus, the author did away with this project of the cinématographe as vulgar; the world needed human selection to acquire coherence.\textsuperscript{95}

One may be tempted to categorize the destabilizing effect present in the writings of Gorky and O. Winter as estrangements on the representational level, and thereby leaving the subject’s own ontology intact. Nevertheless, as describe earlier in this chapter, the embodied experience of film leads us to a close overdetermination of presentation and representation existent in this experience.\textsuperscript{96} Moreover, as Jonathan Crary and Paul Virilio explain, technologies of representation interfere in the subject’s representation in the world.\textsuperscript{97} Consequently, and this is what an analysis from the perspective of the sublime brings up, the disruptive impact of the new technology cuts through representation and addresses the level of presentation, by which it addresses the subject’s arising presence and position in the world. Thereby the ‘ontological free-fall’ of the sublime—the deep destabilization of the subject and its presentation—occurs through the cinematic apparatus to the viewer’s eye, mind, heart, and body, as the shock of the affect caught in the event which cannot be put into words. This leaves Gorky to review his experience as an “extraordinary impression” that almost exceeded his “ability to describe it.”\textsuperscript{98}

The reframing of the astonishing experience of the very early cinema spectator as a sublime aesthetic experience is nothing more and nothing less than the argument that the estrangement that comes with the cinematic technique is felt before representation and language, as the estrangement of the subject’s presentation and presence itself.

While the early experience with the cinematic technique had a deeply destabilizing impact on its audiences, bordering on the ‘ontological free-fall’ present in the negative pleasure of the sublime, there is also a positive undertaking involved in the aesthetic experience of the sublime. Whereas the peek into the void of the sublime heralds the absence of form through understanding and even imagination, there also arises a feeling of experiencing something—the Absolute—beyond the limits of normal perception. The feeling of loss here is not only the negative failure of form, but also the positive freeing from form and concept. As Young explains, the confrontations with the void of nothingness delivers also a feeling of ekstasis in which the subject witnesses that there is something more than the human senses and by which he or she discovers “the ‘supersensible’ nature of one’s being.”\textsuperscript{99} Kant explains this part of the

\textsuperscript{95} O. Winter, “Ain’t it Lifelike! [1896],” 296.
\textsuperscript{96} Sobchack, \textit{Carnal Thoughts}, 146.
\textsuperscript{97} Virilio, \textit{The Aesthetics of Disappearance}, 46. Crary emphasizes this in the introduction to the 2009 edition of this book, as well as in his own study \textit{Techniques of the Observer}.
\textsuperscript{98} Gorky, “Last night I was in the Kingdom of Shadows [1896],” 5.
\textsuperscript{99} Young, “Death and Transfiguration,” 139.
sublime as “the awakening of the feeling of a supersensible faculty within us” by which sublime thinking “evidences a faculty of mind transcending every standard of the senses.”

Young turns to Heidegger when he states that what we need to discover the supersensible nature of our human being is not idealism but “magic realism.” This is the idea that the essence of being is “a ‘plentitude’ of ‘facets’ nearly all of which are unknown to, indeed inconceivable by, us.” Young’s argument on the supersensible runs parallel to what Mulvey describes as the early viewer’s fascination with cinema. As Mulvey remarks, moving on the border between science and a magic trick, the impact of the cinematic technique at its audiences was characterized by the belief that it could expose a layer of reality previously thought to be imperceptible. Although I would emphasize that the outcome of this new realm of representation exceeded the feeling of illusion or a magic trick, the cinematic technique undeniably promised a perception outside the human sensatory by which it alluded to a sort of magic dimension within cinema’s seemingly realism.

The echo of the Heideggerian magic realism that Young describes is also present in Lyotard’s study of Kant. Although he alters the magic into unrepresentable, he maintains the view of the supersensible as an “unbounded field” in which sensation is released from the restrictions of form, concept, and understanding. The sublime then, is a feeling that occurs in “the absence of form, and the twilight of representation.” The paradox or scandal of the moving image wherein movement arises from stillness is situated in the “unbounded field” of the sublime. At the moment of movement that Gunning describes as the key moment in very early cinema’s aesthetic of astonishment, the status of the apparatus escapes form, concept, and understanding. With its ontological status unclear, it becomes “das Unnenbare, the ‘indefinable.’” The moment of movement happens as an “aesthetic Idea” by which it exceeds the sensible. Moving in what Lyotard calls “the agitated zone between life and death,” the sublime “tries to present the fact that there is something unrepresentable.” The project of very early cinema was similar to the unrepresentability principle in the sublime aesthetic experience.

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100 Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 81.
101 Ibid., 141.
102 Mulvey, *Death 24x A Second*, 33.
104 Betz, “Beyond the Sublime,” 373.
Cinema tried to impress and present the movement of life by showing its audiences a succession of 16 or 23 deaths per second.107

As Gunning writes on the aesthetic of astonishment, the audiences were as much bewildered by the technique itself as by what was shown on the screen.108 Thereby, the spectators were as much interested in the gesture and method of representation as they were with the content of the representation on the screen. In this manner, the spectators were astonished by the very act of representation itself. Here, the aesthetic of astonishment of very early cinema coincides with the astonishment present in the sublime. This last astonishment is the absence of form and concept; a terror convoyed by a delight that leaves the subject in stupor and dumbfounded. The outcome of aligning the astonishment of very early cinema in terms of the sublime is that we see that this stupor and dumbfounded impact at the spectator’s side does not stop at the level of content, representation or meaning and understanding, but continues into the deepest level of the subject’s existence, that of presentation and, subsequently, his or her plain presence. When stripped from its content, what is left is only the very beginning; the moment of pure presentation. When imagination is left without concept, it is left to the technique itself, as Nancy writes, “presentation in its free play (...), presenting the one presenting, or representation, absolutely.”109 Here, presentation leads to nothing more and nothing less than presentation. As Lyotard remarks, “The message is the presentation, but it presents nothing; it is, that is, presence.”110

Lynda Nead and André Gaudreault ascertain that the moving image showcases of very early cinema were based on the sheer celebration of the medium’s central characteristic of movement. Thereby, it was centered on the clean fact that movement was present. In that manner, the earliest exhibitions of the cinematic technique involved the sublime aesthetic experience that Nancy describes as “the pure pleasure of pure presentation (...): it satisfies itself with and is satisfied by its power to present and to present itself.”111 Without pointing to a referent, the presentation creates its own shock and its own interruption. Thereby, as he continues, the sublime “transforms or redirects the entire motif of presentation.”112 Whereas presentation normally functions to present (or represent) something,
presentation in the sublime aesthetic experience has a narcissistic, self-centered ambition while it happens for its own sake. When in the very early viewing experience the disruption was taken from the level of representation through the unrepresentable to the fundamental state of presentation, the cinematic movement was not for something (as without intention, or ‘without interest’ as Kant would say), but a sheer celebration of its own existence, of the very fact that it is happening. For very early cinema’s viewing experience this meant the attempt to present movement in its purest form on the level of presentation. This was the presentation of movement to feel movement and the arousal of astonishment to feel astonishment. This marks Gunning’s aesthetic of astonishment as a sublime aesthetic experience.

CONCLUSION

In the introduction of this thesis I stated that this research is an attempt to revisit, and consequently rethink, the viewing experience of very early cinema as a sublime aesthetic experience. Moreover, this rethinking of the viewing experience at the moment of the cinematic technique’s introduction to the popular audience focuses on the parallels between Gunning’s “aesthetic of astonishment” and the “negative pleasure” involved in the sublime as distinguished by philosophers as Burke, Kant and Lyotard. Already in the first chapter of this thesis we have seen that the cinematic technique was introduced in the realm of the technological sublime as an attraction of man-made technology that created an innovation in representation that was thought to be impossible. This chapter continued the argument that the introduction of the cinematic technique should be investigated in the specific context of a popularized sublime aesthetic experience centered on techniques instead of object of nature.

For us, as cinema audience in the 2010s, the astonishing impact of the cinematic technique may be hard to imagine. Moving images have become part of our natural habitat since we see them not only in film theaters but also in our homes, at our streets, and in our hands with the rise of the smart phones by which we can watch and record movies at any instant and everywhere. Therefore, as I have argued in the first chapter, it is important to treat the introduction of the cinematic technique as a specific moment in time that occurs within a specific context. Furthermore, as I have outlined in this chapter, we should recognize that something that has become so natural to us was at the moment of introduction completely unnatural. By emphasizing the impact that the moving image made at its initial moment on its earliest audiences, we become aware that the estrangement that this new technique caused was not
limited to the methods of representation, but cut through the flesh of the body towards an estrangement of the subject’s presentation, and thereby presence, itself. Consequently, I am not arguing that the moving image still astonishes audiences into a sublime aesthetic experience today, but only that it has functioned that way. It is important to keep in mind that the “dazzling appearance” that cinema was at the point of its introduction wears easily off. The shock of newness gives way to familiarization and habitualization. In this respect, as Gunning explains, “astonishment is inherently an unstable and temporary experience.”

Thereby, again, the astonishment of early cinema runs parallel with the astonishment that is present in the sublime aesthetic experience. As Kant describes, astonishment occurs as a shock that happens at the first instance when the mind encounters a representation that is “incompatible with the principles already grounded in the mind, and that accordingly makes one doubt one’s own eyes or question one’s own judgement.” Although the shock can recur continually when the habitualized routine is destabilized and the viewer is made sensitive to the technique of representation again (as an aesthetic method frequently employed by the avant-garde), this later derivative of astonishment could be seen as admiration or a different kind of estrangement from the sublime since the primary shock of the new which surpasses understanding and representation is only limited to the first instance.

Now, what lesson is learned here? What knowledge is gained with the project of reframing early cinema’s astonishing experience as a sublime aesthetic experience, apart from a historical contextual specificity? A critic could argue that the sublime is a rhetoric trick while he does away with this research as an aesthetic play with formulas. However, I believe that there is relevance to this re-visitiation of very early cinema.

