Autopsy and Autography in the First Decades of Cinema

Christian Quendler

The ability to capture impressions of movement and to store them for replay as a more or less stable record of the world are without doubt film’s most celebrated features. Although this double function of film as a perceptual and a mnemonic medium has lent itself to a variety of uses, it has been studied mostly in its narrative application: the recording of perceptual experiences and their reproduction within a narrative frame. As film historians such as Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault have pointed out, the predominant focus on narrative cinema in orthodox film histories has led to a bias that defines early cinema for what it lacks rather than study early films on their own terms and in their historical contexts. This article proposes an alternative approach. Instead of subsuming the perceptual and mnemonic functions of film exclusively within a narrative scope, I will examine them as mediated practices of autopsy and autography. These notions of seeing with one’s own eyes and recording with one’s own hand are defining constituents of testimonial genres such as travelogues, diaries and notebooks, which played a key role in the early development of film. As these notions and their generic contexts lend themselves to narrative as well as non-narrative uses, they are particularly apt to address the diversity of early cinema and its intersections with artistic, scientific, legal and medical discourses. Further, the deeper meanings of these concepts draw attention to the meta-implications of media use: Just as autopsy not only refers to an act of eyewitnessing but also signifies reflecting on the self and being in the absence of life, the autograph extends its literal meaning when it promises to trace something (about the writer or writing) that seems irreplaceable and individual. Discussing early film criticism and films from the first two decades of the twentieth century, I will examine instances of filmic autopsy and autography as strategies of exploring a novel medium and self through that medium.

1 The research for this article was supported by the project of the Austrian Science Fund “Framing Media: The Periphery of Fiction and Film.”
In coming to terms with the diversity of cinematic technologies and uses, media theorists, philosophers and historians have variously called for reflexive approaches that acknowledge the continuities and discontinuities of cinema’s relations across time, cultural practices as well as other arts and media. In order to avoid teleological traps of historiography and mono-dimensional accounts, André Gaudreault suggested that film historical research should assume a multiplicity of perspectives that is adequate to the polymorphous nature of cinema and sensitive to the heterogeneity of visual cultures: “[T]he film historian must devote himself or herself to adopting a panoptic vision, to privileging a panoramic view, assuming a battery of successive observation posts no less complex than the most complicated of Muybridge’s devices” (Gaudreault 2000: 9). Gaudreault’s methodological alternative can be described as a network model of cultural practices that emerges from studying intermedial relations. Such intermedial research perspectives have proved to be immensely productive. They shed light on intricate continuities among periods commonly referred to as pre-cinema and early cinema, rather than presenting the invention of the cinematograph as a radical rupture in the media landscape: “New mediums [sic] are reputed to take their first steps by reproducing in a rather servile manner the other mediums [sic] from which they are more or less derived, and the cinema does not seem to stray from this model” (Gaudreault 2000:9). Intermedial histories of cinema have also helped to revise shortcomings of film historical approaches that unduly privilege narrative forms. Instead of regarding early cinema as a primitive or initial stage in film’s evolutionary development towards a narrative master medium, media historicist frameworks appear more adept at appraising early cinema in its own terms and accounting for the historical discontinuities with subsequent periods associated with the ‘rise of narrative cinema’.

Drawing on intermediality research and insights in media archeology that focus on operational images responding to the demands of the body and the senses, this article proposes a complementary approach. I will examine two notions supported by the cinematic dispositif that pervade the history and theory of cinema as a means of reflection and expression: autopsy and autography, which can be defined as acts of personal witnessing and recording that are also endowed with the reflexive meanings of ‘self-view’ or introspection, on one hand, and of affirming or ‘signing’ of one’s singular identity, on the other. The heuristic power of these notions is expansive. Autopsy and autography are constitutive features of testimonial genres including travelogues, journals and diaries. They interlink narrative and non-narrative as well as fictional and non-fictional genres. They are critical to artistic and scientific discourses as well as

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2 I am particularly indebted to Thomas Elseasser’s research program outlined in “The Troubled Trope.”
legal, medical and philosophical domains. What makes these concepts particularly useful for a historical analysis of cinema is that they describe specific practices that address the three dimensions of art that Jacques Rancière refers to as ethical, representational and aesthetic regimes. Instead of singling out abstract modes that refer to each of these dimensions (such as, for instance, the representational distinction between showing and telling, or the ethical distinction between conscious and unconscious or intentional and unintentional) autopsy and autography refer to embodied practices or gestures where these dimensions are always already negotiated. I will begin by defining the terms autopsy and autography in relation to their ethical, representational and aesthetic implications. Although the notions of autopsy and autography are traditionally regarded as personal acts that highlight human agency, I will argue that a film historical reading that replaces the sense of self in the prefix ‘auto’ with the mechanical automatism of the camera sheds light on the formation of media identity in this early period of film history and its repercussions on modern conceptions of self.

