Chapter 5: "Views" of the City: Lumière Films as an Indifferent Mirror of the Collective

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Abstract

When, at the very end of the 19th century the brothers Auguste and Louis Lumière began to develop their cinematograph business, the company dispatched its operators throughout the world, set up a system for producing copies of films and circulating them across the globe. Many films were named after streets, bridges, plazas, intersections, monuments, etc., and were categorised as "Views". I distinguish here "views of" and "views on" the cities, so that we can describe the relationship between public space and geographical space. I approach this corpus via two dimensions. The first has to do with the relationship to the self that is offered to the social group through the images themselves: for the first time, public space and collective life are represented in the form of "a neutral mirror" of daily life, bearing the mark of the real. The second dimension concerns the overall setup of representation: spectators were in a sense "seeing themselves" as a group for the first time.

Finally I will ask to what extent these views of/on the city and its collective life, produced in this way for public projection and mass exhibition, have changed the relationship of spectators to their own collective life space.

Keywords: Lumière Films, Public Space, Identity, Crowd, Collective Identification, Appropriation/Belonging

Introduction

When, at the very end of the 19th century the brothers Auguste and Louis Lumière began to develop their cinematograph business, they presented to the public not only an apparatus for producing and projecting pictures, but a mass-media presentation of public space (Flichy 1997, 44): as opposed to Edison's "kinetoscope," which was designed to be used at home (like the cable television

of today) the cinematograph includes the possibility of *public* projection of films. With the cinematograph, the Lumière company was able to develop the mass-media form that is modern cinema. Very quickly, the company dispatched its operators throughout the world, set up a system for producing copies of films and circulating them across the globe, so that the spectators of any country where cinematograph operators were set up could "visit" Asia or Australia, New York, Sydney, London, Lyon, etc. Films projected in various theatres offered to the audience representations of their own city mixed in with those of other cities, thus creating a form of world-wide visibility. In this way, the Lumière brothers had invented much more than a media instrument: they set up a cultural industry that could produce and distribute the collective imagination of the masses.

The films for cinema intended to be shown to a group of people are very different from the films offered by Edison: "with Lumière, it is the city and the crowd of people moving around in it, the forms of transportation that crisscross it, which constitutes the theme of the earliest films." (Flichy 1997, 45) Thus a large number of films depict the urbanisation that was taking place at the end of the 19th century, bearing witness to the need to coordinate in a collective manner and to speed up all varieties of movement taking place within the city. The temporality of these films is not structured by narration but is completely given over to a celebration of movement. In the Lumière catalogue, by the side of what were called "various views" (which were in fact generic depictions – baby's supper, knocking down a wall, various occupations), "comic views" and a few "military views", there is in fact a long list of place names. Some of these films, which were named after streets, bridges, plazas, intersections, monuments, etc., were categorised as "Views of Paris" or "Views of England", but most were just entitled as "Belgium – Brussels" or "North America – New York", "–Boston", etc. They are "views" in the sense that a certain city is exhibited, shown or displayed not as on a postcard, but as a theatre of the movement of people and vehicles. We will continue to use the term "views" for all the films in our corpus[1] without further specifying them, since this word has the advantage of emphasising two important aspects of our reflection: the similarity with still photography rather than narrated action (there are no "scenes"), and the importance of point of view (again similar to still photography). I distinguish in this context two types of films: those that can be characterised as views "of" a city, and those that can be identified as views "on" a city.

Over and above the films themselves, I am interested in examining the global arrangement used to represent a city as initially used by the Lumière cinema, and to further examine this grouping in terms of the relationship between public space and geographical space. I will ask: how is this new method for representing a city structured? Is it according to some assumed knowledge, or is this reflected upon? What points of view and types of distanciation, what possibilities of identification are opened up? If we consider along with Louis Quéré that the media forms that are characteristic of modernity "construct a theatre of social practices" and

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[1] Out of all the films from the Lumière catalogue that we have viewed in the course of research undertaken in connection with the centenary of cinema (around 400 films), we have selected those with the following characteristics: the title is a city's name; no narration or *mise en scene*; the result is 33 films selected. All the selected films have another feature in common: they all show crowds in movement.

provide in this way "a support for identity and for individual and collective action", in what way does the cinematographer exercise a "foundational function within the social realm" (Quéré 1992, 154) when he represents the city?