First of all, what I have argued in this chapter is that the astonishing experience of very early cinema was aroused by witnessing a (yet imperfect) representation of pure movement that was thought to be unrepresentable before. Obviously, people were well familiar with idea of movement that they encountered in everyday life, but to see it reproduced through a technique aimed attention to movement itself. Thereby, the true attraction of the earliest moving images was its representation of movement that paradoxically cut through the level of representation to enforce a disruptive impact on the level of presentation. This allows us to see the first films and exhibitions of this new representational

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114 Kant, Critique of Judgement, 193.
115 See Annie van den Oever, Sensitizing the Viewer: The Impact of New Techniques and the Art Experience (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press and Stedelijk Museum, 2011).
technique as a violation and the short-circuiting of the representational order since they did not deliver content or message, but centered on plain presentation, on the gesture of the representation itself. What Doane, Gaudreault and Lyotard called the “sheer celebration of movement,” the “zero degree filming” or the “acinema.”

The violation of the representational order confirms the media historiography of theorists as Friedrich Kittler and others who hold that the history of media is not a continuous linear flow, but the sum of distinctive disruptive moments that break with previous conditions. However, we should add to this historiography that this disruption of the representational order aroused a specific astonishment that, to paraphrase Gunning, the spectator felt in his guts and throughout his body. What was presented here, as I have argued, was the Idea of movement, as something that was could not be brought to form or concept by understanding while obstructing any system of language. This aroused a paradoxical shock at the side of the spectator which is “the contradiction par excellence” of the sublime; it promised both the void of smallness of being as death present in life, while at the same time this realization arouses an elevated feeling of unlimited freedom of the senses and a sensitized awareness of aliveness. The shock of the suspension of the representational order and the presentation of the Idea of movement thereby aims at the trepidation of the sublime as the presentation of the sheer fact “that there is something nonpresentable (... that there is negative being).”

Thereby, the astonishing experience of very early cinema delivered a shock into the deepest level of the subject, towards an estrangement and realization of “the banal sense, it is the emotion of the subject at the limit.” Moreover, it is the mere reminder of our unpretentious circumstance “that presentation takes place.”

Concluding, this argument affirms that the introduction technique was indeed a disruptive experience for both the representational order and its subject. However, as a sublime aesthetic reading of the astonishing experience of very early cinema reveals, the shocking experience went deeper into the subject than an estrangement in optics or in the mind. The astonishment of very early cinema was caused by a shock that went into the subject’s vicera; into the subject’s existence and presence. In the sublime, the subject needs to recover and resettle itself which leaves a mark afterwards. However, this

117 Gunning, “Moving Away from the Index,” 45-47.
119 Ibid., 96.
120 Nancy, “The Sublime Offering,” 44.
121 Ibid., 39.
refuses to be grasped in words and understanding, or even imagination. As Lyotard concludes, “[A]fter the sublime, we find ourselves after the will.”122 It leaves a gap to be interpreted while we are unable to do so. Thereby, we can conclude that the destabilization of the subject’s presentation that the cinematic technique caused left a gap to be recovered, while the subject was unable to. To neglect its impact while the damage is already done is the response, or, with Lyotard’s words, “Always forgotten, it is unforgettable.”123 This opens the door to research on the institutionalization of cinema in which the representational system was recovered while the aesthetic of astonishment could never be completely forgotten.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, cinema was introduced as part of an ongoing project of optical inventions. As Jonathan Crary eloquently has shown, although these techniques of vision were introduced and popularized as toys and attractions, their impact was more than playful entertainment. These techniques abstracted and reconstructed optical experience by which they took on subjectivity and the subject’s presentation in the world.124 Thereby, as Gunning concludes, cinema was both the popular astonishing attraction as well as a significant “philosophical toy” for rethinking these issues.125 The interpretation of the experience of movement as a sublime aesthetic experience as offered in this chapter construed an argument on how the subject’s presence was destabilized through a paradoxical shock.

The astonishing experience of very early cinema then, was a sublime aesthetic experience in which presentation itself took center stage. This sublime is what Nancy calls “an aesthetics of movement” and “the gesture of the infinite.”126 It is at once everything (since presentation is everything) while at the same time it fails to represent anything (a zero degree of representation, or “zero degree of filming”). To end with the beautiful words of Virginia Woolf on cinema, “it can say everything before is has anything to say.”127

123 Ibid., 143.
“A continues dying and reviving in the same instant. The end of time and space! The destruction of gravity! The secret of four dimensional motion.”

— Theo van Doesburg writing on cinema to fellow De Stijl member J.J.P. Oud.¹

¹ Theo van Doesburg was reviewing a Keystone-Comedy and writing this in a letter to the architect J.J.P Oud. As cited in Ansje van Beusekom, “Theo van Doesburg and Writings on Film in De Stijl,” in Avant-Garde and Criticism, Avant-Garde Critical Studies, ed. Klaus Beekman and Jan de Vries (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 57.
CHAPTER THREE:

THE MOVING IMAGE AND THE SUBLIME EXPERIENCE OF TIME IN VERY EARLY CINEMA

In the previous chapter we have seen the impact of movement on the very early cinema spectators. For this chapter I would like to continue this argument by taking it one step further. The main premises here is that the movement of the images gives way to time. At the specific moment of movement that was so pivotal for the very early viewing experience, as the moment when the apparatus was started and the image on the screen changed from a still photograph to a moving image, there occurred a double temporality. Above the then-ness of the photograph (the evidence of something which was before the camera in the past tense), there was put a now-ness of the moving image which occurred in present tense.\(^2\) Thereby, what the cinema spectator witnessed at the moment of movement was the creation of a present or a lived time out that aroused from the past.

The astonishment that was so characteristic for very early cinema’s viewing experience is not only evoked by movement, but also by the result of the movement on screen, which is the representation of time. This is a representation that is experienced in the present and thereby delivers a sort of instant time. Writing on the temporality of the earliest cinema screenings, Tom Gunning states that although their temporal stretch (both in story time and in screen time) was limited, in the cinema of attractions temporality was “possessing its own intensity.”\(^3\) The ‘gesture of presentation’ in which the cinematic technique aroused astonishment at the spectator’s side was emphasizing a suspense different from narrative tension. The excitement of the audience was due to the possibility to witness the “sudden burst of presence” that cinema offered. The showman that presented the spectacle emphasized this tension before the image started to move. As a result, once the apparatus was started and the representation was moving on the screen, the spectator’s attention was focused on the pure present

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\(^2\) See Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second* (London: Reaktion, 2006). At first instance, the moment the image is shown, it is available in the present tense (as the present experience of the world), while, and this is maybe more important, the experience of the moving images is an (embodied) experience that takes on the present tense.

tense of the presentation. While knowing that these images were previously recorded and thereby belonged to the past, the audience was experiencing the images as if they were alive and in the present. In the attraction of cinema, the antithesis of knowing the truth of technique while experiencing the illusion was maximized. However, as Gunning concludes, “the attraction offers a jolt of pure presence, soliciting surprise, astonishment, or pure curiosity instead of following the enigmas on which narrative depends.”

The astonishing experience that the present tense of the moving image aroused can be seen as an effect of the unpredictability of the present. Thereby, the possibility of witnessing something volatile like the present functioned as an attraction in itself. As Gunning explains, the delight of the spectator “comes from the unpredictability of the instant, as succession of excitements and frustrations whose order cannot be predicted . . . Each instant offers the possibility of a radical alteration or termination.”

In her book *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, Mary Ann Doane supplies an important analysis on the aspect of time at the moment of the introduction of the cinematic technique. Her study takes up the enthusiasm around the emerging cinema that allowed the human to record, capture and represent the record of time. While the present was only visible to the human eye in a restricted form, in a sense that it could not be revisited again, the cinematic technique promised the recording, archiving, and subsequently representation of this previously unrepresentable fleeing moment. The cinematic technique then, captured and represented even the contingencies that escaped the human eye at first sight. As Doane writes,

> The significance of the cinema, in this context, lies in its apparent capacity to perfectly represent the contingent, to provide the pure record of time. And this effort is particularly legible in the most dominant genre of the early cinema—the actuality, which appeared to capture a moment, to register and repeat ‘that which happens’.

The presentation of ‘this’ or ‘here it is’ that Doane distinguishes as very early cinema’s fascination with the indexical sign was the source of astonishment for the spectator. More than anything, the cinematic technique at its moment of introduction questioned time itself and made time felt again. Therefore, I would argue that the experience that the very early spectators were involved in can be seen as a sublime aesthetic experience. As a rapturous and destabilizing experience that comes with the representation of something unrepresentable, the sublime aesthetic experience draws the subject back

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5 Ibid., 10-11.
to its own presentation in the world. At the very early cinema exhibitions the spectators witnessed something that was thought to be unrepresentable made present in a pure representation. Moreover, this impossible representation which delivered an experience on the level of presentation was produced by a machine, by which the technique surpassed human vision while uncovering the realm of the present normally which was thought to be inaccessible for the senses. As a result of the pure presentation of time which we can distinguish as the presentation of the Idea of time, this made time itself reconsidered and felt again.

What is more, the cinematic technique promised an accessibility of an ever accelerating time flow through the storage and reliving of instants from the present. Though the ‘scandal’ of cinema is that its movement arises from separate still images, the spectator’s interest was in the representation of the past into the present. Thereby, the fascination for cinema coincided with Étienne-Jules Marey’s sublime desire to “represent all time—to a dream of representation without loss.” The purpose of this chapter is to outline the impact of the representation of time that came with the very early viewing experience. The experience of cinematic time at the very first years of cinema was centered on an astonishing experience of the present tense. Moreover, I argue that this impact on the viewer could be seen a sublime aesthetic experience in which presence (as a being-in-the-world) and the experience of time itself comes into question.

This chapter will start with a sketch of a period in modernity around the introduction of cinema as a moment when time became important. Time began to matter for both philosophy and everyday life, and was experienced as an ongoing flow that accelerated while it brought along more uncertainty. Thereby, this can be seen as the discourse of the sublime, as an accumulation of networks and contexts in which the sublime aesthetic experience flourishes. Thereafter, the focus of this chapter shifts to an analysis of the representation of time through its indexicality. As Doane puts forward, the indexical character of cinema is the inscription of time. Thereby, the indexical promises of the new cinematic technique were crucial for the astonishment that the early cinema spectators experienced. The unrepresentable character and the ‘now-ness’ of presentation will direct us to the sublime aesthetic

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7 Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 61.
8 The distinction discourse of the sublime and discourse on the sublime I derive from Peter de Bolla who describes that the discourse on the sublime would be the concrete discussion that addresses the sublime whereas the discourse of the sublime stretches to multiple other discourses that somehow relate to the sublime. See Peter de Bolla, *The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics and the Subject* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).
9 Although its indexical capability was “cinema’s most striking characteristic”, this does not mean that cinema presents only an indexical sign. Moreover, as Doane emphasizes, “photography and film seem to be excellent examples of sign systems that merge icon, index and, to some extend, symbol.” See Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 93.
experience as outlined by Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Luc Nancy. The next part of this chapter continues this argument by focusing on the contingency in very early cinema’s representation. Here, the emphasis is on the astonishing experience that comes with viewing the present-tense representation as a result of the unpredictability of the present. Running against the logic and empty of meaning, the contingency present in very early cinema breaks the representational order. Against the vision of the selecting human eye, the mechanical eye of the camera represents the accidental and irrational abyss of life. In doing so, the subject’s presence in the world itself comes into question. Together, these three parts will deliver an in depth reframing of the experience of time in very early cinema as a sublime aesthetic experience.

THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY AS AN ERA WHEN TIME MATTERED

At the end of the previous chapter I concluded, following Jonathan Crary and Tom Gunning, that at the time of its introduction the cinema functioned both as a popular attraction as well as a ‘philosophical toy’ through which current ideas on movement and (re-)presentation could be presented. However, in its double function of a popular attraction deeply imbedded in the late nineteenth century spirit of age or ‘Zeitgeist’, the cinematic technique also represented the current ideas and beliefs on the concept of time. It is not coincidental that the moving image was introduced at the late nineteenth century. Almost simultaneously inventors throughout a variety of western countries where modernity and urbanization accelerated the pace of life were working on techniques to capture and represent movement and time. Following the photographic techniques of Muybridge and Marey, innovators as the Lumière brothers in France, Thomas Edison (or Jenkins and Armat) in the United States, R.W. Paul in England, and Max Skladanowsky in Germany all in a time span of less than twelve months, more or less separately, introduced their own variety to the technique to present moving images to the public. The excitement to work on a technique that represented time and movement was, as it were, in the modern air.

As the discourse in which cinema arrived, the context and surrounding of modernity was crucial for the different innovators to work in excitement on the same sort of machine. Important parts of this context were the ideas on time and space that entered the public life and the philosophical debate in

the late nineteenth century. As Georg Simmel outlined in his essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life” from 1903, this was a time when standardized time and precision started to influence modern man’s organization and perception of the world. He states that the “universal diffusion of pocket watches” is the symbol of the “modern mind [which] has become more and more a calculating one.” According to Simmel, the aspect of time became fundamental for life and economy in the urban environment. Moreover, this had consequences as profound and evocative that it came “immediately into contact with the depths of the soul (...) [that] bound up with the final decisions concerning the meaning and the style of life.” More than anything, at the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century life accelerated in modern society. This acceleration was felt through overwhelming stimuli in the senses; a world that was phenomenologically felt as “quicker, more chaotic, fragmented, and disorienting than in previous phrases of human culture.” It is in this accelerated experience of the world that time becomes calculable, rationalized and abstracted.

Earlier in the nineteenth century, the railway system was crucial for the rethinking of time. As Wolfgang Schivelbusch famously described, the railway gave way to a new perception of time in which time was rationalized and industrialized. The speed by which people could now travel by train drastically reduced geographical distance. In 1839 an English journalist wrote that with the railroad distances shrunk so profoundly that “the surface of our country would, as it were, shrivel in size until it became not much bigger than one immense city.” As a result of the geographical reduction in space, there also occurred a ‘temporal shrinkage’ in which time was rationalized and intensified. As David Nye points out, the popular enthusiasm for the railway was due to the belief that it conquered time and space. Thereby the railroad functioned as the connection between worlds and times that were previously seen as separate and distanced. While nations were previously shattered, the railway constructed a whole out of them by implementing one almost divine system of standardized time. By 1883 the U.S. imposed a uniform time while Greenwich was agreed as the meridian for time by twenty-five countries in 1884. Although by heralding a standard time the introduction of the railroad brought an

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12 Simmel, “Metropolis and Mental Life”.
almost god-like power to control time in the country, it thereby also questioned time as a matter and put the issue of time on the agenda of public debates and philosophers.

It seems illustrative that after his book on the important invention and utilization of the railway Schivelbusch directed his attention to electricity.\footnote{Wolfgang Schivelbusch, \textit{Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century} (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988).} Like the railroad, the invention of electrical light altered the organization of modern life. Moreover, it extended human control over time since, mystically spoken, the night used to stand for chaos, dreams, ghosts and demons, and other irrationalities. It was electricity that conquered the night and extended the day as workable and livable realm. Moreover, where it is the railroad that had shrunken time and space, it was electricity that moved on the border of the instantaneous. As Stephen Kern points out, it is in electricity that characteristics of modernity like shock, instantaneity, and acceleration and punctuality (in both working time and private life) coincide within one technology.\footnote{Stephen Kern, \textit{The Culture of Time and Space: 1880 – 1918} (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983), 15. See also Lucy Fischer, “‘The Shock of the New’: Electrification, Illumination, Urbanization, and the Cinema,” in \textit{Cinema and Modernity}, ed. Murray Pomerance (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 19-37.}

Electricity, the railroad and other technologies, together with scientific discoveries and philosophy and arts, altered the concept of time and space in the late nineteenth century. This leads the historian Kern to the conclusion that “a cultural revolution of the broadest scope was taking place, one that involved essential structures of human experience and basic form of human expression.”\footnote{Kern, \textit{The Culture of Time and Space}, 6.} While major technologies restructured time in modern urban life, personal technologies as the watch made time accessible and closely present to the human body. Next to that, in the arts and philosophy, people evaluated the changes in the concepts of time and space. New representational techniques that were introduced around that time had the unique status of being both an attractive innovative technology as well as a reflective medium or popularized philosophical toy. The introduction of cinematic technique can be rightfully situated and understood within this context.

This context then, evoked a certain experience or a general feeling wherein the technological sublime could occur which, in turn, manifested itself through the astonishing experience of very early cinema. As Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer remarkably described in the years after Simmel, the cinema echoed the rush of modernity with all its shocks, jerkiness, mechanization and distraction.\footnote{For an important overview on Kracauer and Benjamin on modernity and cinema see the writings of Miriam Hansen. Her main studies are collected in her last book \textit{Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno} (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012).} For these philosophers as well as for early twentieth century avant-gardists, cinema became an ‘emblem of
modernity. What modernity did to time was turning it into a rush of shocks and flows. In the urban streets the pace of life accelerated with the introduction of streetcars, bicycles and automobiles. As the French novelist Paul Adam wrote in 1907, this resulted in a “cult of speed” that was performed by a generation that aimed “to conquer time and space.” According to Nye, this relation to time is what characterizes the technological sublime when he concludes that, “While the natural sublime is related to eternity, the technological sublime aims at the future and is often embodied in instruments of speed, such as the railway, the airplane, and the rocket, that annihilate time and distance.”

The different avant-gardist movements of the early twentieth century reflected upon the question what the acceleration of life and the shrinkage of time and space meant for humanity. In his 1909 “Futurist Manifesto”, Marinetti confidently proclaimed that, “Time and Space died yesterday. We already live in the absolute, because we have created eternal, omnipresent speed.” The Futurists admired the cinematic technique for delivering an experience that mirrored the “fleeting synthesis of life in the world.” The cinematic technique could present an experience of “simultaneity and interpenetration of different times and places,” by which it was both in the past and in the present, and at a distance as well as nearby. The Dutch artistic movement De Stijl, with Theo van Doesburg as one of the founding members, similarly proclaimed “a new consciousness of time” that celebrated universal time over individual or subjective time. Film, with its “modern abstract universality” could make this new dimension of time visible. With these characteristics cinema served as emblematic for the human experience of modernity. As Kern points out, this experience was one of an intensified present which “embraced the entire globe and included halos of the past and future.” The cinema, as the ‘emblem’ of this new experience, was positioned at the side of the absolute while reaching the far limit of what was possible in representation. When moving on the limit of time representation, the

22 As cited in Kern, The Culture of Time and Space, 111.
23 Nye, American Technological Sublime, 61. Although it is out of the scope of this essay, it is interesting how the annihilation of time and distance is also involved in the current techniques of media and representation. But this would be something for a whole other study.
24 As cited in Kern, The Culture of Time and Space, 98.
25 Ibid., 72.
27 “Manifest I van ’De Stijl’”, as cited in van Beusekom,”Theo van Doesburg and Writings on Film in De Stijl,” 56, 60, 62.
28 Kern, The Culture of Time and Space, 88.
cinematic technique was celebrated for allowing an experience of the past into the present, and the distant at closeness.

Although Paul Virilio politically and ideologically stands miles away from Marinetti, his writings (disapprovingly) echo the cult of speed that the Futurists admired. Writing on the acceleration of world into an eternal present, Virilio critically describes that the “supreme goal of technique. . . [is] their purpose to create time out of everything, a time that would no longer be one, where *one simply exists*, a time that would be on earth yet nowhere.”29 Though it originates from the world, this is a temporality which lost every reference to the world’s time flow. Notably, it is the cinématographe that is described as the initial metaphor of accelerated time in modernity. According to the French philosopher, it is the cinematic technique that radically altered society’s experience of time by supplying a new aesthetic of movement, in which the present and immediacy triumphed over the static and the past that were dominant before modernity. Experience to Virilio is altered by the radical shift in mode of perception that a new technique of vision can effect. Therefore, we should interpret the introduction of the cinematic technique in relation to the changing concepts of time and, consequently, the altering experience of time that destabilized the subject’s presence and position in the world.

The change in time experience and the concept of the present in an accelerated time flow was what the introduction of cinematic technique put into question to its spectators.30 As I will argue below, this radical change in the experience or sensation of time gives way to the sublime aesthetic experience. The new cinematic technique, through its indexical character and capability to capture the contingent, crystalizes this essential disruptive shift in time experience. From here, I will leave behind the surrounding context and the discourse of the sublime and move toward the discourse on this matter to answer the question how the sublime was aroused from inside this very early cinematic experience.

