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LOOPS, OR *THE WAVE*

The English language allows an all-too-easy division between natural cycles and technical loops. Cycles belong to botany, zoology, geology, and, above all, astronomy, where natural cycles are tethered to heavenly circles. Loops have an obscure etymology. But their application is unambiguous. Loops are the products of techniques and technologies from diverse fields such as needlework and mining, railways and telegraphy, film and computing.

The historiography of cinema has been unkind to loops. Narrative—the dominant form of cinema for over a century; the from through which cinema emerged as an art in the hands of Griffith, Eisenstein, etc.—is the ineluctable drive forward. But even before the hegemony of narrative, cinema became conterminous with linear progress. Along with the train, the cinema camera / projector was among the most enduring nineteenth century inventions predicated on the cylindrical transmission of rotational into translational (straight-line) motion, as Helmut Müller-Sievers has shown.[1] Trains and cinema converged most emblematically in the Lumières' early film *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (1896). (fig. 1).[2] The eponymous train pulls into the station, continues well past the camera—into the auditorium?!; here the trigger for the legendary flight of spectators—and eventually comes to a stop; passengers disembark, others board; each event follows the last with mechanical precision and unbreakable causality. Modern time is technological time is cinematic time: modernity, modernization, and modernism are perfectly synchronized.
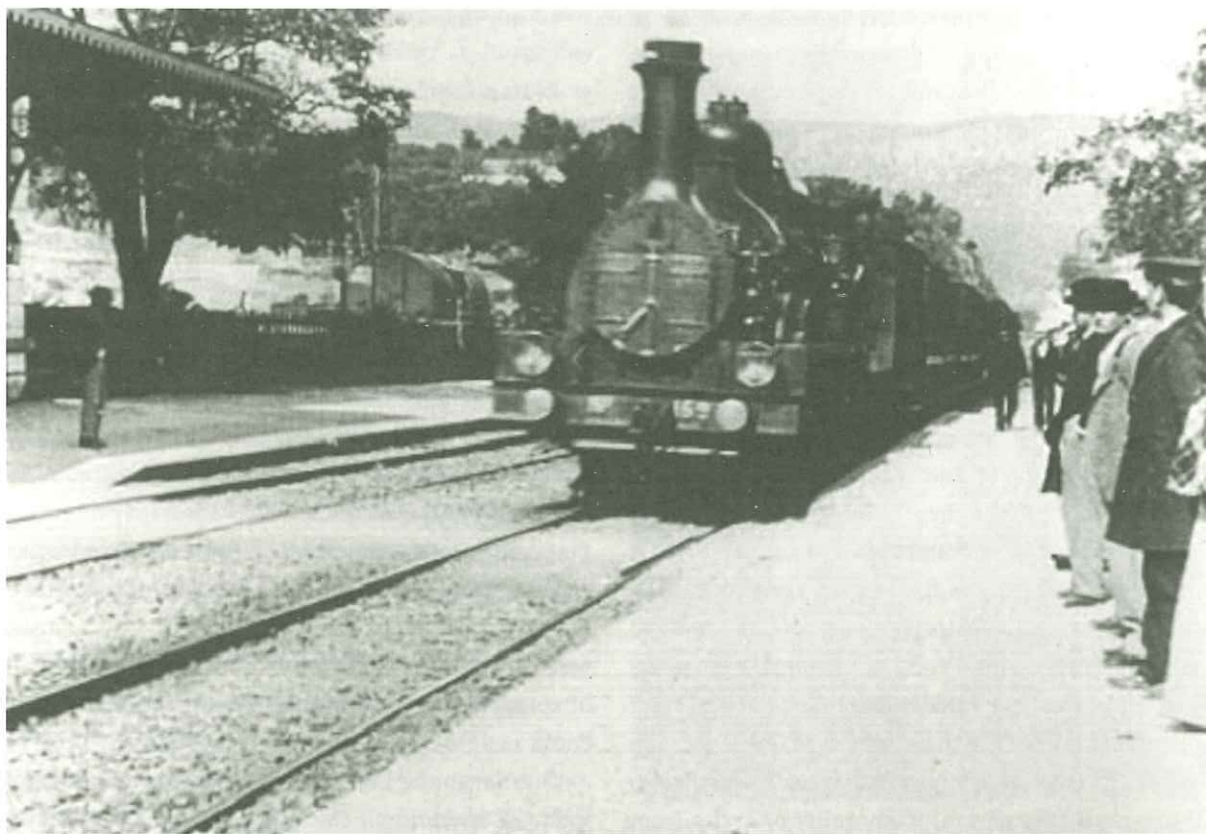