In order to put forward several elements of a response, I suggest approaching this corpus via two dimensions. The first has to do with the relationship to the self that is offered to the social group through the images themselves: for the first time, public space and collective life are represented not in terms of some sort of dramatisation, fiction or figuration (as would be the case on the stage, or in a painting) but in the form of "a neutral mirror" of daily life, bearing the mark of the *real*, in which nothing happens other than that which one may observe oneself on any given day. Spectators are confronted with a form of "close distanciation" that we will be at pains to describe. The second dimension concerns the overall setup of representation: spectators were in a sense "seeing themselves" as a group for the first time.

By using several films in which the urban space is not structured by means of images, I will show in what sense the city is in these films rendered a common space for anonymous movement, and I will examine the representative arrangement used by the Lumière studios as a mode of representation *of* the crowd (today we would speak of the masses) *for* the crowd. Although there are not very many of these in the corpus, these films reveal in my view in a significant manner the relationship to public space that is characterised by the media, fantastically, as "objective." A second group of films, which offer the viewer a space that is socially and visually structured, will lead me to consider these films as supports for collective identification.

Finally I will ask to what extent these views of/on the city and its collective life, produced in this way for public projection and mass exhibition, have changed the relationship of spectators to their own collective life space, particularly as regards the relationship between a relation of belonging and a relation of appropriation, which remain to be defined in what follows.

The Lumière corpus shows that public space, at the end of the 19th century, is a locus in which one invests one's private life, an "interior urban space in which the 'man about town', Baudelaire's "flâneur," moves. The separation between interior and exterior tends to disappear; streets with arcades are more like interiors, and aisles in stores are like streets" (Flichy 1997, 38). Many scenes displaying the city in the background show games (n° 50. *Enfants jouant aux billes* and n° 563. *Bains sur le Rhône*), people taking walks (n° 1172. *Les escaliers du pont de l'Alma*), public parks where children play (n° 150. *Paris: Bassin des Tuileries*) - moments in which private life is extended as it were into public space. A second characteristic of the corpus is the importance given to crowds of people. The crowd seems to be the human counterweight of a hypnotic effect produced by the movement of powered transport (trains, trolleys, autos, steamboats) that so fascinated early cinema. The crowd is never standing still; it flows from one side of the frame to the other. One thing that should be noted here is the large number of sequences involving a *passage*: parades of all kinds, cavalry and infantry manoeuvres, cavalcades, carnivals: in all these examples (standing in contrast in formal terms to another series, which contains a large number of films as well, devoted to arrivals and departures), space (usually the street) is put in motion by the crowd. It is undeniable that one of the interesting

things about the Lumière cinema is the way crowds and public spaces interact. Certainly, it was clear to Walter Benjamin and to Jean Paul Sartre that "the cinema, in essence, speaks to the masses and speaks about their destiny." (Sartre 1948, 322) It could well be instructive to examine the ways in which this relationship of the crowd-as-spectator in the earliest films to itself was arrived at through the structuration of a common space.

A Neutral Reflection

Classical representations of collective life (I am thinking of drama in particular) have been based on a very clear separation between real life and the representation. This separation, given substance by the limited space of a stage, a space, time and action whose arbitrary unity of place, through actors' performances or through masks, has the essential characteristic of expelling reality from the stage and closing up the representation upon itself. As with writing, for example, it has been based on a substitution that is characteristic of every process of symbolisation. The cinematograph introduces a hiatus in this process, which in the estimation of some (Bougnoux, for instance) has only become greater because of the invention of television and other recent media forms. In fact the cinematograph does not claim to produce a representation, but rather a reproduction of the real, of life itself, and this is accomplished by means of technical extensions of our own organs of perception. Thus it is seen as a technical apparatus rather than the production of meaning. The reproduction of the real that is converted into a phantasm by the cinematograph is referred therefore to a form of mimesis that would deny the artificiality of the process, such that conformity to the model would be a basic technical fact and not some ideal to be attained. From this point of view, the cinematograph really is the commencement of a world of belief in which seeing and believing have become one thing. The tenuousness of the semiotic cut (*coupure sémiotique* -Saussure) in early cinema is made quite explicit in the panic that is supposed to have affected spectators at projections of *Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*.