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30 I am well aware that to claim that technique alters the experience of time runs up against a lot of opposition in the ‘hard’ sciences. In this perspective, there is only one experience of time. However, I stick to the modernity thesis that was also famously defended by Walter Benjamin. Moreover, I think that we should interpret this as the ‘software’ that changes (as opposed to the ‘hardware’ of experience in our brains). Thereby, experience and subsequently perception *does* change. See for example Noël Carroll, “Modernity and the Plasticity of Perception,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 59, 1 (Winter 2001): 11-17. Possibly, the experience of time that I refer to stands close to what Merleau-Ponty would call “sensation” as the basic of experience and subsequently perception.
So far we have seen that the cinematic technique arrived at a moment in history when time not only mattered but also evoked a new kind of unstable experience. Either as a source of anxiety or celebrated with enthusiasm, the new presence of time in modernity’s experience was a problem for representation. The cinematic technique should be seen as an answer to the problem of representation of time while being the incarnation of the impact of this new, accelerated (and abstracted) time and the intensified present. Friedrich Kittler importantly wrote that cinema, together with the typewriter and gramophone, should be understood first and foremost as an ‘event storage system’. The unique capability of the gramophone and the cinématographe was its ability to store and write with time. The cinematic technique thereby balanced on the border of the representational since, as Kittler writes, “[T]ime (…) is what determines the limits of all art.”31

The astonishment at the side of very early cinema’s spectator can be seen as a result of the cinematic technique’s ability to move on the frontier of the representational. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the moment of movement was decisive for the strong impact that the new technique made on its audiences. Thereby, movement gave way to unthinkable representation, arousing a feeling of sudden presence with the viewer. Following movement, the aspect of time is also crucial at the same moment. As argued at the beginning of this chapter, it is movement that gives way to a present tense that transforms the static and past image into an experience that is lived through.32 As outlined in the previous chapter, at the moment of movement, the ‘pastness’ of the photograph turned into the ‘nowness’ of the moving image. What the spectator witnessed at the moment of movement was the pure capability of the medium to revisit the past as a present experience. Although the moving image is actually the blending of the two temporalities (as Laura Mulvey has shown), it nevertheless creates an embodied experience of the present tense at its outcome. However, at the same time, the temporality of the moving image is also troubled by the temporality of the external world since the real time that is actually lived by the spectators in the exhibition room does not disappear. The cinema then is a mechanism that involves multiple levels of time. The moment of movement—as the decisive moment when the impact of the new technique was maximized—can be seen as the realization of these multiple

temporalities involved in the cinematic technique. What the very early cinema spectators witnessed at this moment was the installment of different temporalities into the present.

What the cinematic technique delivered at that time was a representation of that which was at the far limit of the representable, namely time. As Stephen Kern already indicated, around the turn of the century time was experienced as an intensified present. The past and the future collided into the present. Important for this understanding of time was the French philosopher Henri Bergson who wrote extensively on the idea of duration. In his book *Time and Free Will* from 1889 he wrote that although we can in common understanding and everyday conversation separate the past and the present, in our experience of the world, each moment “represents the whole, and cannot be distinguished or isolated from it except by abstract thought.” Instead of separate units of time, the past and the present collide into an “organic whole”. Although Bergson disliked the idea of cinema as the representation of time for its succession of separate instants into one whole, we could, drawing on Gilles Deleuze’s interpretation, state that the cinematic technique drags the pastness of photographs into the presentness of moving image experience. Thereby, the cinematic technique positively forms a representation of time.

Cinema then, seems to present the “organic whole” of time. As Mary Ann Doane extensively points out in her book *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, the introduction of cinema was accompanied with the belief that this new technique of event storage in time could record and represent the flow of time. Thereby, the past was defeated and resurrected in the present. By this means, as Doane observes,

*Cinema presents the illusion (...) of what Marey could only dream about, the possibility of a continuous and nonselective recording of real time. . . It refuses to acknowledge the loss of time on which it is based. . . Death, the most corrosive effect of time, is vanquished by an apparatus understood to contain the potential of flawless storage.*

Moreover, the possibility that these moments from the past could be represented into the present was what made the event storage through moving images so revolutionary for audiences and artists at the late nineteenth century. This was deeply imbedded in the idea of modernity that aimed to conquer time and space by the use of man-made technology. For, as Doane also determines, “[T]he manifest project of modernity—and of the cinema in the wake of Marey and Muybridge—is to make time visible, representable, to store and, hence, to defeat time as relentless passage.” Thereby, the introduction of

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34 See Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 175.
35 Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 62.
36 Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 190.
the cinematic technique was the ultimate effort to move on the limit of art and on the border of the representable. Even in our cinema experience today, the belief of time captured affects our viewing experience. When we watch old movies, whether it be from the Lumière or Griffith, there is a feeling of ‘there it is’, or, as Mulvey puts it, the “fascination of time fossilized.”\(^{37}\) For cinema’s earliest viewers, this experience of time captured and aesthetically relived must have been a key attraction.

Central to this faith in the capacity of cinema to capture and represent time was the cinematic technique’s indexical nature. Where Marey and Muybridge already wanted to inscribe a “pure graph of time”, the cinematic technique was the automaton that could mechanically record and represent what was before the camera. Moreover, the differences between the frames which cause the movements on the screen, can be seen as the inscription of time itself. The inscription of movement is the plain record that something happened at a specific time, and consequently, that time passed by. As the result of a state that was once present, the indexical sign becomes “the signature of temporality.”\(^{38}\) For its earliest audiences, this was a fascinating and astonishing capacity of the new cinematic technique. “At its birth”, as Doane writes in an article on the indexical sign, “the cinema’s most striking characteristic was, in fact, its indexicality, commented upon in countless newspaper and magazine articles that heralded the new technology’s ability to capture time and movement.”\(^{39}\)

Although Charles Sanders Peirce only occasionally wrote about photography and never about the cinema, his theory on the indexical sign shows important parallels with the cinematic technique. The indexical relation then, is the most direct relation possible between the object and its reference. It is that sign in the present that is ontologically dependent on the past, on the object that once was there. At the same time, as Peirce points out, the indexical sign is one that is identified as an activity of referencing and pointing. Two of Peirce’s favorite examples, the pointing finger and the weathercock on top of the church tower, coincide the past and the present at the closest instant.\(^{40}\) The pure indexical sign uses a causal and instant connection between the object and the referent, creating a relation between the two where the past and present collide and are “inextricably bound together.”\(^{41}\) The temporality in Charles Peirce’s theory on the indexical sign is one of present tense. Among his examples he indicates pronouns as ‘here’, ‘now’, ‘this’, ‘that’, and ‘I’ and ‘she’ as deictic terms that function as indexical signs. As an activity of the sign, it is as if the object “is made present to the addressee.”

\(^{38}\) Doane, \textit{The Emergence of Cinematic Time}, 16.  
\(^{39}\) Mary Ann Doane, “The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity,” \textit{Differences} 18, 1 (Spring 2007): 129.  
\(^{41}\) Doane, \textit{The Emergence of Cinematic Time}, 101
Thereby, as Doane indicates, the experience of presence is involved in the indexical sign, for, “[W]hile the index hovers on the cusp of presence and pastness, it always seems to be haunted by an aspiration to presence.”\(^\text{42}\) In this response, the confrontational experience of the very early cinematic technique can be seen as a confrontation with the pure method of the indexical sign. At the moment of movement, the viewer witnessed, probably for the first time, a trace from the past turning into a presentation in the present.

In his illuminating study on presence, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht confirms this relation between deixis and presence. As he observers, is it not by coincidence that Heidegger’s term *Dasein*—an important understanding in the debate on presence—contains the deictic signification ‘da’ (as German for ‘there’).\(^\text{43}\) Although Gumbrecht does not get involved in the theory of signs, he does mention the experience of presence as characterized by an “extreme temporality”; a “hit” that strikes us with a “suddeness and farewell.”\(^\text{44}\) Similar to the indexical sign, the experience of presence happens inside the flux of time yet it is “actualized” in the smallest moment. Therefore, as the moving image reduces even further the gap between the past and the present (at least in the viewer’s experience), the cinematic technique’s capacity as an indexical sign gives way to an experience of presence.

As Frank Ankersmit points out, the experience of presence that Gumbrecht delivers—a concept close to that of Jean-Luc Nancy and aligned to “aesthetic experience”—could be interpreted as a shudder that is “suggestive to the shock of the sublime.”\(^\text{45}\) Thereby, as I will explain below, it is the sublime aesthetic experience that underlies the burst of presence that comes with the indexicality of cinematic technique. However, differing from Ankersmit,\(^\text{46}\) I would like to turn to the contemporary French reading of the sublime for its incorporation of time and presence into the discourse on the sublime. Recurring in Jean-François Lyotard’s reading of the sublime is that the radical aesthetic experience of the sublime occurs with the representation of the unrepresentable, or consequently, its

\(^{42}\) Ibid., 92 and 219-220.


\(^{44}\) Gumbrecht, *The Production of Presence*, 58 and 101. Gumbrecht derives these concepts from Jean-Luc Nancy and Karn Heinz Bohrer’s writings on presence.


\(^{46}\) Although Ankersmit also crosses the bridge between presence and the sublime aesthetic experience, his reading of the sublime is not solely based on Kant. His aim is to involve the Romantic notion of experience in the discourse that is dominated by language and Enlightenment. See Frank Ankersmit, *De Sublieme Historische Ervaring* (Groningen: Historische Uitgeverij, 2007), 27. Although I deeply admire his cause, my aim for the current topic is to stay close to the Kantian sublime.
ability to present the very fact that there is something unpresentable.\(^{47}\) Like Kittler who already stated that time was at the limits of all art, Lyotard posits his unpresentable thesis of the sublime in close relation with the concept of time. He famously celebrated Barnett Newman’s statement that “the sublime is Now”, not as the localization of the ‘present instant’ but at the very instant; the mere question “Is it happening?”\(^{48}\)

Above I have outlined that the indexical sign in the early cinematic technique functioned as the shock of a short-cut through past to the present where, as a result, the feeling of presence actively presented itself. The sublime aesthetic experience deploys a similar method. Already in the previous chapter we outlined in the sublime the suspension of all form and concept. As a direct result of this, as Lyotard explains Kant, the sublime is “the destruction of the temporality proper to all presentation.”\(^{49}\)

Moreover, while Lyotard seems to follow Bergson’s notion of duration which leaves no room for sequential time and the isolated present, in the sublime aesthetic experience this natural flow is suspended. Notably, the flow of time, or to use the pre-Bergsonian Kantian term Zeitfolge or “time series”,\(^{50}\) is the a priori condition for experience. Thereby, time (together with space) constitutes the “inner sense” that makes experience and understanding possible. So, with the sublime aesthetic experience the flow of temporality is destructed victimizing the “inner sense”. In so doing, the “sublime feeling strikes a blow at the very foundation of the ‘subject.’”\(^{51}\)

Lyotard’s reading of Barnett Newman’s avant-garde paintings can be helpful to see how this disruption of time is situated in the instant. What these paintings deliver then, is a “sensation of time” deprived from meaning and even, in some way, from space. As Lyotard states, if there is “any ‘subject-matter’, it is immediacy.”\(^{52}\) This sensation of time in the sublime is due to the realization of the mere fact that time is present as the articulation of the simple circumstance “that something is happening”. “What happens comes later,” as the French philosopher outlines. This is not to say that the sublime is

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\(^{49}\) Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, 143.