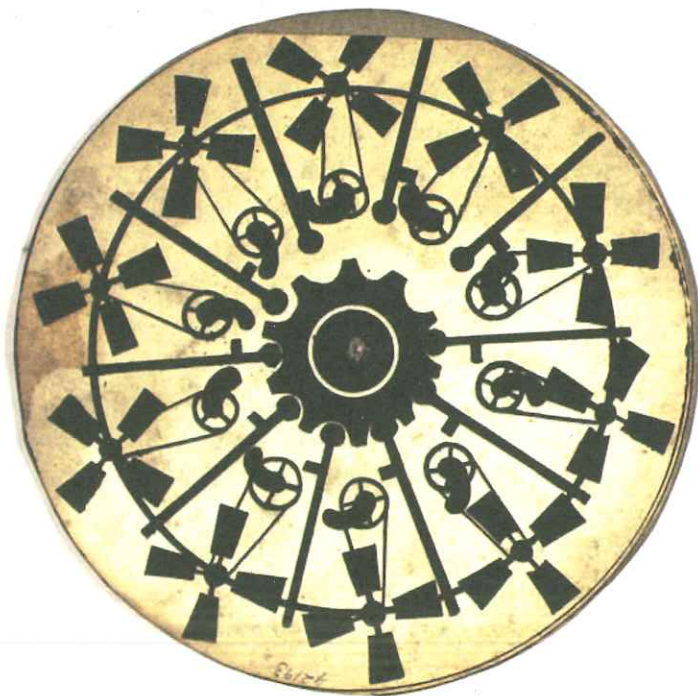Fig. 1. Auguste and Louis Lumière, *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat*,1896.

Fig. 2. Phenakistiscope disc, after 1832, 19.5 x 26.5 cm. Collection Museums Victoria, Victoria, Australia.

And yet before the Lumières' train even set out for Ciotat, the cinema was populated by looping devices such as the Kinetoscope. Indeed, loops can also be found among the essential incunabula of cinema. Most famously, each of the six films comprising the opening night program of Edison's Vitascope at Koster and Bial's Music Hall was looped.[3] What's more, several of the subjects—especially the dance numbers—resembled precisely those looping motifs familiar from Phena-kistiscopes, Zoetropes, and other nineteenth century optical devices, up to and including early cinematic devices (fig. 2). (That these motifs reappear among the preponderance of animated GIFs on social media and the internet makes for at least anecdotal proof of non-linear media history.) If large cycles belong to nature and (following Paul Ricoeur) linear narrative to humans, then the rapidly looping »temporality of optical toys is closer to that of the machine.«[4] Human temporality (at once natural and technical) thus divides all-too-neatly the natural temporality of cycles from the technical temporality of loops.

Natural cycles and technical loops. Precisely this neat division came crashing down at Koster and Bial's Music Hall on April 23, 1896 (and on several earlier and numerous subsequent screenings). For the runa-way favorite film on the program was an 1895 short shot by Birt Acres called *Rough Sea at Dover* or *The Wave*, which depicted a series of waves crashing over and over again against a pier (fig. 3).[5] As reported at the time: »Then came the waves, showing a scene at Dover pier after a stiff blow. This was by far the best view shown, and had to be repeated many times. As in the umbrella dance, there was absolutely no hitch. One could look far out to sea and pick out a particular wave swelling and undulating and growing bigger and bigger until it struck the end of the pier. Its edge then would be fringed with foam, and finally, in a cloud of spray, the wave would dash upon the beach. One could imagine the people running away.«[6]