We should not be surprised at the many references in the literature of the period to images as "projectiles". It is really like the arrival of reality in the movie theatre, experiencing the cinematograph. Reality is no longer expelled from the stage. It becomes the very object of one's visual attention, by reason of its ordinary character. And so we find a certain number of films consisting of arbitrary shots of the immense and neutral reality of a collective action that escapes from all control: people entering and leaving the crowd, which does not cease, and which happens in all directions, affirms the fragility of the barrier that separates the real from its representation. In these films: 148. *Nîmes : sortie de l'Eglise*; 154. *Paris : Place de l'Opéra*; 325. *New York : Avenue et Union Square*; 489. *Fêtes du Jubilé de la Reine d'Angleterre [Victoria] 22-26 juin 1897: la foule suivant le cortège*; 857. *Procession à Séville I*; 1087. *Après le lancement: sortie des invités et du public*; 1265. *La foule après la revue des troupes*, and these are only a few examples, space is not structured but occupied and traversed, the field is not oriented, the street is invaded and public space itself becomes the indistinct locus of disorganised trajectories. These are fragments of a "neutral reality" because they were selected in a way that made sure neither of unity nor of

totality, nor a meaning for the images viewed, unless it would simply be the signification that these things were real. These films draw heavily on the "*effet de réel*" that Barthes identified in 1968 apropos of *Un cœur simple* by Flaubert: verisimilitude and belief are not obtained through respect for the rules of a genre (and rightly so, since these are new media) but through useless details (in Flaubert), by the absence of any selection in the framing of the image (here) that has one meaning: "I am real" (Barthes 1968, 84-89). The entire set of these procedures led spectators toward a relationship to the Self marked by proximity, which Benjamin hailed, identifying it with the "loss of an aura" in the first version of his celebrated text on the technical reproducibility of works (Benjamin 2000, 74-86; in the final version of this text (1938), the author draws fewer distinctions and no longer expresses himself in unreservedly positive tones concerning the disappearance of the aura). Here there is no beyond, no star, no well-known actor, not even a proper name other than that of the place being traversed. Also, there is to be no reflection before these images, but to the contrary the characteristic hullabaloo of an event not experienced "for oneself" in the intimacy of private experience, but indeed experienced in the mode of "with others", in their proximity before that which is presented to the collective gaze.

If social exchanges obey a logic of the visible and the invisible (Quéré 1992, 83), what common space do they make visible? Is it a form of representation of everyone by everyone, founded on a principle of non-distinction and interchangeability of actors? The collective character of the cinematograph, the proximity that it presents for the crowds, at one and the same time part of the image it gives of the crowds themselves, and in the collective experience of which it is the object, made W. Benjamin (for example) dream of the possibility of giving the masses an image of themselves as a social class (Benjamin 2000, 96) and thus to politicise art (Benjamin 2000, 110-13). But we may estimate that all the films cited above, in which no person's face is recognizable, as well as certain films of parades, in which subjects are seen as they traverse the image from one side to the other, seen from the rear, presenting a repetition of the same military or ecclesiastical uniform (178. *27è Chasseurs alpines: défilé*, or 644. *Lourdes: Procession II*), do not so much render visible a social class as symbolise the non-distinction of a democratic institution founded upon "it doesn't matter who you are".