\(^{51}\) Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, 144.

\(^{52}\) Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 82.
the instant that has been taken out of time. On the contrary, the disruptive experience of the sublime is an acknowledgement of existence in time. As Lyotard cites Friedrich Hölderlin: “At the extreme limit of distress, there is in fact nothing left but the conditions of time and space.” In the sublime aesthetic experience it is precisely these “pure conditions”, the fundamentals to experience, that are disrupted. In this manner, what is at stake is presentation (as the ‘coming-into-presence’ or the arrival of presence) itself. On an equal level, the attraction of witnessing the indexical sign is located, as Doane puts it, in “the sheer evidence that something has happened.” Thereby, this attraction for the indexical sign aligns itself with the sublime as directing to these “pure conditions” of existence.

Similar to the deictic message of the pure index which is nothing more and nothing less than the pointing finger, the sublime according to Lyotard is the pure presentation that delivers “a feeling of ‘there’ (Voilà).” Moreover, the object of the sublime is a referent without story and deprived of message. It just ‘says’ “Here I am” and “Look at me”. The sublime functions as a pointing out, a delivery without content. As Jean-Luc Nancy emphasizes, it is a mere “act”, a “gesture” that is “fundamentally open”. In the temporality of the sublime the past and the uncertainty of any future collide in the present. In addition to Nancy, Jacob Rogozinski stresses that the temporality of the sublime is the violation of the appearance of time in common understanding as a “homogeneous flux” that distances the present from the past and the future. The sublime is the breaking of this schema, allowing freedom and uncertainty to penetrate the present.

There are close parallels here between the sublime aesthetic experience and the indexical sign. As I argued above, both the indexical sign in its deictic form and the sublime aesthetic experience are “gesture” of presentation. Instead of delivering a message, both the index as well as the sublime aesthetic experience involves the plain act of pointing, or presenting. As Doane explains Peirce, “the index is evacuated of content; it is a hollowed out sign.” Moreover, the directness of the indexical sign moves on the limit of representation at the realm where the plain gesture of here becomes “a kind of absolute.” The strong feeling of presence, which is closely linked to the sublime through presentation, indicates a similar deictic gesture without content. This feeling of presence, as a lightning strike that

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54 Doane, “The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity,” 135.
55 Ibid., 80.
56 Ibid., 81.
58 Jacob Rogozinski, “The Gift of the World,” in *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question*, 144
60 Thierry de Duve as cited in Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 215.
occurs and vanishes, is a “moment of intensity” that is evacuated of all meaning; there is nothing to be learned from them.\textsuperscript{51} This all aligns to Lyotard’s reading of the sublime aesthetic experience as the absolute of representation (“the representation of the unrepresentable”) by presenting the act of presentation itself. As the French philosopher writes on the meaning of the sublime, “[T]he message is the presentation, but it presents nothing; it is, that is, presence.”\textsuperscript{62} Thereby, the sublime is the aesthetic experience that underlies the impact of the index and its feeling of presence.

As we have seen, the index was also responsible for the astonishing signature of time in the newly introduced cinematic technique. In this respect, as a mixture of double temporality, the indexical sign brought the past into the present. Especially at the moment of movement that was so fundamental for the astonishing experience of very early cinema’s viewers, the spectators witnessed the indexical sign coming into being as resurrecting from the past (the stilled photograph) toward the present (the moving image). Not only did this allude to the modern experience of time which brought an intensification of the present in which the past and the future collided in the present through duration, it also made the time \textit{felt} for the spectator. This was a feeling without meaning. Thereby, it alluded to the unrepresentational character of time which is subject to the sublime aesthetic experience. It is this sublime aesthetic experience that delivers an experience of the disruption of temporality that is so fundamental for the subject’s being.

I would like to emphasize once more that its promises as an indexical medium was fundamental to the technological enthusiasm and the astonishing impact that the new cinematic technique made on its audiences. As an indexical technique, the cinema could record and represent life \textit{in} time. Its indexical characteristic conveyed a sense of presence that was astonishing for its spectators. The interrelation between the indexical sign and very early cinema’s “sudden burst of presence” that Gunning distinguishes shows that this astonishing experience at the birth of cinema should be seen as a sublime aesthetic experience.

\textsuperscript{51} Gumbrecht, \textit{Production of Presence}, 97-98.
\textsuperscript{62} Lyotard, \textit{inhuman}, 81.
THE CONTINGENCY OF CINEMA AS SUBLIME PRESENCE

As we have seen so far, through the indexical character of the representation, the presentation of time was put forward at the moment of movement in the cinematic technique’s early exhibitions. This gave way to the “burst of presence” by which we can interpret the astonishment of the early spectators as a sublime aesthetic experience. As a last addition to this discussion I would like to point out one consequence of the indexical character of the cinematic technique that gave way to the sublime aesthetic experience present in the very early viewing position.

That the different cinematic innovations all occurred on various places around the western world in a short period of less than two years is not coincidental. Rather, we could say that the cinematic technique was the answer to a demand for a recording device that could capture everything that was going on in the world inside the accelerated flow of time. With the acceleration of time there came a nostalgia to capture the past for the present. The desire was to archive the passage of time in its most purest sense, without losing anything to the representation. This was, as we have seen above, Marey’s and Muybridge’s ultimate desire, to capture all time without losing anything to the technique of representation. By which we can almost say that this movement longed for representation inside presentation, or in other words, dreamed of an eternal presentation.

The indexical character of the cinematic technique alluded to this desire. Moreover, as Mary Ann Doane points out, “[T]he promise of indexicality is, in effect, the promise of the rematerilization of time.” Because the indexical sign is not a message but the sheer indication that something was there—that something occurred or happened—the indexical sign comes as close as possible to the pure recording and representation of the world without loss. With this ability to just point to the referent, the indexical sign approaches the vision of pure representation. In this respect, the cinematic apparatus was thought to be able to register all aspects of the flow of time. However, as the act of cinematic recording is very much situated in the present (photography and film were celebrated by Benjamin for being mechanical and faster than the hand could draw), it also allows the uncertainty of the present to enter its frames. When the recording is directed to the concrete world as it passes by, there is always a level of uncertainty and possibility on what is going to happen. As Roland Barthes already indicated, this is the

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63 Doane, The Emergence of Cinematic Time, 61. As Doane describes this as “a dream of representation without loss,” which I think to be an oxymoron, since when there is nothing to ‘re’-present, there is no representation but only presentation.

64 Ibid., 10.
real mark of the photograph, as that unexpected power of the singular instant which pokes through the representation.  

In the previous chapter we already took notice of the early film critic and theorist O. Winter who commented that the cinematic technique was plain mechanical recording which lacked the selection of the human eye. As a result, there were too many impressions present at the screen for the spectator to derive meaning because there was simply too much going on in the moving images.  

Although Doane does not take O. Winter criticism into account, I believe that what the early critic was aiming at is the contingency and uncertainty that Doane recognizes as present at the earliest years of cinema. The “rematerialization of time” in cinema in this respect includes the unexpectedness and contingency of accelerated and shocking time experience in modernity. As she concludes from that, the shock effect and astonishing experience of very early cinema is inevitably correlated to cinema’s ability to record and represent the contingent.

Although the cinema throughout the twentieth century (until and possibly even in the digital era) remains partially dependent on its indexical character (merging with the iconic sign), the true shock effect of contingency through the indexical was only very temporarily present. The aspect of contingency is especially central to the earliest films that were produced with the cinematic technique. In the early years, from its inventions in 1895 and 1896 until the cut was used to create more narrative coherence establishing an own logic or temporality, the camera was purely involved as a recording device. These early films, for example the actualities by the Lumière brothers or the short films by R.W. Paul, functioned to display the new medium’s capacity to record time. The single long-take, which at that time was limited to forty to fifty seconds, is a showcase of the inscription of “real time”. However, taken from reality, what was crucial for this experience of time was the unexpectedness that came with these plain recordings of time going by. As Doane puts it, “[T]his representation of time carries with it both the frisson and the threat/anxiety of the unexpected and is culturally tolerable only for a very brief period at the turn of the century.”

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67 Doane, The Emergence of Cinematic Time, 15.  
68 One is tempted to pin this change down to dates, but the shift from plain recording or ‘zero degree of filming’ (a term used by Gaudreault) and narrative is gradual. Though we can say that until 1903 actualities were dominant and that around 1907 narrative temporality grew in importance.  
69 Doane, The Emergence of Cinematic Time, 161.  
70 Ibid., 137.
chance and randomness in time. In these earliest films, it was the accidental character of time and the contingency that was central to the attraction of the new cinematic technique.

The earliest cinema screenings had such a great impact on its spectators because these very early films moved forward on the unique paradox recorded and rematerialized time. This is the enigma in which both the rationality and chronological order of the cinematic technique is present (recording everything in 16 or 24 equal instants), while still the unexpectedness and uncertainty of “real time” (as time like it is experienced in real life) is present in the recorded images. Therefore, the earliest screenings, it is contingency and the uncertainty of time involved in the new representational technique that is vital for the astonishment in the early viewing experience.

In Kantian terms, it is our “natural motive” to employ reflexive judgment to extract an order in the disorder of the world, as, what Rogozinski calls, “a quasi legality in the contingency of phenomena.” Therefore, it is in our nature to tame the unexpectedness of the present by focusing on the rational and declining or even erasing the coincidental. Yet, these contingency do offer themselves to our senses. And here lies the discrepancy in Kant between presentation and representation. Kant uses the word *Darstellung* as the verb “to present” (as “exhibit”) or the sensuous presentation of Ideas. This is different from *Vorstellung*, or representation, which is the method of “making or rendering the thing present.” In contrast to the *Darstellung* or presentation which is the rough first sensuous experience, in the *Vorstellung* or representation there is already cognition or a possible logic involved. Therefore the aspect of contingency belongs more to the field of presentation than representation since it offers itself to our senses but is neglected and turned down in understanding.

