The imaginary Other spectator:

*a paradigm for early cinema spectatorship*

Beth Corzo-Duchardt, Muhlenberg College

**INTRODUCTION: *HUGO***

I begin with a clip from Martin’s Scorsese’s 2011 film *Hugo:*

**[show clip - SLIDE 2]**

Here we have a repetition of a familiar story; one that film scholars often refer to as “cinema’s founding myth.” It is regarded as myth because there is no historical evidence to suggest that these Parisian audiences in 1895 panicked. Why does Scorsese repeat it here? Shouldn’t he know better? Well, as a storyteller he understands that idea of these imaginary naïve spectators of the past help to ensure 21st century viewers’ appreciation for these early films. Scorsese knows that most viewers will find these films boring, (*and having taught film history, I know first-hand it’s hard to get Millennials excited about these films*). **[SLIDE 3 – train film still]** So, simultaneous to showing *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat,* Scorsese gives us **[SLIDE 4 – Isabelle’s narration]**Isabelle’s narration along with a dramatic reenactment of an audience astonished and frightened by the image onscreen. [**SLIDE 5 – panicking audience]**Thus our viewing pleasure is train gulated through the idea of these imaginary other spectators of the past who (allegedly) feared for their lives.

Now, to be fair to Scorsese, even though there is no evidence giving any indication of audience panic at that particular screening in 1895, newspapers of the era do supply reports of audiences panicking—**[SLIDE 6a]** such as the widely-circulated account of two women who “screamed and fainted” while watching another train film, the *Empire State Express*[[1]](#footnote-1)*,***[SLIDE 6b]** another about how women in the front row during a screening of a film showing waves breaking on a seashore **Q** “ducked their heads … to keep … from getting wet,”[[2]](#footnote-2) and another, which I’ll analyze in a moment, **[SLIDE 6c]** about a group of indigenous Mexican women who ran out of a theater for fear of being run over by a moving-image-fire engine. Allegedly.

**[Slide 7 – blank]** Scholars often cite these stories as evidence of the subjective experiences for movie-goers in the early days. There are two dueling interpretations: One camp interprets these stories as evidence that the cinema provided a radically new perceptual experience for first-time audiences. That “No one had ever seen anything like it before.” This is the tradition Scorsese is tapping into, of course. In the other camp are the adherents to the cinema of attractions thesis, as articulated by Tom Gunning, who rejects this claim. It’s not that no one had ever seen anything like it before, he argues, but that audiences went into the theater expecting to be shocked and astonished. Because moving pictures were presented alongside other popular entertainments – such as magic shows and roller coasters that also elicited physically jarring and sometimes panicked responses.[[3]](#footnote-3)

There are two things missing from this debate that I want to address today. **[SLIDE 8a]** First, close readings of the individual original newspaper articles. My close readings reveal that there are profound power differentials between the narrators who observe audiences panicking and the individuals who they say are doing the panicking. **[SLIDE 8b]** The other thing missing from the debate is a theorization of the affective function these stories served for those who wrote and consumed them. I draw on Christain Metz’s concept of “partial identification” to do this. This is all to say that I think film historians should shift our focus from arguing about what these stories might tell us about the subjective movie-going experiences for the audience members who are said to scream and faint, duck their heads, or run away, and instead focus on what these stories can tell us about the subjective movie-going experience of those who wrote, published, and read these tales.

**HOW A BIOGRAPH CAUSED A PANIC**

I turn now to a close reading of an article in order to demonstrate what such an analysis looks like. **[SLIDE 9]** “How a Biograph Caused a Panic Among Indians,” was published in 1900 and written by a man who is identified only as a “well-known lawyer.” It begins: **Q** “One of the most laughable experiences I ever had […] was in Tucson, Arizona, and not so long ago either.” After this set up, this unnamed lawyer relays his experience witnessing audience panic at an early film exhibition. I quote: **[SLIDE 10]**

“The last scene was one of the most realistic given by these machines—the advance of a fire engine at full speed, which first appeared far down the street. […]**[SLIDE 11]** [O]n came the horses, the driver flourishing his whip, the smoke jutting forth in puffs from the engine, and the magnificent gray [horses] were in the foreground on the stage, at the next leap they would be in the audience and then with a cry that could have been heard a block off, the entire Mexican contingent rose and wildly attempted to get out of the way. […]**[SLIDE 12]** In a marvelously short time [they] were in the street, heading for their homes, or congregated in little knots to tell others what a narrow escape they had had from being crushed beneath the fire engine.[[4]](#footnote-4)