Similar to the Lumière train (and the apocryphal flight of spectators), the rough sea threatened and delighted its first audiences. But unlike the Lumière

Fig. 4a. Detail of fig. 4.

the point of exasperation. In order to ›time‹ it properly, I got together a group of workers and people in the neighborhood, and I studied the effect that was *produced* on them. In eight hours I learned what I wanted to know. *Nearly all of them reacted at about the same time.*«[8]

Rather than chase ancient myth, Léger anticipates the modern focus group. As such he recognizes the reversal of subject and object that, as Cornelia Vismann has argued, »may well be the most prominent feature of a theory of cultural techniques.«[9] Techniques like close-ups, inversions, and loops animate objects and objectify humans. Just as isolated affective units circulate on social media as looping animated GIFs, so too the looped close-up of Kiki de Montparnasse's smile serves as a mechanical unit of pleasure and affirmation, not merely its representation but, through empathic response, its production in the spectator. Léger studied the effect that was *produced* on people, by looped film. If cycles tether natural and human phenomena to celestial circles, loops mechanize nature and humans alike and dissolve the differences between them. The cinematic choreography of such loops could be exhibited under only one name: *Ballet mécanique.*

Around this time, only Nietzsche knew how to live a looped existence, what he dubbed eternal recurrence. The threat of eternal recurrence was either the heaviest weight or the ultimate incitement to live, namely, to live like a wave: »How greedily this wave is approaching, as if it were trying to reach something! How it crawls with terrifying haste into the inmost crevices of the craggy gorge! It seems to be trying to arrive before someone else; something of value, of great value, seems to be hidden there. – And now it is returning, a bit more slowly but still quite white with excitement—is it disappointed? Has it found what it was seeking? Is it simulating disappointment? – But already another wave is nearing, still more greedily and wildly than the first; and its soul, too, seems full of secrets and the hunger for treasure-digging. That is how the wave lives—that is how we live, we who will—I will say no more.«[10]

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ANMERKUNGEN

1   Helmut Müller-Sievers: *The Cylinder. Kinematics of the Nineteenth Century,* Berkeley 2012.

2   See Martin Loiperdinger: Lumiere's Arrival of the Train. Cinema's Founding Myth, in: *The Moving Image* 4/1 (2004), p. 89–118.

3   And yet, as Charles Musser convincingly argues, these six looped films likely created a (nationalistic) narrative arc, thereby complicating any strict division between attraction and narratives, loops and linearity. Charles Musser: A Cinema of Contemplation, a Cinema of Discernment. Spectatorship, Intertextuality and Attractions in the 1890s, in: *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded,* ed. Wanda Strauven, Amsterdam 2006, p. 159–179.

4   See Nicolas Dulac and André Gaudreault: Circularity and Repetition at the Heart of the Attraction: Optical Toys and the Emergence of a New Cultural Series, in: *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded,* ed. Wanda Strauven, Amsterdam 2006, p. 227–244, p. 228.

5   For details on the film, see Deac Rossell: *Rough Sea at Dover.* A Genealogy, in: *Early Popular Visual Culture* 15/1 (2017), p. 59–82.

6   *New York Mail and Express,* 24 April 1896, p. 12. Cited in Charles Musser: *Emergence of the Cinema. The American Screen to 1907,* New York 1990, p. 116.

7   John Durham Peters: *The Marvelous Clouds. Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media,* Chicago 2015, p. 249.

8   Fernand Léger: *Functions of Painting,* ed. Edward F. Fry, trans. Alexandra Anderson, New York 1973, p. 51.

9   Cornelia Vismann: Cultural Techniques and Sovereignty, in: *Theory, Culture & Society* 30/6 (2013), p. 83.

10 Friedrich Nietzsche: *The Gay Science,* ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff, Cambridge 2001, p. 176 (§310): Will and Wave [*Wille und Welle*].