All the films of which we have been speaking constitute "views on" the city in the sense in which no particular point of view structures space or time. Inasmuch as they are arbitrary views of a neutral reality, they present the public that views them with two propositions relative to public space: 1. They are simple extensions of the spectators' vision and not a production of meaning, and so this places the spectators in a relation of proximity to these views. In fact, no particular production of meaning presides over the production of these images; they do not presuppose any proper locus of knowing or being-able that governs their meaning. 2. The non-distinction of individuals in the films produces space as a "common" space, neutral and not marked, and engages the spectators in a relationship of belonging to this public space, a relationship which is characteristic of "mediated communication", opposed to "intersubjective communication." The former is based on the non-distinction of individuals, the second on the distinction, or recognition of some individuals by others; the first

involves a relation of belonging and asks a question about legitimacy (in whose name are you speaking?), the second involves a relation of affiliation and asks a question about identity (who are you?) (Lamizet 1995, 131-37).

Nonetheless, it is not a matter of interchangeability such as the one usually thought of when the question is one concerning a mass public, that is, when we refer to an average obtained through a survey or a measurement of the audience, something Sartre called "collective opinion": "Thus an American lives in a state of fascination with what I would call his objective opinion, that is, that which is expressed in statistics prior to his asking himself about something, the image of which is communicated to him." (Sartre 1983, 93)

In fact, no narration, no character, no type, not even a point of view structuring space imposes upon these "views" an assumed form of subjectivity, even a collective one. In terms of what we said about these images and a fictionalised arrangement seen as a pure extension of actual vision, it is indeed a matter more of the view of "nobody" than of a view that is presumed to belong to everyone, or that is pre-figured as such (today, everyone's opinion is pre-figured by mass-media information as it was a view by a neutral "nobody" and calls for "objectivity"). From this point identification passes by way of the identity of the one for whom the communication is intended, solely: to the extent that they see these images together, the spectators are liable to identify with them, and to do this collectively. With the films mentioned above, the cinematograph of origins proposes only a collective form of identity, but does this in accordance with procedures that are quite different from the procedures criticized by Sartre or the theoreticians of the Frankfurt School, who see mass dissemination as a form of hegemony.

In other words, the relation to the city cannot be the object of a "collective opinion" in this case, or even to a sharing of points of view. It is reduced to the sharing, in the sight of others, of an experience of perception that is imbued with fascination and proximity, in which each person is liable to be an object of the gaze of another inasmuch as he belongs to the group formed by the nameless crowd, that is also a group of spectators.

Recognition

There is another group of films which we should speak about because in contrast to those we have just discussed, they offer views "of" the city, that is, of a structured space that could be explored by the spectator. Several procedures can be listed with respect to these films. Either the camera operator exercises control over reality in order to unify the space, to constitute a scene by avoiding gawkers – which he or she may attempt to expel from the frame or to push to the edge (150. *Paris: Bassin des Tuileries*); sometimes he or she positions the camera so that the separation between scene and spectators appears in the image and structures it (155. *Paris: Cortège du bœuf gras*); he or she may also transform a view into a show by producing, through wide shots or overhead shots, the gaze of a spectator (129. *Lyon: Place Bellecour*; 132. Marseille : *La Bourse*; 135. *Marseille : Marché aux poissons*; 137. *Marseille : Vieux port*; 153. *Paris : Place de la Concorde*; 324. *New York : Descente des voyageurs au pont de Brooklyn*; 855. *Une rue à Séville*; 155. *Paris : Cortège du bœuf gras*). These views are

characterised by a perspective, by the geometrical order of the movements that traverse the frame, and in general by the fact that an assumed point of view constitutes a subject who is being looked at and a subject that is looking. It is no longer a matter of being at the heart of the crowd in the city, but of showing these things. All the films cited here demonstrate a certain detachment (which sometimes constitutes the spectator as a voyeur, in the case of an overhead shot) which sets up what we will later call the "pro-filmic" universe, distinct from the real through being set up for a scene, in which contingency is rendered intelligible. This objectivation allows a sociological character to be given to a geographical space: thus in *Sortie d'usine* (10), *New York: Broadway et Wall Street* (323), and *Les escaliers du pont de l'Alma* (1172), *Boston: Commercial Street* (333) and many others, a social group is given visibility and thus public existence.