He goes on to describe how those who remained in the theater erupted in laughter at this display of panic and concluded this tale by saying **[SLIDE 13]** **Q**: “I don't know whether those Mexican women ever discovered the real nature of the entertainment, but it will be a long time before they will occupy front seats in that theater again.”[[5]](#footnote-5) **[SLIDE 14 - blank]** This description posits an experiential division between on the one side, the narrator and other “normal”bspectators who understood the basic features of moving image technology and, on the other side, the “primitive-minded” indigenous Mexican contingent who believed the moving image fire engine was physically present. His description also emphasizes how much pleasure he and his compatriots took from watching those other spectators panic. That pleasure, I argue, is akin to the pleasure that Scorsese was tapping into by giving his 21st century audiences a dramatic reenactment of the mythological panicking audience in 1895. And I suspect that the lawyer’s tale about the panicking Mexican audience, was just as fictional as Scorsese’s. After all, this was the era of yellow journalism, of *really* fake news. The title of the article “How a Biograph Caused a Panic Among Indians” amounts to 19th-Century click-bait. Stories about colonial subjects’ fearful encounters with modern technology was a standard, and frankly clichéd trope in 1900. The vast majority of newspaper accounts of audience panic in this era single out members of marginalized groups. We’re not talking about a general panic, but rather a panic attributed to specific women, immigrants, indigenous people, working class people, African Americans and children. The myth of the generalized panicking audience at the Grand Cafe that *Hugo* references only emerges later on. The first mention of it appears in a 1940’s film history book. (*I have some ideas about why that is, but I won’t get into that now.)* The crucial point is that whenever these stories appear there’s always an experiential distance between the normal spectator who narrates the account and the panicking spectators being observed. This should make us very skeptical.

Contrary to what many film historians have claimed, then, I am arguing that these stories do not provide valid evidence that the cinema constituted a radically new perceptual experience. Nor do I believe that the panic described in this lawyer’s story and in other, similar stories corroborate the cinema of attractions thesis—at least not in the way that Gunning has argued. My claims are not incompatible with the cinema of attractions idea. In fact, I do think that these stories can tell us something about one particular attraction that the early cinema held for the lawyer and his readership, **[SLIDE 15 – Philippine exposition]** which had a lot in common with some side-show and world’s fair attractions and exhibits, those that put so-called primitive people on display for the awe and pleasure of modern white modern spectators. Although this story can’t tell us anything about the subjective experiences of the Mexican women, it tells us a lot about the subjective experiences of the lawyer and his presumed readership. It demonstrates that he, like that many white American men at the turn-of-the-twentieth century, desired to experience partial identification with the imaginary primitive spectator. **[SLIDE 16 – BLANK]** The circulation of this and similar stories among newspapers, trade journals, and even fictionalized representations (the famous *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show*) would be a prime example) implanted the idea of this other spectator into the American imaginary. In other words, these stories served as paratexts that prepared early cinema spectators for the kinds of pleasures they could expect when the Biograph came to town. It is in this way that partial identification with the imaginary other spectator became a paradigm for early cinema spectatorship in the United States.

**PARTIAL IDENTIFICATION**

**[SLIDE 17]** Let me explain what I mean by partial identification, and then we’ll return to the lawyer’s story for a closer read. I’m borrowing the term from Chritian Metz who also uses it in the context of addressing the myth of the panicking spectator at the Grand Café in 1895, although he’s not at all interested in its historical specificity. Instead, he interprets the story as a myth that illustrates the fundamental desire that underlies all cinematic spectatorship.[[6]](#footnote-6) He argues that “We” [and I’m using scare quotes, I think we need to trouble that] displace onto the figure of the panicking spectator our own primal desires when in fact this panicking spectator, which he calls the *credulous* spectator, is within us all. He describes an internal split within the individual between the **[SLIDE 18a]** **in**credulous spectator who knows the moving image is unreal and **[SLIDE 18b]** the credulous spectator who believes the image is real because he has not yet developed the capacity to distinguish between cinematic illusion and material reality. Metz writes: **Q**: “The credulous person is, of course, another part of ourselves, he is still seated *beneath* the incredulous one or in his heart, it is he who continues to believe, who disavows what he knows.” **[SLIDE 18c]** Metz believes that we forge a **Q** “partial identification” with the imaginary credulous spectator of the past in order to **Q** “sustain [our] credulousness in all incredulousness.”[[7]](#footnote-7) In other words, partial identification with the imaginary other spectator enables the pleasure of losing oneself in the world of the film, the pleasure of complete belief in the reality of the image. It’s important to emphasize that Metz clearly identifies these panicking spectators as figments of imagination. He calls them **Q** “personified projection[s].” **[SLIDE 18d]** I refer to them, collectively, as the imaginary Other spectator.

PAUSE.

Now, while Metz understands this partial identification with the imaginary other spectator through a psychoanalytic framework as a universal condition that underlies all cinema spectatorship, **[SLIDE 19 – my quote**] I understand partial identification with the imaginary other spectator through the lens of critical race theory as a cultural and historical phenomenon that is bound up in the politics of American imperialism and white supremacy specific to the era.