In this manner, contingency and uncertainty tend to obstruct the order of representation. It is the involvement of something of the first level of sensuous phenomena which seeps through in the next level of representation. Just as we in the previous chapter concluded that the sheer celebration of movement was a threat to the representational order, the contingency involved in the very early actualities which underlined the indexicality of the moving images were a danger to the stable image and meaning. Around the turn of the century, when time seemed to accelerate and the shock of unexpected events was around the corner at the urban streets, the main objective was, as Lyotard points out, to get hold of time in a manner “that it accepts a high rate of contingency.” I believe that

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72 Martta Heikkilä, *At The Limits of Presentation: Coming-into-Presence and its Aesthetic Relevance in Jean-Luc Nancy’s Philosophy* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2008), 80.
73 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, 68.
the very early cinema should be seen as an effort to include the contingency present at the level of presentation into the system of representation.

The threat of recording ‘everything’ (“the dream of the perfect archive”\textsuperscript{74}), including the unexpectedness of time in the world, into the representation is that the representation contains both everything and nothing. For if there is no selection and everything is worth recording, then hierarchy and order disappear. So, the real danger is the loss of meaning, by which the representation is brought back to presentation since representation without meaning is presentation. Again, this is a central risk of the indexical sign. For, as we have already seen above, the indexical sign is “hollowed-out” or “emptied” of all meaning. As Rosalind Krauss remarks, “it is inherently empty. . . It is meaningless meaning that is instituted through the terms of the index.”\textsuperscript{75} However, as we recognized with the introduction of the cinematic technique, the confrontation with the indexical sign is very much central to the attraction and astonishment of the technique. Consequently, we can confirm that it is the confrontation with meaninglessness and presentation itself that becomes vital for the attraction of very early cinema.

Conversely, the contingency and the threat of meaninglessness that is involved in the indexical sign can direct us toward our physical existence and toward our presence in the world. This was already recognized by Charles Sanders Peirce himself who wrote that the irregularity of time which we try to domesticate through ratio is nevertheless fundamental for our experience of the world. Moreover, as he wrote, “[I]t is the brute irrational insistency that forces us to acknowledge the reality of what we experience, that gives us our conviction of any singular.”\textsuperscript{76} It is particularly the sublime aesthetic experience which gives an account of an experience that leads us to face our own presence in the world. The sublime aesthetic experience is principally connected to the meaningless (or the “before meaning”) of presentation itself.

Notably, the sublime, especially in Lyotard and Nancy’s reading, should be seen as a “rage against the machine” or an “allied war against representation: for the sake of the event.”\textsuperscript{77} This is the “it is happening” before it has any meaning. Here the event is experience as the presence that strikes us; a presence that has no meaning but yet we feel the temporality of the event itself as a singularity.\textsuperscript{78} It is the insecurity of temporal experience that has no place in form and understanding but is celebrated in

\textsuperscript{74} Doane, “The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity,” 148.
\textsuperscript{75} Rosalind E. Krauss, The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 206.
\textsuperscript{76} As cited in Doane, The Emergence of Cinematic Time, 100.
\textsuperscript{78} See Gumbrecht, Production of Presence, 111.
the sublime aesthetic experience. Behind (or temporarily speaking maybe ‘before’) beauty and representation lies the promise of the unlimited, “the possibility of beginning”, a freedom without content which is yet “fundamentally open.” This is because it is offered as the sensible—or even the supersensible—event that goes beyond form and concept. The contingency that is involved in the very early cinema recordings (and screenings) can be rightfully understood as the opening to a sublime aesthetic experience. Although this stance is lacking in Doane’s own writing on the subject, I believe that the sublime already echoes in her book when she writes of the contingency in very early cinema as “the counterdream of rationalization, its agonistic underside—full presence.”

Additionally, the sublime aesthetic experience delivers this full and free experience of time which is full of every potential and possibility. Yet, in this heightened state of presence, a punctual or lightning presence, the lack of meaning and the absence of language function as a silence in which presence comes into question. Since what is presented is a totality derived from all meaning, what is actually offered is the presentation itself. In Nancy’s aesthetic theory the notion presentation is the “coming-into-presence” which is, in fact, the fundamental or the establishing of presence. Thereby, as Nancy remarks, the interrogation of presentation which is the central question to the sublime aesthetic experience, is indeed, “nothing other than the question of existence.” By recording a world in time with all its unexpectedness and contingency, the very early cinematic technique promised actually a method that dealt with the shock of inconsistency and uncertainty of modern society. It did so not in a manner of doing away with the rough experience by inscribing meaning and understanding. On the contrary, this experience should be seen as a form of radical aesthetic reflection which is not driven to understanding but to an experience of the absolute. This is the experience of time that is rough, unexpected and uncontrolled; in fact, the experience of experience or the feeling of feeling.

In this manner, the “sudden burst of presence” located in the present tense that Tom Gunning recognizes as vital part of the astonishing very early viewing experience is the experience of a presence that comes into question itself. This is what made the very early viewing experience so disruptive, astonishing and unforgettable. It is the witnessing of the singular and the accidental as fundamental

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80 Doane, The Emergence of Cinematic Time, 223.
81 For an extensive discussion of Nancy’s aesthetic theory and his idea of “coming-into-presence” see Heikkilä, At The Limits of Presentation. The most direct remarks that Nancy makes in to this topic can be read in Jean-Luc Nancy, “Preface to French Edition,” in Of the Sublime: Presence in Question, 1-3. A more comprehensive study, yet less directly connected to the sublime can be found in Jean-Luc Nancy, The Birth to Presence, trans. Brian Holmes and others (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993).
basic of existence; the “incomparable quality” of life. Yet, as Lyotard concludes, this experience is at the same time too big and too small. It is, as he writes, “unforgettable and immediately forgotten.” Since it is in essence accidental and unpredictable, it is uncontrollable while it refuses institutionalization. Therefore, as Doane importantly remarks, the attraction of the paradoxical logic of the cinematic technique’s indexical nature could only be tolerated for a brief period of time. Narrative, which is the installment of an own temporal logic onto the recorded images, can be seen as the regulation of the uncontrollable features of the indexical nature of cinema. The employment of a narrative (over the narrative present in a single shot) controls the contingency in the moving images while increasing the possibility of meaning present in the representation.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have outlined how the astonishing viewing experience of very early cinema was aroused by the representation and presentation of time that the new cinematic technique could deliver. While Gunning already indicated that the experience of the present tense in cinema and the burst of presence were interrelated in the aesthetic of astonishment in very early cinema, the sublime aesthetic experience crosses the bridge between the experience of time and a heightened sense of presence. On the discourse of that technological sublime aesthetic experience we can conclude that around the years of the introduction of the cinematic technique the people went through a change in time experience. Society around the turn of the century was characterized by the acceleration of time and space by the use of technology. As a result, contingency and the unexpected accidental were around every corner. In this streets filled with ‘hyperstimuli’ the subject was easily distracted and fragile. In this context of accelerated modern time, the past and the future collided in the present.

My argument is that this context evokes a fundamentally destabilizing experience that manifested itself in the aesthetic of astonishment that was so characteristic for very early cinema’s viewing experience. The cinematic technique performed as a voice of the disruptive experience of everyday life. It highlighted this and presented the accumulation of disruptive effects into a single presentation that induced a strong astonishment at its audiences. As a technique embedded in its context, the cinematic technique was also a vehicle of the fear and excitement that came with the

83 Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 141.
introduction of new technologies. This, in Kantian terms, “double movement of negative pleasure” formed the basic fundamental for the strong disruptive experience of very early cinema.

The indexical character of cinema, which Doane distinguishes as probably the main attraction of very early cinema, hit as a lightning through the representational order by presenting a collision of the past and the present. Thereby, the indexical sign, as a kind of absolute of representation which stands both inside and outside the temporal flow, became the initiator of a disruption in the viewer’s temporal experience. This is a destabilizing experience that involves, and actually hits, the subject’s own presence. Yet, in its two-sidedness of delivering both a negative disruption of the temporal flow while the subject prevails and witnesses its own presentation in the world, we could rightly conclude that this is a sublime aesthetic experience. On a similar level, the confrontation with the contingent and accidental that was part of very early cinema delivers a double emotion in which the subject faces its own conditions of existence. Thereby, this contingency contributes to the sublime aesthetic experience of very early cinema.

I believe that identifying the astonishing experience of temporality in very early cinema as a sublime aesthetic experience is an important contribution to the ongoing debate on the introduction of cinema, as well as on the theory of media change in general. It does not only emphasizes that the attractions of the shocks and thrills that Gunning discovers in early cinema can be seen as a negative pleasure but also that this attraction was aroused by presenting a temporal disruption that coincides with its historical context. Herewith I mean that the sublime aesthetic experience that was aroused with the new cinematic technique was very much imbedded in its historical context that brought the acceleration of time and a rethinking of temporal experience. While time, as Doane and others remark, was in those days around the turn of the century really present in the feeling of the people, the new cinematic technique at its moment of introduction functioned as a medium which took this feeling as its subject matter and centered its attraction around it. Moreover, the very early cinematic technique thereby delivered a heightened presence in which the subject’s “pure conditions” and the presence of time in existence came into question. However, it did so in a sublime way, by not coming to terms in meaning or understanding but delivering a raw feeling of the feeling. At the introduction we already stated that the cinematic technique made time felt again and the involvement of the sublime aesthetic experience shows this once more. Particularly, more than anything, the impact of the cinematic technique as a sublime aesthetic experience was emphasizing the feeling of time over understanding and meaning.
As a result of this discussion, we situated the discourse on the aesthetic of astonishment within the debate on presence. By aligning the very early viewing position as a sublime aesthetic experience, we can recognize how a heightened state of presence appears at the introduction of a new representational technique. With this perspective, we recognize that at its very moment of introduction, which is the moment that the aesthetic of astonishment was present, this new medium did not direct itself to understanding and meaning but exploited its disruption to emphasize that which is outside language, namely feeling and presence. Although it would be an interesting starting point for further research, it is far beyond the scope of this thesis to claim that this practice is also present at other moments of media change (for example from analogue to digital film). However, with this chapter I have tried to open up the debate on the introduction of the cinematic technique for the consideration of presentation and presence.
“The sublime is not so much what we’re going back to as where we’re coming from.” — Jean-Luc Nancy

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CONCLUSION:

BEGINNINGS AT THE END

The last twenty-five years early cinema studies made giants steps in the academic understanding of the moment of introduction of the moving image. Amongst others, Tom Gunning was one of the first to approach the first years of cinema in its own specific way, emphasizing the impact that the moving image made on its earliest audiences. At the same time, he was also the first to shatter the myth of very early cinema audiences running from the train on the screen in fear of death. The myth of the primitive audience response fleeing for the train should be seen as a narrative construction to understand the impact of the moving image in a one-dimensional way. What he recognized was that the earliest spectators who were so heavily attracted by the cinematic technique were “not primarily gullible country bumpkins but sophisticated urban pleasure seekers.”