1. Ethical, representational and aesthetic implications of autopsy and autography

My discussion in this part is organized around Jacques Rancière’s tripartite conception of art as being distributed across ethical, representational and aesthetic regimes. The ethical regime concerns the social function of art. Ethics is understood here in a pragmatic sense that focuses less on norms of good ethical behavior than on the subject’s situation in a scene that is described in ethical terms. Accordingly, the ethical dimension of images and media can be described in values that qualify their social uses and effects (e.g. diverting vs. instructive, or harmful vs. beneficial). The representational dimension refers to the means and techniques of artistic expression as a repertoire of formal conventions, which Rancière relates back to the ancient meaning of art as a craft. By contrast, the aesthetic regime is understood in a distinctly modern sense. It describes a realm of reflection and intervention where representational conventions and ethical values are suspended, interrogated and negotiated.

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3 For the distinctions of these dimensions in artistic works see Rancière 2000.
4 I am not arguing against the usefulness of such representational and ethical categories. They are extremely useful for systematic approaches in intermediality research as, among others, Werner Wolf’s important publications document. See also Rajewsky 2002. Yet, historical or genetic approaches to intermediality will inevitably have to address specific configurations of these categories such as autopsy and autography that are established through genres and other cultural practices of use. On historical research programs of intermediality see also Gaudreault/Marion 2005.
What are the ethical, representational and aesthetic implications of the notions of autopsy and autography? Perhaps the strongest implications of these terms are ethical, which also accounts for the prominent role they play in diaries and travelogues. The ethical bearings of autopsy and autography result from the sense of authenticity and authority that they connote. The assertion of having witnessed something with one’s own eyes situates the observer in the immediate context with the observed. The focus on the situational context in acts of autopsy can be associated with certain representational conventions. As a central trope in travel literature, the autopsy principle does not only focus on detailed descriptions of objects or events observed, it also includes minute descriptions of the observer’s personal circumstances, his or her thoughts and habits. The ethics of autopsy gauge the distance between the observer and the observed and his or her commitment in the situation. As I will discuss below, this ethical dimension relates especially to the possibility of situating a camera as a secret observer or using it as an invasive instrument. This secrecy may be evaluated negatively as a form of voyeurism (where the observer's role in the situation is ethically dubious) or it may be legitimized by placing the camera in the service of a private detective. Similarly, the invasive dimension of the camera can be seen as a threat to privacy or re-evaluated with reference to a scientific or medical context, where such invasions are considered acceptable.

While autopsy as an authenticity claim deals primarily with experiential aspects, autography asserts authenticity by claiming authority over the production and representation of the experiential content. The autograph quite literally vouchsafes for the authenticity of an expression and its author. Autography extends its literal meaning when it promises to trace something about the writer or the writing that is irreplaceable and individual. Just as writing can stand in for the writer, style can become a signature for the author. The sense in which autography is used here differs somewhat from Nelson Goodman’s distinction between autographic and allographic arts, which he explicitly introduced without implications “concerning the individuality of expression demanded by or attainable in these arts” (Goodman 1969: 119). However, to the extent that his distinction addresses a basic problem related to the production, mediation and reception of an artwork, it is also pertinent to my discussion. Goodman uses these terms to determine which features of an artwork are constitutive and which are merely contingent. Whereas autographic arts like painting come with the proclamation of singularity and genuineness

5 See esp. William E. Stewart’s (1978) Die Reisebeschreibung und ihre Theorie in Deutschland. More recently, Vanessa Angew has revisited this notion of the autopsy in the diaries of Thomas Cook. Laura Rascaroli (2009) also briefly touches upon the autopsy principle in her discussion of diary films.
(which qualifies even the most exact duplication as a fake), allographic arts, like music or architecture, seem resistant to such forgeries. Differences in the performance of a musical work do not falsify the aesthetic genuineness of a musical composition but are rather incidental to its actualization during a performance:

Initially, perhaps, all arts are autographic. Where works are transitory, as in singing and reciting, or require many persons for their production, as in architecture and symphonic music, a notation may be devised in order to transcend the limitations of time and the individual. (Goodman 1969: 121)

Whereas Goodman probes the question whether the “institution of a notational system [could] transform painting or etching from an autographic to an allographic art” (195), I will reverse the question by approaching it from a perspective of media anthropology: To what extent can an allographic dimension associated with film technology attain an autographic status?

Goodman’s reflections on modes of production as art-specific criteria have already touched upon representational aspects. As Rancière puts it, the representational regime identifies the substance of art by means of the conceptual pair of poesies and mimesis. In its most basic sense, the representational regime defines art as an activity and the arts as specific ways of doing or making. Artistic processes are guided externally in acts of imitations (e.g. in copying a spectacle of nature) and regulated internally by creative interventions (e.g. by arranging such a spectacle as a scene or entangling it in a plot). While the former, mimetic principle stresses resemblance of external relations, the latter, poetic principle highlights the organicity or surplus of meaning brought about by internal relations. Thus, on the representational level, autopsy and autography align with the pure spectacle of the senses, on one hand, and the arrangement and fabrication of these in narrative and non-narrative forms, on the other.

