

Animation Studies – Animated Dialogues, 2007

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(The) Death (of) the Animator, or: the Felicity of Felix

Part I: The Kingdom of Shadows¹

The night of the 4th of July 1896 was a special night for cinema. It was the night that Maxim Gorky attended the screening of the Lumière brothers projections at the Nizhny-Novgorod fair in Russia and wrote the first significant review of cinema, a review that for me as for Tom Gunning offers us the first substantial account of the experience of cinema, a rich, indeed paradigmatic, guide to cinema and its abiding senses, sensations. For me, and it appears Gunning, Gorky's extraordinary 'first sight' of cinema defines the very experience of cinema spectatorship (and also too cinema analysis, film theory).

When I say Gunning and I, I reference his canonical article 'An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)credulous Spectator' (Gunning 1989) and my article 'The Crypt, the Haunted House, of Cinema' (Cholodenko 2004). My article extends, qualifies and recasts Gunning's formulation in 'An Aesthetic of Astonishment' of his notion of the cinema of attractions, also by rereading Gorky's review. It is crucial to understand at the outset that Gunning's re-modelling of early cinema as his cinema of attractions has become the orthodoxy in Film Studies.

Although I have precious little space to take up not only Gunning's but my article here, let me make it clear that I am nevertheless in this new paper adding to and enlarging upon the work I did in my article on his. So while I do rehearse points I made there, I am also animating what I take to be pivotal new ideas from a return engagement with his and my text. It is an engagement allowing me to propose (in section I) that Gunning confirms my still apparently radical notion for animation studies, articulated in so many publications, that not only is animation a form of film, all film, including cinema by definition, is a form of animation. Moreover, it allows me to argue not only the singular importance of animation to cinema and to film *but* (in section II) the singular importance of death to animation, hence to cinema and to film.

I

What is key for my thesis here is that in his article Gunning describes the 'ur' attraction, shock, and experience of the earliest cinema – the experience in and by which it demonstrated its powers to the spectator – as the sudden transformation, the 'magical metamorphosis,' from the 'all too familiar' still photographic image into the all too strange mobile cinematographic image of living moving shadows of people and things. Gunning emphasises the fact that at the start of each show the still image was held frozen long enough to disappoint spectators, making them believe they were being conned and just at an all too familiar display of photographs; and only once that feeling had set in was the projector suddenly cranked into action, turning that image into something all too strange. Quoting Gorky's famous words describing the unfreezing of the photographic image (words never not evoking Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Dr Frankenstein's animating of his creature) – 'Suddenly a strange flicker passes through the screen and the picture

¹ The title of this paper is to be read 'Death the Animator, the Death of the Animator, or: The Felicity of Felix.' A second part of this paper, subtitled 'A Difficulty in the Path of Animation Studies,' was presented at the 2007 Society for Animation Studies conference in Portland, Oregon, 29 June – 1 July. It is published in the SAS journal *Animation Studies*, vol. 2, 2007, on-line at: <http://journal.animationstudies.org/>

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stirs to life’ – Gunning sums up this process, what he calls ‘this cataclysmic event,’ as ‘this still projection takes on motion, becomes endowed with animation, and it is this unbelievable moving image that so astounds’ (Gunning 1989, pp. 34, 35).

There it is: that word – animation, ‘becomes endowed with animation.’

Though Gunning does not conduct any explicit examination of this term ‘animation’ and its implications for an understanding of the process, he unwittingly makes my case for me. To put that case simply, animation is the first attraction of the cinema. And as I shall propose, more: its last attraction. And more yet: its enduring attraction.

What so attracts is the animating by a mechanical apparatus – its metamorphosing of the still, the inanimate, into the mobile, the animate. *And* what that animating effectuates – in this case the metamorphosis from photographic image to cinematographic image. *And* what is animated thereby – ‘this unbelievable moving image that so astounds.’ *And* what is animated within that image – living moving shadows of people and things. *And* what is animated within the spectator. *And* what is animated within (and thence without) that space/place/room. All of which commingle inextricably – the work of animation as the animatic.