They came to the fairground or the exhibition show of the new cinematic technique to get involved in a specific kind of thrill that included both a strong sense of fear for the mechanical ghostly representation as well as excitement for is unforeseen technical qualities. In the presentation of the new cinematic technique, the spectator was left speechless and astonished by what he or she witnessed. Yet, as Yuri Tsivian complemented Gunning’s early writings, the fear and terror that was part of this experience is not so much a real ‘death fear’ but an angst (as a deep rooted destabilization) that was culturally “prepared and mediated.”

Therefore, very early cinema’s viewing experience was an experience that had a certain distance from every day or real life experience. In fact, what these spectators were involved in was an aesthetic experience.

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The aesthetic experience of astonishment was specifically characterized by the double emotion of fear and attraction, or terror and pleasure. Gunning defines this as an “almost anti-aesthetic” in which something non-pleasing in the classical aesthetic way still possesses a nearly magical attraction to its audiences. As experienced positive and negative at the same time, the ambiguity of the emotion seems to be the prime problem for understanding the very early cinema viewing experience. Nevertheless, there has been done a lot of writing on this subject over the last years. Up until this moment, the dominant theory to explain this double sentiment present in the impact that the moving image had on its early audiences is from the angle of the uncanny experience, as explained by Jung and Freud. Tom Gunning, but also leading film scholars as Laura Mulvey and Mary Ann Doane, each in a different way, have upheld this position.

However, what this explanation from the theory of the uncanny experience misses is the very first and initial impact of the moving image. This is the moment of impact that precedes recognition, images and understanding, but still includes the double emotion of terror and pleasure. My primary interest in the aesthetic of astonishment of very early cinema was due to the knowledge of a long-standing aesthetic tradition that included the double emotion of pain and pleasure at the heart of the beholder’s experience. This was the aesthetic experience of the sublime as principally depicted by Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. As Jean-Luc Nancy explains this tradition of the sublime in the twentieth century, it does not simply takes place within the aesthetic tradition as that it constitutes the aesthetic tradition itself, as it poses fundamental questions on the limits of sensible presentation. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis was to interpret the astonishing experience of the very early cinema spectators from the ongoing tradition of the theory of the sublime aesthetic experience.

To reframe the familiar knowledge from the theoretical angle of the sublime aesthetic experience is constructive for certain reasons. First of all, as I explained above, the current accounts that arise from the theory of the uncanny do not sufficiently provide an answer for the ambiguity of the emotion at the first and initial moment of impact. The sublime aesthetic experience, as the aesthetic experience that precedes form and understanding, can contribute valuable insights in this regard. It thereby addresses this break-through moment in image culture not only from the perspective of a long-standing aesthetic tradition, but it also poses important questions on perception as it occurs before understanding.

Furthermore, when we approach very early cinema’s viewing experience from the perspective of the sublime aesthetic experience, parts of the viewing experience light up that would otherwise remain unquestioned. These parts of the experience include the role of the historical and ideological
context of the technological sublime in which the invention of the cinematic technique was presented, as well as the role of the body in the experience, as the site of embodied and tangible emotion. These parts of the viewing experience I have explored in detail in the past chapters. On the whole, the most important shift that the perspective of the sublime induces is the recognition of impact on the level of presentation in addition to representation. Whereas regular film studies still approaches the impact of cinema in terms of representation, the theory of the sublime stimulates us to rethink the initial, embodied and sensational impact of the moving image while acknowledging the direct, presentational power of the medium that precedes meaning.

Above all, my aim for this thesis was not to correct Gunning and other film scholars who contributed to the current state of early cinema studies. It is interesting that in his most recent writings, Gunning also seems to recognize this gap between images or meaning and the materiality of experience. In these texts, he develops ideas on the irrational power of the moving image that arouses a sense of presence. Therefore, this present research should be seen as a contribution to the evolving field of early cinema studies, in a direction of a more phenomenological and inclusive view of the disruptive impact of the early cinematic technique.

Following the interest in early cinema studies the previous decades, there has also been renewed attention to interpret the introduction of the moving image as situated in the context of modernity. The acceleration of urban life at the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as described by Georg Simmel was already connected to mechanical reproduction of art and entertainment by Walter Benjamin. At the same time Siegfried Kracauer ambiguously praised the cinema for successfully representing the distraction of the urban streets. Film scholars as Miriam Hansen, Ben Singer and Leo Charney have done great work in revisiting these interesting writings on modernity in relation to early cinema. Important film historical writing in this regard has also been done by Charles Musser and Yuri Tsivian, who describe in detail how this new and astonishing technique was introduced and presented to its earliest audiences.

The first chapter of this thesis was an effort to frame the introduction of the cinematic technique, as part of modernity’s disruptive experience, in the historical and ideological context of the late nineteenth century technological sublime. Drawing on the writings of David Nye and Thomas Hughes, we could recognize that there was a widespread technological enthusiasm in the western

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world. Moreover, as Nye in particular notices, in the second half of the nineteenth century technology became humanity’s renewed manifest destiny. In this ideology, the “victory of mechanical philosophy” was humanity’s triumph over nature. New innovations were centered as an attraction that could provide in an ever more disruptive and stimulating experience. It is in this context that we should locate and analyze the introduction of the cinematic technique.

My aim for this chapter was to reposition the writings on the introduction of the moving image as described by both the film historians as well as the film scholars interested in the impact of modernity, within the wider context of the technological sublime of the late nineteenth century. My argument was that when we connect the writings on early cinema to the larger picture of technological enthusiasm in the nineteenth century, we develop a better idea of the ambiguous emotion of attraction and fear that is so pivotal for the very early cinema viewing experience. In the atmosphere of the late nineteenth century—as the years when technological progress was accelerating—innovations were at the same time intensely celebrated and yet strongly feared. The introduction of cinema seemed to occur within that same context. The way it was introduced, advertised and presented by showmen on fairgrounds, and at exhibitions and world fairs, supports this view. At the same time, the earliest writings in newspapers on the Lumières’s cinématographe and Edison’s vitascope uphold both the exuberant celebration of the new technique, as well as a sense of fear or terror that this innovation brings along. As a result, the late nineteenth century spectator was more or less trained or sensitized to get involved in this kind of disruptive or astonishing experience.

To reposition the debate on the introduction of cinema in the larger context of the technological sublime of the nineteenth century is constructive in two ways. First, it deepens the historical meaning of the introduction of cinema as it connects this pivotal moment in media and visual history to a larger cultural atmosphere or undercurrent. Second, and this promises to be more important for the overall aim of this thesis, to understand the introduction from the specific cultural and historical mood of the technological sublime helps us to understand the double emotion present in the aesthetic of astonishment of very early cinema. It thereby demands us to reframe the impact of the earliest moving images from the theory of the sublime aesthetic experience as evoked by technology. In this manner, this brief historical analysis presented in the first chapter paves the way for a more interpretive analysis from this perspective.

In retrospect, one could raise the argument against this thesis that the cultural and ideological preparation that the nineteenth century spectator endured to feel the sublime experience in technology undermines the nature of the sublime aesthetic experience. As voluntarily involved in the emotion,
these people are drawn into what Amanda du Preez would call a “self-directed”, “kitch” or “pseudo-
sublime”. However, the early cinema audiences were still involved in an astonishing experience which
was dazzling and ontologically destabilizing. Moreover, the newness and unimagined nature of the
cinematic technology left the spectator speechless. To investigate whether a prepared and technological
aroused emotion would be a derivate of ‘real’ sublime aesthetic experience is beyond the scope of this
thesis. Thereby, the problem that evolves from this chapter would be an interesting starting point for
further research. Together, I recognize that due to the emphasis of this research on a more
philosophical interpretation, my historical reach for the first chapter was limited. Further research in the
historical direction should emphasize more the ideological and gender side of the technological sublime.
Especially interesting in this regard would be a study on the initial impact of a representational
technology as a male emotion. As theory on the nineteenth century technological sublime seems to
illustrate, the initial first strong (i.e.) male response to the technique is followed by a process of
feminization and utilization of the technique. Furthermore, I would expect that this transition reflects
within the process of narrativization in very early cinema. Yet, this preliminary hypothesis would
demand a research on its own.

Whereas the first chapter positioned early cinema’s viewing experience in the broader historical context
of the technological sublime, the second and third chapter must be seen as the theoretical centre of
gravity. In contrast to the first chapter, this part of my thesis was more interpretive, relying on film
theory and art philosophy. Where the overall aim of this thesis was to gain insight in the astonishing
viewing experience of very early cinema, chapter two investigated the moment when the impact of
moving image was at its height. Movement thereby was very much the main attraction of the earliest
film exhibitions. This was particularly the case at the moment when the image on the screen changed
from stillness to movement. Since, as we follow Gunning, this moment of movement was the most
decisive instant for the aesthetic of astonishment, we have to investigate the power of moving images
to gain more insight in the impact of the earliest films.

The impact of movement in relation to the motionless image has been studied by film theorists
as Mulvey and Doane. Their description of the disruptive impact that the moment of movement has on
its spectator was insightful for my research. However, the conclusions that these authors draw from the
ontological destabilizing impact of movement are explained in terms of the uncanny. As a result of my

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interest in the disruptive impact as it occurs before meaning and understanding, I agree with Mulvey’s view on the collision between a past and a present but yet I come to a different conclusion. My concern with the moment of movement is, as Gunning acknowledges in recent writings, with the “magical sense of presence” and “bodily sensation” that this instant provokes. Thereby, the impact of the moving image is caused by the celebration of movement for its own sake; a ‘zero degree of filming’ and the admiration of moving images without delivering a meaning or coming to an understanding. In this view, the moment of movement causes a shock before recognition takes place at the most sensitive and embodied level.