Finally, the aesthetic implications of the concepts of autopsy and autography can be found in the deeper meanings of these terms. As introduced at the beginning of this part, in the aesthetic regime, we can contemplate, investigate or probe the senses and meanings attributed to what is sensible. These meanings address the sensible in experiential and representational terms (i.e., what can be perceived as form) as well as in ethical terms (i.e., what is likely to be of benefit). This reflexive dimension is manifest in an existential interpretation of autopsy as a reflection on the self in the presence or absence of life. This sense of autopsy falls right between the psychological and the pathological uses of the term and can
be defined as reflecting on being and living in the face of death.\textsuperscript{6} As an alternative to the transcendental concept of death, the limits of the self can be reflected in the light of inanimate mechanical objects and routines that interrupt and displace the experiential stream that informs our notions of self. While autopsy is a form of self-reflection guided by a sense of alterity (e.g. non-human or non-living), autography is a form of self-reflection that builds upon metonymic relations (e.g. by understanding the writer through his or her writing).

Having outlined how practices of autopsy and autography shape notions of self across ethical, representational and aesthetic dimensions, I want to examine what happens when the sense of self in the prefix ‘auto’ is replaced by the idea of a cinematic automatism. We can describe this process as mutual re-description of self and media. On the one hand, novel media allow us to experience ourselves in new ways and this defamiliarizing experience can serve as an expression of what escapes our notions of self. Conversely, media can also help to reduce the complexity in our conception of personal identities by breaking it down to a human-scale scenario of media user. Media thereby offer a way of understanding ourselves by blending vague notions of the self with those of the self as a user of technology, such as language users, readers or movie goers.\textsuperscript{7} On the other hand, we identify media by blending them with familiar practices and human-scale scenarios of use. For instance, early terms for cinema such as \textit{screen play} and \textit{motion pictures} project theatrical and painterly frames on this novel technology.

Accordingly, projecting notions of autopsy and autography onto cinema entails a two-fold process of endowing cinema with a functional sense of identity and re-experiencing oneself. In the first step, cinema simply serves as an instrument of autopsy and autography; in the second step, the experience of autopsy and autography mediated by film is related to the film user. The second part of this article will focus on the first step, where autopsy and autography reflects upon cinema as a means of seeing and recording. In the third part, I will turn to the second step, focusing on filmic instances of autopsy and autography that reveal insights about the user.

Before discussing specific filmic practices of autopsy and autography as well as their ethical, representational and aesthetic ramifications, it is helpful to contextualize these practices by outlining how early and classi-
ical film theorists responded to the challenge film posed to established ethical and representational conceptions of art. I will conclude this part by looking at three exemplary positions: early pictorial theories of film as well as approaches to cinema that evolved in the context of futurism and critical theory.

A central problem in early art criticism on film concerns the representational nature of the photographic image, which became a test case for renegotiating the boundaries between art and science. One main concern in early writings on film as art was scientific precision, which was either deemed to exceed or fall short of the aesthetic imperatives of realism and naturalism. A strain of early film theory, which is sometimes dubbed as pictorial film theory for its heavy recourse to classical art theories, aligned its notion of realism with aesthetic programs found in literature and painting. In The Photodrama and its Place among the Fine Arts (1915), the screenwriter William Morgan Hannon argues for a cinematic realism that is modeled on the idealism found in Charles Dickens’ fiction and on pictorial impressionism:

Photography is too exact – it includes the non-essentials as well as the essential – to give merely the essence of things [...] In short, the photodrama is not quite equal to the demands of those hyper-aesthetic and super-sensitive souls who expect in all art-products a subtle revelation of the essence of things — nay, what might be termed the elusive essence of things. (Hannon 1915: 21)

In the same year, the poet Vachel Lindsay emphasized the symbolic virtue of filmmaking. In his anthropological poetics, which placed motion pictures in a history of picture-writing that included ancient and hieroglyphic scripts, he considered this fad with cinematic exactitude and precision merely a transitory phase:

Let the cave-man, reader of picture-writing, be allowed to ponder over scientific truth. He is at present the victim of the alleged truth of the spongy and sentimental variety of photograph. It gives precise edges of the coat or collar of the smirking masher and the exact fibre in the dress of the jumping-jack. The eye grows weary of sharp points and hard edges that mean nothing. All this idiotic precision is going to waste. It should be enlisted in the cause of science and abated everywhere else. The edges in art are as mysterious as in science they are exact. (Lindsay 2000: 155)

Such explicit and implicit alignments with other art theories can be found across a variety of theoretical approaches of film.

As an example of an avant-gardist approach, the writer and critic Ricciotto Canudo proposed an interesting alternative to such pictorial approaches to film, which had a great impact on contemporary and later generations of avant-garde filmmakers. Rather than privileging art over

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8 For the debate on photorealistic precision in literature see Orvell 1989.
science, Canudo regarded film as a synthesis of the two. He re-conceptualized the classical representational modes of *mimesis* and *poesis*, which he associated with the aspects of the real and the symbolic. For Canudo, both aspects are characteristic of the modern spirit. While the aspect of the real belongs to the scientific rationale of the filmic apparatus, he sees the symbolic, above all, in the combinatory power of movement and speed.\(^9\) His reflections on the seventh art represent a radical synthesis, inspired in part by ancient and medieval disciplinary canons that encompassed both the arts and sciences.