Let me pause to say: I theorize the animatic as not only the very logics, processes, performance and performativity of animation but the very ‘essence’ of animation – the animation and animating of animation. The animatic – the very singularity of animation – is anterior and superior to animation. It subsumes animation, is its very condition of at once possibility and impossibility. It is at once the inanimation in and of animation and animation in and of inanimation. The animatic is that nonessence enabling and at the same time disabling animation as ‘essence,’ including Eisenstein’s plasmaticness as ‘essence’ (which is why I put essence in quotation marks). The animatic makes every animation always already a reanimation. The animatic is not simply different but radically, irreducibly Other.

At this point we need to consider the consequences of Gunning’s and my animating attractions in light of his now canonical notion of the cinema of attractions, the cinema for him defining the earliest, what used to be called the ‘primitive,’ phase of cinema, generally from 1895 to 1905 or so, cinema’s ‘childhood,’ as it were. The cinema of attractions is an exhibitionist cinema of direct address, indeed confrontation, of the viewer, providing the viewer with attractions in the form of shocks, thrills, chills, delights, frights, joys, terrors, curiosities, like trains coming directly at the viewer, threatening death...

Here a key claim: insofar as Gunning makes animation the first attraction of cinema, he makes his cinema of attractions animation of attractions. While attraction, as term of drawing, from the Latin *trahere*, means to draw to and is the opposite of repulsion, this kind of attraction animates at once attraction and repulsion, delight and fright, joy and terror. Or rather, and better, as term, figure and performance of the graphematic (Cholodenko 2000) and animatic after Jacques Derrida, this kind of attraction graphematically animates and animatically graphs/grfts both attraction and repulsion, neither attraction nor repulsion, at the same time. It animates the at once attraction of the repulsion and repulsion of the attraction, the delight in the fright and fright in the delight, the at once joy in the terror and terror in the joy. Such animatic affects inextricably commingle, exchange, reverse on each other, irretrievably blurring the distinction between them.

And, crucially, insofar as these moments of shock, of thrills and chills, of ‘suddenlys,’ defining the cinema of attractions persist for Gunning beneath his cinema of narrative integration, providing an ‘underground current flowing beneath narrative logic and diegetic realism’ (Gunning 1989, p. 38) and that periodically erupts in that cinema, that animation of attractions

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and these attractions of animation persist for us.² Even as, of course, the re-emergence for Gunning of the cinema of attractions in the ‘Spielberg-Lucas-Coppola cinema of effects’ (Gunning 1986, p. 70) in the 1970s and 1980s marks that reanimation of the animation of attractions as *hyperanimation* of *hyperattractions*, that is, the increasingly pervasive impact of the reanimation of film animation as digital film animation, as the *hyperanimatographic*, which would be, by the by, of the order of the *hyperanimatic* and *hypergraphematic*.

So, to sum up: in elaborating the nature of his cinema of attractions, Gunning unwittingly makes animation the first attraction of cinema, the last attraction of cinema and the enduring attraction of cinema, thereby likewise unwittingly makes his cinema of attractions animation of attractions.

II

But for me there is yet far more to this animation of attractions and these attractions of animation. It has to do with the nature and character of this animating, this reanimating, including of the spectator, what might be called the attraction ‘as such,’ the ‘ur’ attraction. And it is to Gorky’s review we turn to reach at this, with its famous opening lines:

Last night I was in the Kingdom of Shadows.

If you only knew how strange it is to be there. It is a world without sound, without colour. Everything there – the earth, the trees, the people, the water and the air – is dipped in monotonous grey. Grey rays of the sun across the grey sky, grey eyes in grey faces, and the leaves of the trees are ashen grey. It is not life but its shadow, it is not motion but its soundless spectre.

Here I shall try to explain myself, lest I be suspected of madness or indulgence in symbolism. I was at Aumont’s and saw Lumière’s cinématograph – moving photography. (Gorky quoted in Harding & Popple 1996, p. 5)

‘Not life but its shadow,’ ‘not motion but its soundless spectre.’