Consequently, in this chapter I turned to the phenomenological and embodied explanation that Vivian Sobchack and Jennifer Barker provide. As Sobchack and Barker argue, the moment between stillness and movements is a vital disturbance of the flow of live and thereby addresses our embodied being and redirects us to our carnal existence. Yet, there is a pleasure involved in this experience since it makes the spectator feel his or her being. When we interpret the aesthetic of astonishment of very early cinema from this perspective, I hold that we should turn to the theory of the sublime as described by Burke to fully understand the double feeling that the early cinema spectators were involved in. In the theory of the sublime aesthetic experience, the beholder is involved in a strong emotion that alternates between delight and terror, or in the Kantian equivalent, between pleasure and pain. As delivering all feeling and no understanding, the sublime aesthetic experience forces the spectator to acknowledge the subject’s state of existence in relation to the magnitude of the object. As a result, the sublime aesthetic experience is such a strong emotion since we cannot comprehend what we see, while we do recognize both the limits of human existence as well as the overruling power of our ratio to reach beyond ourselves.

Furthermore, the strong emotion of negative pleasure at the moment of movement was directed to the impact of the moving image itself. This shock has no interest to deliver meaning, but only to arouse feeling. In this absolute celebration of movement for its own sake without content, the early cinema technique was actually occupied by the sublime aesthetic experience as representing the unrepresentable. This insight from contemporary French philosophers Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Luc Nancy helped to locate the astonishing impact of the very early cinema before meaning and understanding is involved.

For present-day audiences, a certain disruptive impact caused by the almost too obvious aspect of movement in cinema is hard to imagine. However, focusing on the initial and very first impact of the moving image, we should recognize that going back to the very beginnings of cinema and the
preliminary and material perception of it helps us to gain insight in the paradoxical emotion that the earliest film exhibitions caused. To approach the astonishing impact at the moment of movement from the theoretical angle of the sublime aesthetic experience leads us to discover that the paradoxical emotion of fear and attraction, and of pleasure and pain, takes place not so much in the realm of representation and meaning, but at the level that precedes understanding. Thereby, the primary scene of impact of the aesthetic of astonishment is at the level of embodied and carnal experience, rather than the intellect. So, whereas dominant film studies have searched and successfully found the shock of the earliest moving images in cognition and representation, this thesis tries to open up the debate to the realm of the body and presentation. In short, before occurring at the subject’s brain, the astonishment of the very early cinema viewing experience happened at the spectator’s viscera, into his or her existence and presence.

I hold that this is possibly the main outcome of my thesis. It is up to further research to develop the impact of movement at the level of embodiment in more detail. However, I believe that opening up the debate on the astonishing impact of early cinema in terms as presentation, presence, and material experience, could revitalize the discussion on the introduction of the moving image. In line with most recent film studies, this perspective seems also to be fruitful for the experience of film overall. Yet, I imagine that especially studies on pivotal moments in media history, and the impact that media has on its viewers or users, could benefit from including the part of experience that precedes cognition, understanding and the ratio. Relevant research would also contribute to the connection between the body and the sublime aesthetic experience, as I have indicated in this thesis. As a somewhat new terrain in aesthetics, I think that innovative knowledge that is currently produced in the field of presence, feeling and affective theory should definitely be linked to the aesthetic tradition of the sublime. Also, or possibly even more so, this should be done when these studies prove to contradict the conventional theory of the sublime. In these studies, knowledge from film and media studies could perfectly contribute to aesthetic philosophy in this domain.

The third chapter was in many ways the continuation of the second chapter. Whereas the second chapter dealt with the impact of movement, the third chapter discusses the impact of the consequence of movement, which is time. There has been done a lot of writing on the relation between cinema and time. Yet, on the aspect of time at the roots of cinema Mary Ann Doane’s The Emergence of Cinematic

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6 A very recent effort to explain the issue of presence by combining both philosophy and neuroscience can be found in Alva Noë, Varieties of Presence (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).
Time proved to be very insightful. As she writes, the cinematic technique was celebrated at the time of its introduction for its ability to capture time and to revive the past into the present.

My aim for this third chapter was to read very early cinema’s affiliation with time in regard to the impact that the re/presentation of time had on very early cinema’s spectators. Still drawing on the insights of Doane we recognize that the cinematic technique promised a recording without loss. As a mechanical eye it could capture reality in a way that evacuated the meaning making of the human mind in experience. As she beautifully explains, this was Étienne-Jules Marey’s ultimate dream, “a desire to represent all time—to a dream of representation without loss.” In my view, this was what the early audiences strike about the new cinematic technique. In his 1896 critique, O.Winter similarly declared that he was offended by the pure and comprehensive representation of the cinématographe. The selection procedure of the human eye and mind was absent in this mechanical representational technique.

To conceptualize the discomfort but yet attractive feeling that the earliest cinema spectators were involved in we need to acknowledge, similarly as in chapter two, the materiality of experience. In contrast to Doane, my interest was not to explain this disruptive feeling using the theory of Freud, but rather to conceptualize her ideas further. To develop a deeper understanding of the astonishing experience of the very early cinema audiences, the theory of the sublime aesthetic experience proved to be helpful once more. The cinematic technique, with its potential of a pure indexical sign and thereby admitting the contingency of the world, was destabilizing because of the completeness of its representation. In the all-embracing representation of the world in time, meaning and selection are left behind. As a recording and restoring device that was evoked of all meaning—as the early features of the Lumière brothers portray plain recording of time and movement—it short-circuited the representational order. Therefore, we are not so much dealing with representation (Vorstellung) as with presentation (Darstellung).

The sublime aesthetic experience, as described by Lyotard and Nancy as the ‘radical’ aesthetic, proves to be a helpful account for the disruptive experience of witnessing an almost too complete representation that alludes to a presentation. The abrupt involvement in presentation strikes the subject’s own presence in the world. The sublime aesthetic experience clarifies that this disruption happens because of a heightened sense of presence that direct the subject to acknowledge his or her own pure conditions. What is more, this emotion of astonishment is more about feeling than meaning.

7 Mary Ann Doane, The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 61.
or content. Thereby, the main point of the aesthetic of astonishment that the early cinema spectators were involved in is the feeling of time passing and the feeling of one’s own presence in time.

The interpretation of very early cinema’s viewing experience from the perspective of the sublime proved to be productive in this chapter because it turned attention to a different part of the problem. Whereas other studies presuppose that cinema is a representational medium, a reading in terms of the sublime aesthetic experience exposes that we are actually dealing with a more complex experience. In this view, the astonishment that the early spectators were involved in was as much provoked by presentation and presence as through representation. Although this problem has also been raised by philosopher Paul Virilio and certain others, the attention for this aesthetic question remains largely unaddressed in film studies. However, as Nancy and Lyotard emphasize, the heightened sense of presence actually lays at the very origin of aesthetic experience. Therefore, the argument raised in this chapter—which includes the issue of re/presentation into the astonishing experience of very early cinema—can be seen as a modest first effort to include this ongoing debate from the tradition of aesthetics into the study of the introduction of the moving image. Additionally, as I would like to hypothesize for further research, it seems to me that for the moving image the notion of presence and presentation would be a very fruitful angle to approach the tangible experience of “being in touch” that the cinema evokes as a medium embedded in reality. This is in coherence with the second chapter, which dealt with the material and bodily sensation, in the sense that the theoretical body of this thesis aims for a more inclusive view on the astonishing impact of the early moving images, in which the disruption takes place before and besides the representational and understanding axis.

As a result, further research on this topic needs to include as much the domain of feeling as it does with meaning. When we locate and recognize the sublime aesthetic experience at the introduction of the new representational medium of cinema at the late the nineteenth century, the question that arises from this conclusion is whether this experience is also present with at other moments of media change that interrupt or disrupt the representational order. In contrast to media theorists as Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin who argue that the continuation of meaning and content over different media is the main challenge to that a new medium faces,8 I would like to emphasize that at its initial moment of introduction the actual bodily and sensuous impact of the technique or medium itself is what is foregrounded. The experience of the new medium of moving images at its initial state should be seen as an aesthetic experience that is typically released of content, meaning or understanding. Moreover, at

the moment of introduction, at least as we have seen in the case of the introduction of the cinematic technique, we recognize an aesthetic of astonishment in which pure feeling and a heightened sense of presence took center stage. In this experience, understanding and concept of what the viewer witnessed was preceded by the material feeling and bodily impact celebrated at its own sake. Therefore, to apply the theory of the sublime aesthetic experience (with its notions of presentation and presence) to digital technology and current new media changes would possibly be an interesting and productive way to conceptualize and understand the impact of new media that allows for more attention on the very sensitive impact of the medium itself.

What remains at the end of this thesis are a lot of beginnings for further research. Yet, this was also the purpose of the current research: To open up the debate on a hundred and twenty year old pivotal moment in media history by using concepts that may not be the most self-explanatory, but are nevertheless provocative for further research. This thesis also illustrates that even after decades of early cinema studies, there are still parts of the very early cinema viewing experience that remain overlooked. Therefore, even though academia may have made vast steps in the understanding of media experience, there is still important research to be done. Even though aspects as movement and time seem to be too obvious to study, new and recent perspectives will demonstrate that we do not yet comprehend. The challenges make us go back to the beginnings; to experience, perception, and presence. Towards the next beginning at the end.
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1 and 2: Film stills from *The Countryman and the Cinematograph* (1901). Directed by R.W. Paul. DVD. *Early Cinema: Primitives and Pioneers*. London: British Film Institute.

Figure 3: Film still from *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (1902). Directed by Edwin S. Porter. Online video. *Library of Congress*. http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/h?ammem/papr:@field(NUMBER+@band(edmp+1917)). Last accessed July 9, 2012.


Figure 10 and 11: Film stills from *Rough Sea at Dover* (1895). Directed by R.W. Paul. DVD. *Early Cinema: Primitives and Pioneers*. London: British Film Institute.

Figure 12: Film still from *Repas de bébé* (1895). Directed by Auguste and Louis Lumière. DVD. *Early Cinema: Primitives and Pioneers*. London: British Film Institute.

Figure 14 and 15: Film stills from *Sortie d’usine* (1895). Directed by Auguste and Louis Lumière. DVD. *Early Cinema: Primitives and Pioneers*. London: British Film Institute.


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