The figure of the magician is a recurring metaphor in early and classical film theory that nicely illustrates film’s position in relation to the representational practices associated with the arts and sciences, respectively. Lindsay envisioned the filmmaker as a magician and prophet-wizard that reconciled scientific and poetic imagination by following a Romantic and post-Romantic tradition modeled on William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Edgar Allan Poe and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Articulating a post-Romantic stance in “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit” (1936), Walter Benjamin returned to the distinction between magician and scientist to illustrate differences between painting and cinema. Magician and surgeon are representative of two orders located at opposing poles in the spectrum of the arts. Comparing the painter to a magician and the filmmaker to a surgeon, Benjamin stated the contrast as follows:


However, the loss of this respectful distance or aura brought about by technological media is not a reduction in the process of mediation. The

\(^9\) “L’aspect *symbolique* est celui de la vitesse. Une série forte multiple de combinaisons, d’activités combinées, est offerte à la vitesse qui en compose un spectacle, c’est-à dire une série de visions et d’aspects liés dans un faisceau vibrant et vu comme un organisme vivant” (Canudo 1995: 33).

\(^{10}\) “The attitude of the magician, who heals a sick person by a laying-on of hands, differs from that of the surgeon, who makes an intervention in the patient. The magician maintains the natural distance between himself and the person treated; more precisely, he reduces it slightly by laying on his hands, but increases it greatly by his authority. The surgeon does exactly the reverse: he greatly diminishes the distance from the patient by penetrating the patient’s body, and increases it only slightly by the caution with which his hand moves among the organs” (Translation in Benjamin 2002: 115).
illusion of immediacy is, of course, a highly fabricated effect. As Scott Curtis (2004: 227) has pointed out, the “physical and psychic penetration associated with motion pictures (and the surgeon)” relies on a highly complex apparatus that encompasses processes of filmmaking, editing and projection. While magic defies close reading, the surgical act of cinematography depends on it. In place of an aura that channels our aesthetic experience and directs our sensibilities to the ‘elusive essence of things’ or any other kind of aesthetic goal, an apparatus or network of procedures emerges that manipulates and frames photographic reality. The presentation of the documentary implicitly or explicitly includes framings that facilitate its legibility and sustain (if necessary or desired) the illusion of an authentic and immediate reality. Such framings typically contain both ethical and aesthetic descriptions through which the image is perceived. Thus, the redescription of cinema as magic vision (as favored by Lindsay) to what Benjamin describes as a scrutinizing gaze beyond scruples of distance and shame implies changes in the frame of reception that promote and legitimize what in a non-scientific context may be considered transgressive and voyeuristic (see Bottomore 1985). The changing politics of the aesthetic may be described as a shift from framing a space of contemplation to framing an opportunity that legitimizes communal acts of voyeurism.

2. Cinema as vicarious agent of autopsy and autography

Framing techniques in early films are revealing of this need to develop a way of reading filmic documents as representations and managing their ethical transgressive potential. In the Biograph short A Search for Evidence (1903), viewers are presented with a series of point-of-view shots that – framed by a keyhole mask – reveal the private interiors of people living in a hotel. The first shows a young man in a nightgown pacing up and down the room as he tries to lull a baby to sleep. The second depicts a man stumbling over a chair in an attempt to light a ceiling lamp. The third witnesses a doctor attending the sickbed of a girl. In the fourth room, we see a party of men playing cards and drinking wine. In the fifth, a woman gets ready for bed. These glimpses into the lives of others are framed and held together by shots that show a detective leading a woman through a series of moving vignettes of everyday
life. The detective personifies the ethical frame. His presence frames and legitimizes a series of voyeuristic glimpses into the private lives of others.

His guidance draws attention to the mediated quality of this eyewitnessing act. He also serves as a vehicle that accounts for the representational dimension. He figuratively embodies the pointing device of the camera, which is complemented by the keyhole masks that marks the detective’s and the woman’s gazes. It shapes and outlines a shared first-person perspective for both the diegesis and the film audience. In this sense, the role of the detective combines the function of a male guardian and projectionist. He can serve as an allegory for the cinematic apparatus that controls and enables women to see for themselves spectacles to which they hitherto had no access (see Hansen 1991, esp. chapter one “A Cinema in Search of a Spectator: Film-Viewer Relations before Hollywood,” 23-59).

Another common practice of invoking film as a form of vicarious autopsy was to deploy the camera itself as a detective agent. As Tom Gunning (1995: 35) observes, the camera often played an “essential role as the mute yet unassailable witness of a crime.” In many early films such as Falsely Accused (1908) or Zigmor vs. Nick Carter (1912), the camera delivers the hard and fast evidence that rights the wrong or – as in Getting Evidence (1906) and The Story the Biograph Told (1904) – exposes sexual transgressions and betrayal. In the latter film, the role of the detective is replaced by a mischievous office boy who secretly sets up a camera to film his boss kissing his secretary. When the movie is shown in the theater, the affair is exposed and the secretary is soon replaced by a man.