As I argue in ‘The Crypt, the Haunted House, of Cinema,’ Gorky’s paradigmatic experience of cinema makes *the spectre ‘ur’ figure of cinema* and *the uncanny ‘ur’ experience of cinema*. Indeed, I propose there that what Gorky describes as his experience of cinema would be the effect of the spectre, the spectre of cinema and its whole set of affects/shocks/attractions composing the ‘ur’ experience of cinema as form of animation for me – making that ‘ur’ experience what I call *the Cryptic Complex of the uncanny, the return of death as spectre, endless mourning and melancholia* and *cryptic incorporation* (Cholodenko 2004, p. 107).

Cryptic incorporation lies beyond projection and introjection, is the simulation of introjection, and creates a crypt for a spectre inside the self, safe both from life and from death. It is a place that can never experience closure, from which this living dead speaks as ‘the unconscious of the other,’ turning the incorporated, encrypted self into a haunted house, ‘the haunt of a host of ghosts,’ writes Derrida (1986, p. xxiii). One might say that the affect of cinema is the special effect of the spectre. The spectre would be for me the ‘ur’ figure of cinema, could it be ‘ur’ figure, which by definition it cannot, could cinema have an ‘ur’ figure, which by definition, as form of animation as the animatic, it cannot. The spectre operates not only at every second at every level in every aspect of every film but also at the level of the cinematic, or rather animatic, apparatus of

² Insofar as the cinema of attractions subtends the cinema of narrative integration, provides its foundation, as it were, it is a foundation always already uprooted, a foundation without foundation, likewise making that which is built upon it, the cinema of narrative integration, always already uprooted, making any such ‘integration’ by definition impossible. See my ‘The Crypt, the Haunted House, of Cinema,’ p. 104.

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film, hence at the level of film ‘as such.’ It operates therefore to confound cinema, film, subject and world, knotting them inextricably, making it impossible thereafter to definitively distinguish them.

Furthermore, I propose in my article that, in characterising the complex logics and operations of the experience of cinema with such loaded terms as ‘canny’ and ‘uncanny,’ Gunning himself, though he never addresses the uncanny, again unwittingly supports my reading. In fact, I propose there that for me all that Gunning says of the advent of the cinema is already in Freud’s logics of the uncanny, that the attraction, film (including therefore cinema) and all the more animation are of the order of the uncanny.³ For Freud, as many of you readers know, the uncanny has to do with the return of what gave us a fright when we were children to give us a fright again as adults. It suggests that the adult is never only adult but always at the same time child, too, even as it posits two sides to itself – the psychological and the anthropological – two necessarily commingled, cryptically incorporated sides. Which means that what returns from one’s own childhood is allied with what returns from the childhood of the human – our primitive animistic fears of the return of the dead. And in both the nature of animation is at stake. For the uncanny has to do with life and death, with the reanimation of that fright at seeing the dead return to life as living dead: both alive and dead, neither alive nor dead, at the same time. And the fear that they would not only haunt and continue to haunt us but harm us, even take us away with them, turn us into one of them, even *are* taking us away with them, *are* turning us into one of them – becoming one of the living dead, one of the undead, ourselves (which is co-incorporating the Cryptic Complex effects!). For Freud, all uncanny returns/reanimations are stand-ins for his Death Drive. It is death that returns, death that reanimates, as lifedeath.

Such would be the primal experience of cinema, a shocking, traumatic experience of animation, of reanimation – of the animation, reanimation, of death – that even the sophisticated Gorky rehearses for us in his account of the unaccountable, account of Freud’s most striking example of the uncanny – haunting – the ‘relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts,’ as Derrida puts it (1994, p. 195, note 38), making cinema – the crypt, the haunted house, of cinema – privileged example of Freud’s ‘unheimlich’ (haunted) house. House of the living dead, a house, never a home.

To say that the ‘ur’ attraction of cinema, of film, is the uncanny, indeed is the Cryptic Complex, is to say that the ‘ur’ attraction of cinema, of film, is animation, for not only is animation of the order of the uncanny, of the Cryptic Complex, the uncanny, the Cryptic Complex, are of the order of animation, of animation as the animatic.