We see this very clearly in the story narrated by the Tucson lawyer. **[SLIDE 20- article title]** When I introduced his story, I argued that the presence of the Mexican contingent and their panic was crucial to his pleasure. I also pointed to the experiential division that his account sets up between himself and the Mexicans. Now, one might just interpret his story as him having a laugh at the expense of a racialized stereotype and leave it at that. **[SLIDE 21- hall quote]** But as Stuart Hall reminds us: **Q** “The play of identity and difference which constructs racism is powered not only by a positioning of [the Other] as the inferior species but also, and at the same time, by an inexpressible envy and desire.”[[8]](#footnote-8) This “play of identity and difference” which constructs racism is, I argue, also operative in the lawyer’s partial identification with the Mexican spectators. Perhaps some of his pleasure was about feeling superior them, but there was also operative an envy and a desire to, in Metz’s words to “sustain his credulousness in all incredulousness.” **[SLIDE 22 – Blank]**

There’s an ambivalence built into the language of the lawyer’s description that reveals how these indigenous Mexican women served as vehicles for his vicarious pleasure through partial identification. He begins in an observational and evaluative mode: **[SLIDE 23]** “The last scene was one of the most realistic given by these machines—the advance of a fire engine at full speed, which first appeared far down the street. Soon however,he dispenses with objective language and shifts into a first-person account from the perspective of a credulous spectator, who is confusing image for reality: **[SLIDE 24]** “on came the horses, the driver flourishing his whip, the smoke jutting forth in puffs from the engine, and the magnificent gray [horses] were in the foreground on the stage, at the next leap they would be in the audience.”

The fantastical conceit here is that the fire engine and the horses are co-present with him in the space of the theater. In this way, the lawyer is actually owning a naïve belief in the physical reality of the image. But that only lasts a moment. The next half of the sentence abruptly shifts from a description of his view of the film, to a description of his view of the other spectators. **[SLIDE 25]** “and then with a cry that could have been heard a block off, the entire Mexican contingent rose and wildly attempted to get out of the way.” This second part of the sentence doesn’t really fit with the first part, so it makes us kind of go-back and re-read the first part of the sentence where we realize: oh, actually he wasn’t describing his own subjective experience, but rather the subjective experiences of the Mexican contingent who, he says, ran of the theater. There’s a confusion about whose point of view he’s describing. At the start of the sentence, it seems like his point of view is aligned with the point of view of the panicking spectators. **[SLIDE 26]** This rhetorical slippage is indicative of his partial identification with the Other spectator, who I suspect are figments of his imagination. I read this lawyer’s description of the Mexicans’ panic as his fantasy of the kind of experience that would like to have had at the movies. His relation to the moving image was thus triangulated through his projections about the indigenous Mexicans belief in the reality of the image.

What’s at stake here? Why might the lawyer desire to completely lose himself to the power of the moving image? Metz would say this is an articulation of the fundamental human desire to return to pre-Oedipal juissance. I think it’s about a cultural response to the ennui of modernity. According to the white supremacist logic of early 20th century America, which this lawyer clearly buys into, these indigenous Mexican women represent living relics of a primitive past. They are, he presumes, unburdened by highly developed intellects and the pressure to keep up with modern living. The desire to become primitive—at least temporarily, was an appeal articulated across American popular culture of the era. Just think of the writing of Jack London, the Tarzan franchise, the Philippine exposition at the St. Louis World’s fair, and the noble savage trope more broadly. But white Americans may have tended to idealize the people they labeled “primitive,” their identification with them could only ever be partial. Otherwise it might destabilize white supremacy and would risk delegitimizing the nation’s practices of settler colonialism, Jim Crow segregation and imperialistic endeavors in the Pacific. These cultural determinants account not only for the partiality of the identification with the other spectator, but also the very construction of the imaginary Other spectator in the first place.

**[SLIDE 27 ]** I conclude with a question: What is the relationship between the imaginary other spectator that enables our pleasure in *Hugo* and the imaginary primitive spectators who populated the pages of newspapers and trade journals in the days of early cinema? *Hugo* encourages its audience, us, to see ourselves as more modern, and more technologically advanced then the spectators of the past who are frightened by a moving image train generations ago. This real temporal distance is mirrored in the imagined temporal distance between the lawyer and the Mexicans in the audience who are coded as primitive and technologically backward. I think it behooves us to ask ourselves whether the persistence of the myth of the panicking spectator is a vestige of the imaginary other spectator of the cinema’s earliest days; an imaginary other spectator that is a personified projection of white male Americans’ desire, disdain, and envy of the Other.

Thank You.

1. *New York Telegram,* 15 October 1896, *New York Mail and Express,* 17 October 1896. Reprinted in Kemp R. Niver and Bebe Bergsten, *Biograph Bulletins: 1896-1908* (Los Angeles: Locare Research Group, 1971), 14; “The Theaters.” *The Atlanta Constitution,* 13 December 1896, B35. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Chevalier has a Rival,” *New York Sun* (Evening), 24 April 1896. Reprinted in *Vitascope Press Comments*, Raff & Gammon, 1896, <http://mss3.libraries.rutgers.edu/dlr/showfed.php?pid=rutgers-lib:23930>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)credulous Spectator," in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, ed. Linda Williams (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “How a Biograph Caused a Panic Among Indians.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*: *Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 72-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 72-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Hall, Stuart. New Ethnicities 444. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)