Władysław Starewicz’s insect puppet animation film The Cameraman’s Revenge (Miest Kinomatograficheskovo Operatora, 1912) combines visual themes and plot elements found in The Story the Biograph Told, In Search for Evidence and other early films (see Figures 1 to 6). Bored by his country life, Mr. Beetle seizes the occasion to visit a nightclub and brothel on one of his many trips to the city. At the nightclub, he bumps into an aggressive and vengeful cameraman, who then follows Mr. Beetle and records his erotic adventures. When Mr. Beetle returns to his wife, he catches her in the arms of her artist lover. Mr. Beetle generously forgives his wife and takes her to a movie theater, where the revengeful cameraman turns out to be the projectionist.
As in *The Story the Biography Told*, the cinematic apparatus appears both as a recording and a projection device. Even though autopsy and autography in this film aims at the objective world rather than the filming subject, Starewicz adds a reflexive twist to the idea of filmic autopsy. By animating dead insects, he addresses not only a core principle of animation theory, but also a key concern of early film theory in general. For film theoreticians as diverse as Jean Epstein and Vachel Lindsay, the idea of animating something inanimate or capturing things in movement was synonymous with getting to the essence or the soul of things.\(^{11}\)

The keyhole masking and the prominent display of the cinematic apparatus, which was characteristic of early cinematic self-reflexivity, are integrated in a narrative where human and camera vision are calibrated for non-professional purposes. Staging the cameraman’s filming and screening and representing the camera’s gaze multiply the narrative and representational levels of the story. The keyhole frame in Figure 6, for instance, shows the screening of a recording that depicts the cameraman’s perspective as captured by the camera. The next sill in Figure 7, shows Mr. Beetle’s furious response to the film as he jumps at the movie screen. His drastic reaction is itself an allusion to a common motif in early films, such as *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (1902), where viewers mis-

\(^{11}\) See e.g. Jean Epstein (1921), “The Senses I (b)” or Vachel Lindsay (1921), *The Art of the Moving Picture*, esp. chapter 10 “Furniture, Trappings and Inventions in Motion,” 84-95.
take the filmic image for reality. However, Mr. Beetle is, of course, not a naïve viewer. What literally looks like a metalepsis, i.e. a paradoxical leap across ontologically distinct representational or narrative levels, is an emotionally charged but not a delusional act. While this scene is a visual pun that combines early cinematic stock figures such as the enraged wife in *A Search for Evidence* with the myth of naïve film viewers, Mr. Beetle does not aim at entering into the scene depicted on the screen, but tries to get through the screen in order to take it out with the projectionist.

Such disruptions and displacements of a represented scenes point to the ethical and aesthetic undercurrent that self-reflexively addresses the relation between the cinematic dispositif and its operator. In the hand of a mischievous apprentice or a vengeful cameraman, visual technologies become a threat to established boundaries between private and public life:

The viewer of the film negotiates this propulsion of private deeds into public exposure, positioned as both voyeur-witness and moral judge through the surrogate apparatus. But the power of this fantasy also contains its inverse, the paranoia of constant surreptitious surveillance. (Gunning 1999: 46)

The camera thereby becomes another figure of spying and eavesdropping that allows for novel imaginative scenarios, which Mikhail Bakhtin considered a driving force in the development of novelistic fiction:

In addition to the figures of rogue, servant, adventurer, pimp, the novel devised other means for spying and eavesdropping on private life – and while these other means are at times very clever and subtle, they became neither typical nor essential to the genre as such. For example: the Lame Devil in Lesage (in his novel *Le Diable boiteux*) removes the roofs from houses and exposes personal life at those moments when ‘a third person’s’ presence would not be permitted.

(Bakhtin 1981: 127)

While the camera may act as an agent, it cannot be held liable. A cinematic record can be appropriated for purposes that seem legitimate even if the recording involved devious practices. On the one hand, the recording of the camera is viewed as a mechanical event independent of human agency, on the other, the camera is attributed human or psychological features. As Gunning points out, the camera embodies an observing agent with characteristic modern features:

First, since the witnessing is technological rather than human, its evidence has a correspondingly greater claim to truth, since the “apparatus cannot lie.” […] The lack of human intention in the operation of the camera mirrors an equally important aspect of the photography of guilt which connects it to the detective’s other techniques of evidence and identification. In most cases, the camera takes the culprit’s photo when he is caught
unawares. Therefore, like Holmes’s keenly perceived trifles, the camera captures the guilty one in a moment of unconscious self-betrayal.

(Gunning 1995: 36)

The auto-mechanism of the camera seems to offer a double benefit. Not only does it eliminate a human bias in observing, it can also reveal what lies beyond the intentions of the observed subject. The camera, it seems, affords a disjunction from human perception that brings forth what normally passes as unnoticed or even unintentional; it facilitates an emotional, legal or ethical distance between the person who operates the camera and the record created.

However, the instrumental function of the camera as a human extension also fosters a new junction between the camera and embodied human perception. To what extent does the mechanism deflect the moral repercussions involved in such acts of spying and eavesdropping? Gunning draws attention to a revealing detail in the technological development of smaller portable photographic cameras that can help qualify this question. The original name for hand cameras, which are best known through George Eastman’s model of the Kodak, was ‘detective camera,’ a term that was later abandoned for its negative connotations. In April 1890, W.H. Burbank wrote in *The American Amateur Photographer*: “The word savors too much of devious ways and shady practices to be retained by any true lover of the camera” (Burbank 1890a: 136). The shift in terminology from an investigative practice of detection to the basic physical act of holding nicely illustrates a change in the cultural use of cameras: “The hand camera was apparently originally seen as a specialist camera whose small size, instantaneous exposure, and ease of operation allowed it to be used unobtrusively or even surreptitiously” (Gunning 1999: 49).