So, recasting, indeed reanimating, Gunning, when Gunning says that the shock, the attraction – that is, the simultaneous attraction and repulsion, fascination and dread – at seeing what was still ‘come to life’ founds the cinema, persists in it and reemerges from it, he is unwittingly saying that animation ‘founds’ cinema, persists in it and reemerges from it. And more: he is unwittingly saying that the uncanny, the Cryptic Complex, the animatic, ‘founds’ cinema, persists in it and reemerges from it. That lifedeath, at once the life of death and the death of life, ‘founds’ cinema, persists in it and reemerges from it. Lifedeath is not simply the inanimate become animate, and vice versa. Rather, and according with Derrida’s logics of it as both/and, neither/nor, at the same time, it is the inanimate become animate and the animate become inanimate at the same time, that is, both animate and inanimate, neither animate nor inanimate, at the same time – an ‘animate

³ A proposal I made earlier, in note 19 of my article “OBJECTS IN MIRROR ARE CLOSER THAN THEY APPEAR”: The Virtual Reality of Jurassic Park and Jean Baudrillard,’ pp. 82-83.


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inanimate.’ *Lifedeath is animation as the animatic*: both alive and dead, neither alive nor dead, at the same time. Such is the ‘foundation,’ the foundation without foundation, of cinema. And of animation.

Such is for us the first, last and enduring attraction of cinema as form of animation as form of the animatic: the uncanny reanimation of the dead as living dead. And at the same time, the uncanny reanimation of the living, including the spectator, as living dead. A reanimation supported by the very conditions of viewing in this in-between space, this (non)place, Christian Metz’s place of ‘licit illicitness’ (Metz 1975, p. 65), this crypt, the haunted house, of the movie theatre itself, where all become again what they were never not.

So for us, put (ostensibly) simply, animation as the animatic is the uncanny spectre of cinema, what animates and at the same time deanimates cinema. That is, cinema thought solely as of the order of presence, essence, identity, self-identity, production, reproduction, pure productivity, ‘the reality principle,’ ontology, the Good – what I have called elsewhere cinema thought only in terms of the subject and his desires and as only a mode of production and appearance. What that spectre calls for is as well the thinking of all cinema (and all aspects of all cinema, including the author, genre, the Imaginary, ideology, spectatorship, etc., all aspects of all films) through the superior life of the object, the world and its games, to which for me animation bears privileged relation. In other words, the spectre calls for the thinking of all cinema through animation. Through animation as the animatic and its apparatus, which subtends the cinematic apparatus, and through its modes of Seduction, play, dissemination and disappearance. Through the animatic as lifedeath, as Cryptic Complex, as the hauntological – what would be the life of the illusion of life, thought by me after Derrida, as well as after Jean Baudrillard (his notions of Seduction, Illusion – the genie’s illusion of the world – Evil, irreconcilability, etc.), after Freud, Gilles Deleuze and others, too. What would be a view from the necrospective, what I have called a ‘vanishing point of view,’ a *spectrography*, a *cryptography*, a *thanatography* (Cholodenko 2004, p. 111) – an address of the thanatic ‘economies’ of film.

Of course, the spectre, as privileged figure of cinema, likewise privileges the legion of forms with which it – as living dead, as the ‘undead’ – populates the cinema. Even as it makes the ghost film privileged, as it does the horror, gore, science fiction, crime, detective and thriller genres. Even as it turns spectatorship into spectreship, into haunting and being haunted, cryptically incorporating and being cryptically incorporated. Even as it turns Plato’s Cave and all theorised in its light, including in the modelling of cinema by Metz, Jean-Louis Baudry et al., indeed all modellings of cinema in terms of an ontology of the image, into the special case, the conditional, reduced form, of the hauntological, of the crypt, the haunted house, of cinema. Even as it puts paid to any and every effort by the ‘ghostbusting’ analysts/theorists of cinema to master, exorcise, conjure away and eradicate this spectre, including putting paid to Metz’s, indeed anyone’s, dream of a Theory of Everything (TOE) cinematic.⁴

So, to ‘conclude’: ironically, paradoxically, animation as the animatic privileges death over life, and makes every encounter with cinema as form of animation as form of the animatic an encounter with death. Thanks to the animatic, the excluded, the ‘blind spot’ – animation – and the excluded of all excluded, the ‘blind spot’ of the ‘blind spot’ – death – are always already reanimated and reanimating, are always already back. 

⁴ In terms of Stephen Hawking’s aspiration for a TOE of the universe, see my ‘The Nutty Universe of Animation.’

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