By offering a spectator's point of view, these films, in contrast to those previously spoken of, give meaning to space and make it possible for the spectators to appropriate it. The spectators can in fact easily recognize places that are shown in wide shots, in frames like postcards, which often feature characteristic monuments, picturesque sights, etc. Otherwise we can observe a very large number of camera angles (except in the rare films that use a sustained overhead shot (e.g., from an upper story window) such as *Une rue à Séville*), that may be a matter of furtive glances. There are also instances in which passersby stop and stand in front of the camera during the entire film. The cinematograph attracted a crowd, as did all the new media of the period. (cf. P. Flichy). These camera angles, or simply faces that are close and recognizable, are constitutive of a symbolic exchange in which each one, in turn, can be the object of another's gaze. Positions change from one side of the camera to the other, and this prevents any established locus for the generation of meaning or even of "a view" to be settled on, even though the film refers to an individual point of view. We know that the camera operators, when visiting a town, often pretended to be shooting in order to attract passersby who would want to see themselves on film when the film was projected later that evening. This possible recognition of places and the idea of becoming visible in social space are part of the basis upon which the cinematograph rests, like the regional or "community" media outlets of today: "Each person can legitimately demand to be filmed today." (Benjamin 2000, 95)

On the another hand, the recognized place or street is transfigured by the view that structures it; the space in which one walks or moves around, a territory for individual experiences, placed in a series with exotic views of distant places; the image of oneself given to circulating at a planetary level; the group of views tightly framed by norms (white and black, time duration, fixed level). In the absence of any narrative configuration, one cannot think that these films mediatise an identity other than as linked to a place. If represented space can be the object of appropriation, it is only insofar as it is collectively recognised by a public whose members identify themselves as residents (Parisians, Lyonnais, New Yorkers, etc.). This is so, because well-known streets and places are precisely no longer ours but open to the gaze of the other, and so they have always already escaped us.

In this group of films, one may note the important elements of the analysis: 1. They construct the spectator's gaze, institute the places of the looking/looked at subject, and arrange the spectators so as to promote a form of symbolic exchange;

2. By structuring the space of the street they give it a symbolic dimension and objectify its social dimension: social groups there are presented to the common gaze, in which they are "distinguished", that is, identified as such. 3. Space here stands as the object of a form of appropriation that is outside intersubjective communication, and this form is collective. 4. Social visibility, collective appropriation and symbolic exchange in connection with these images create a plural public space, fit for debate and interlocution, which is the political dimension of public space, as defined by Habermas.

Conclusion

When spectators watch these films being projected, they see a quite varied series of movies; "views" as well as "scenes", comic or otherwise, news stories, etc. Their relationship to the city, over and above the fact that it represents movement via trolleys, autos, subways, etc., and over and above the fact that the cinematograph might have been able from this point of view to prepare people for modern life, by getting them used to rapid movement, "corresponds to the serious danger of death man has to face today (...), on any street in a large city" (Benjamin 2000, 107). Their relationship to the city rests essentially upon two propositions: one sends us back to our belonging to a common space, to the neutral nature of spaces and the non-distinction of persons; a proposition nevertheless not open onto seriality as in Sartre, or synchrony as in B. Stiegler, who speaks of synchrony as a "processes that tend progressively to make you conform to an average [where] the difference between "I" and "we" gets diluted, producing the "someone" (...)" (Stiegler 2003, 69). It does not end up with an equivalence of "I" and "someone," but allows only the constitution of a spectatorial "we". The second proposition sends us back to the appropriation of a space that is recognized as one's own, traversed by the body, back also to territory and intersubjectivity; but it does not end up with individual identity. Thus each proposition remains unachieved. We are not within the "among us" of popular celebrations, nor within the indistinct and depoliticised space of Sartrian mass media. This form of "unfinished appropriation within common space" puts each of us at a distance from ourselves, and while it represents public space, this form leads us to a collective experience of "difference from oneself" which we have not yet gotten used to, even now, to which present-day media respond, in order to suture it.

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