For Gunning, the hand camera “brought nothing less than a social revolution that affected the legal definition of self and privacy as well as the nature of social embodied behavior” (Gunning 1999: 57).

The wider cultural use of the hand camera was particularly targeted at amateur travel photography. As Burbank notes in a later issue of *The American Amateur Photographer* the same year: “The hand camera may be said to have opened new possibilities and have done much towards hastening the coming of the time when the whole world will lie within easy reach of one’s hand as he sits by his own ingle nook” (Burbank 1890b: 328). The introduction of the hand camera to tourism and travel literature had crucial ramifications that filmmakers throughout the twentieth century have returned to in different ways. The hand camera can vouchsafe for and amplify the principle of *autopsy* so central to the travelogue genre. More importantly, as Burbank’s phrase “within easy reach of one’s hands” suggests, the hand camera highlights the connection between hand and eye, which throughout the twentieth century will become a crucial conceptual link for innovating cinematography (such as
3. Cinematic discoveries of self

The popular uses of the portable camera in travelogue photography as well as in new forms of social tourism and muckraking journalism, which, like the work of Jacob Riis, ventured to ‘exotic’ places among the poor and lower class life, set the mode for filmic travelogue genres. A remarkable film that combined panoramic tracking shots with the exotic lure of people living on the fringes of society was *A Day with the Gypsies* (1906), directed by Cecil Hepworth for Gaston Quiribet. The film has been equally praised for its smooth landscape tracking shots and its consistent use of a subjective camera throughout the entire film. In this sense, *A Day with the Gypsies* (1906) can be seen as an early remarkable instance of exploring the ideal of travelogue autopsy in a motion picture film. Notably, this film has not only become a reference point for cinematic realism but has also been invoked as a cinematic model in theorizing video games (see Guneratne 1998, as well as Mark J.P. Wolf 2001).

The film begins with a title card that reads “Early one morning I discovered some gipsies [sic] preparing for the road.” The first shot opens rather inconspicuously with a tableau of three gypsies: an old woman standing, an elderly man sitting and a young man lying on the ground. Soon, however, we notice that their relation to the camera changes as they start to look grimly into the camera. Although a first-person perspective has been introduced by the intertitle, the effect of this shot is quite startling. The intrusion that disrupts the gypsies’ idle morning repose is first displayed on their faces. We first read the faces of the gypsies before we recognize that it is the camera that causes this disruption. The viewer’s ‘identification’ with the camera is less an immersive or empathic effect of re-centering than a conscious act of recognition and inference. We recognize that the gypsies are staring at the camera; we infer a camera-persona and attribute a first-person value to this persona.

The change in the register of gazes in the opening shot is only the first of a series of exchanges with the camera, in which the viewer is invited to take on the role of a filmic other. In order to persuade the gypsies to let him spend the day with them, the camera-persona offers the old

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women some money. We see an empty hand reaching towards the camera and a hand filled with money withdrawing from the camera’s off-space. At noon, their caravan approaches a small village where they stop for refreshments. Panoramic shots filmed sideways give way to shots of streets and houses filmed from the front of the caravan. When the gypsies jump off the caravan to buy drinks, an intertitle reminds us of the subjective camera: “Although I remained in the caravan I was not forgotten.” Mirroring the previous money transaction, we then see a young woman offering a mug to the camera. The last interaction of this kind occurs at the end of the film. After we have seen the gypsies set up their camp and dance by their fireplace, the first-person protagonist decides to have his palm read. Framed in a close-up, the old women starts reading his hand before an intertitle ends the film with the fortuneteller’s words: “You have got a lucky face.”

This final twist of having the fortuneteller read the face of the ‘camera’ represents the inverse of the opening shot, in which the camera captures and makes legible its presence in the gypsies’ faces. A Day with the Gypsies documents a characteristic feature of filmic observation and self-reflection in early cinema. While the camera and especially mobile cameras mark a paradigmatic change in the perception of self and everyday life, this process of self-reflection evolved primarily through observing an other rather than using the camera directly as a means of introspection.13

Louis Feuillade’s Tragic Error (Erreur tragique, 1912) can serve as a complementary example that stages film viewing as a process of discovery that, like A Day with the Gypsies, includes a dimension of self-discovery. The two-act drama of Tragic Error unfolds in close, frame-by-frame reading of a film that anticipates Michelangelo Antonioni’s Blow-up (1966) by some fifty years. René and Suzanne de Romiguieres’ honeymoon at the foothills of the Cévennes is briefly interrupted when René receives a letter that asks him to attend some business in Paris. Finding some spare time in the city, René goes to the movies to watch a Gaumont comedy entitled Onésime vagabond (see Figure 7). However, instead of enjoying a moment of diverting repose, René is shocked to discover his own wife arm in arm with another man passing through the background of a scene (see Figures 9 to 10). By staging in depth and combining different acting styles, Feuillade depicts a filmic space where reality and fiction are presented as at once mixed and distinct.14 Suzanne and her male company are set off spatially, their ‘natural’ acting (Suzanne even tries to conceal her face when she notices that she has just walked into a

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13 The possibility of having one’s picture taken unawares leads to important revelations about oneself. Gunning (see e.g. 1999: 57) has numerous reported on such early defamiliarizing experiences of recognizing oneself through the medium of film and photography.

14 See also Richard Abel’s discussion of this film in The Ciné Goes to Town (Abel 1994: 350-351).
film scene; see Figure 10) contrasts with the exuberant and comic pantomime of the vagabond fighting two policemen (see Figures 8-9).

Such confusions of fact and fiction are common themes in early narrative cinema. These self-reflexive moments reveal a contemporary fascination with cinema’s mimetic power. Rather than considering them as expressions of an actual confusion about cinema’s ontological status, they address an ambiguity in the representational mode of cinema. The coexistence of the fictional and real elements on the same representational plane correlates with two interpretive frames. Conventionally, these frames are seen in a hierarchical relationship: e.g. a filmic recording captures a dramatic enactment of real actors.\(^\text{15}\)

Immediately after the show, René acquires a copy of the film and sets out to study it frame by frame (see Figures 11-13). He then returns to his wife without notice, hoping to catch her by surprise. The first reel of the film ends with René studying the stills again. He is already consumed with jealousy. As one intertitle suggests, the filmic images branded onto his brain increasingly undermine his sense of reality: “Et René croirait avoir fait un mauvais rêve, si l’image maudite n’était là pour entretenir sa volonté sauvage d’observer et de savoir […]”\(^\text{16}\) Unlike the dream image, the virtue of the filmic resides between the mental and material reality.

Finally, René’s suspicions are confirmed when he comes across a letter from a man named Roger, who asks Suzanne to meet him at the local train station (see Figure 14). Blind with rage, Roger sabotages his wife’s carriage by placing a burning wick in the harness of the horse. After she is already on her way, René discovers that the suspected rival is Suzanne’s brother. He rushes off and finds the wrecked carriage and his wife miraculously alive.

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\(^{15}\) In early narrative films shot-on-location, dramatic enactment and non-scripted reality sometimes appear in an adjacent relation. A case in point is a scene in Frank S. Mottershaw’s chase film *A Daring Daylight Burglary* (1903). The film, which may itself be viewed as loosely based on a historical chase that happened some twenty years prior to the shooting, ends with the burglar’s arrest. While the thief first manages to escape the police by train, he is eventually overpowered at the next train stop. His arrest at the track shows passengers getting on and off the train that appear to be uninformed about the film shooting.

\(^{16}\) ‘René would have believed he was having a bad dream had the accursed image not instilled in him the wild desire to observe and know’ (my translation). The English intertitle on the Kino edition of *Gaumont Treasures* reads “He cannot remove the images from his mind. He has to see and know for himself.”
Feuillade’s *Tragic Error* adds another aspect to the notion of the camera as a locus of authentic or genuine reality. As a dispositif of reality or truth the camera is not only contingent on frames of recognition (e.g. when we put ourselves into the position of the subjective camera in *A Day with the Gypsies*) but also on frames of misrecognition (as is the case when René’s anxieties block out other possible interpretations of the image). These two frames relate to two complementary instrumental functions of the camera as an extension of the human sensorium. Whereas *A Day with the Gypsies* stresses the immediacy of perception, *Tragic Error* addresses problems of inferences in the reception process. Both films highlight the interface between unaided and camera vision as a site where cinematic autopsy emerges. A great deal of our fascination with *A Day with the Gypsies* results from identifying or recognizing the ‘otherness’ of the camera as our vicarious perception. In *Tragic Error* the evidential power of the film is not only resistant to close frame-by-frame readings, it is so strong that René cannot resolve his conflict unless he sees and knows for himself.

In this regard *Tragic Error* stands out from other films at the time that employed the cinema as a revelatory agent. Shortly after *Tragic Error*, Lawrence Marston and Edwin Thanhouser released *The Evidence of the Film* (1913), which like *Tragic Error* contains self-reflexive scenes of reading a filmstrip and exhibiting a film where fictional and real worlds collide. In contrast to the *Tragic Error*, the evidence accidentally captured by a moving picture company does not complicate reality in dramatic ways but as in many other evidence movies helps to solve a crime.
4. Conclusion: The narrative integration of autopsy and autography

In the first decades of cinema, the dissonances and differences between human perception and camera vision represent an attraction for themselves and are frequently the object of playful explorations. Reconciling these differences can be seen as a lure for film technology, industry as well as film narration. Like *The Story the Biograph Told*, *Tragic Error* consciously exploits this lure as a means of self-promotion. The (meta-)reference to the cinematic apparatus as a corporate identity that includes the production and distribution network of the companies plays a crucial role in integrating filmic perception and reception in a unified frame. Linking the camera’s visual evidence to the corporate identity of a film production company thus creates a sense agency that cuts across the diegetic and non-diegetic as well as the fictional and non-fictional realms.

We can contrast this corporate notion of filmic vision with an autographic figure of viewing that refracts and reconciles human and filmic vision: the keyhole mask. As the examples discussed in this article illustrate, the keyhole mask has an important mediating function. It offers a common frame for the human gaze and the camera’s field of vision as much as it integrates the latter into a stereotypical scenario of spying. By constraining human and camera vision, it effectively neutralizes their respective differences. In other words, it can serve as a vehicle of media mimesis that naturalizes the defamiliarizing effects of camera vision. Film history has developed an impressive repertoire of strategies that assimilate human and camera vision by either inserting a filtering media on the diegetic level (such as a keyhole, camcorders, etc.) or through expressionist and stylistic devices that render peculiar and extraordinary mental states (such as dreams, intoxications, hallucinations, etc.). Such devices are regularly interpreted as phenomena closely linked to the experiential world of characters. They focalize by rendering certain aspects of subjectivity visible.

In contrast, the ‘corporate camera’ is linked to a storytelling frame as is spelled out in the title of *The Story the Biograph Told*. It subsumes the selective and compositional processes of recording and editing. Yet, the *The Story the Biograph Told* and *Tragic Error* stage the revelatory power of the camera within complex plots that include parallel actions and embedded narratives. Staging acts of filming and screening in a movie self-reflexively gestures toward the actual production and exhibition of the film. It also turns the camera and the screen into props that act as counterparts of the machinery that makes up the ‘real’ cinematic apparatus. *The Story the Biograph Told*, *The Cameraman’s Revenge* and *Tragic Error* all depend on this playful doubling of filmic acts as fictional events or what amounts to the narrative reproduction of cinematic autopsy and autography. The narrative integration of these testimonial gestures and
their reproduction in a fictional context also opens up new horizons of symbolization. As Abel (1994: 360) suggests, *Tragic Error* can be viewed as Gaumont’s allegorical response to the increase of censorship at that time.

Filmic records do not seem to speak for themselves unless their focalizing and storytelling functions are fused or fabricated into a unified experience. *A Day with the Gypsies* comes closest to such an endeavor. This film illustrates nicely what André Gaudreault has dubbed the film monstrator and the film narrator. The intertitles, which are all written in the historical past, situate the presentation of the film within a ‘narrative order’ or, more precisely, a temporal itinerary. They fulfill basic tasks of the film narrator: they mark temporal and spatial gaps, set the pace and rhythm of the story, offer a commentary of what is shown and provide a rationale for the montage. It is characteristic of the time between 1904 and 1907 that the narrative import of intertitles is rather modest (see Gaudreault 2009: 124-134). Apart from framing the spectacular transactions with the camera, their main narrative function is to set the times of the respective scenes. This has to do with the fact that the main syntagmatic juxtaposition of shots draws on well-established genres of the panoramic picture and the chase movie.

The historical past used throughout the intertitles draws attention to the disparity between the two narrative modes: the scenic presentation of the filmic images and the verbal narration that assists this monstrative entertainment. The tensions that result from the different narrative and temporal modes in the verbal and visual information reflect the challenge of reconciling the film monstrator and the film narrator as one persona that brings together past and present as well as self and other. *A Day with the Gypsies* is illustrative of a historical development in filmic narration before the emergence of what Tom Gunning called the narrator-system, where the narrative function is no longer exterior to the filmic image (such as the explanations of a film lecturer or intertitles projected on behalf of a film lecturer) but emerges from the filmic images and their juxtaposition on the screen.18

Although the two gestures of autopsy and autography surfaced prominently in the first decades of cinema, as new forms of viewing and writing, they are seldom explored as unified or systematic visions of self and medium. The narrative identity of cinema that emerges during the transitional period from 1907 to 1915 shows one way of reconciling self and medium within a representational framework of narrative conventions (see Brewster 2004). *A Day with the Gypsies* points to an influential genre that cuts across narrative and non-narrative discourses: the diary. Even

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18 In *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film*, Gunning describes the narrator-system as “one particular synthesis of filmic discourse occurring in the general move to a cinema of narrative integration” (1991: 25).
though the time frame of the movie and the historical past of the
intertitles deviate from the rigorous temporal regime of the diary, which
Philippe Lejeune so elegantly defined as “a series of dated traces” (179),
the consistent use of subjective camera and its appeal to explore the cam-
era interactively bear strong affinities to this genre.

*A Day with the Gypsies* not only anticipates video-gaming aesthetics but
also can be aligned with a tradition of filmmaking that has resorted to the
diary and similar testimonial genres as an explorative venue for reinventing cinema. Notably, Dziga Vertov invoked the diary as a pro-
grammatic frame for his quest for an absolute film language in *Man with
a Movie Camera* (1929). Journals and notebooks also play a crucial role in
the auteur cinema of the 1950s, where the autographic dimension of cin-
ema found a poignant expression in Alexandre Astruc’s notion of the
camera-pen. Beyond the confines of narrative feature films, the film diary
epitomizes a shift to personal filmmaking in the avant-garde of the 1960
and 70s (see also Rascaroli 2009).

**Movies**

*A Daring Daylight Burglary* (1903). Dir. Frank S. Mottershaw. Sheffield Photo
Company.

*A Day with the Gypsies* (1906). Dir. Cecil Hepworth for Gaston Quiribet.


*The Evidence of the Film* (1913). Dir. Lawrence Marston and Edwin Thanhouser.
Thanhouser Film Corporation.


*Mest Kinomatograficheskovo Operatora (The Cameraman’s Revenge)* (1912). Dir.
Władysław Starewicz. Khanzhonkov.


*The Story the Biograph Told* (1904). Dir. A.E. Weed. American Mutoscope and
Biograph.

*Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (1902). Dir. Edwin S. Porter. Edison
Manufacturing Company.


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Christian Quendler
Department of American Studies
University of Innssbruck