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New York - Domitor 1994: »Cinema Turns 100«. Projecting Contexts, Receptions, Technologies, and Films

1995

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/16079>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Sammelbandbeitrag / collection article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Bertellini, Giorgio: New York - Domitor 1994: »Cinema Turns 100«. Projecting Contexts, Receptions, Technologies, and Films. In: Frank Kessler, Sabine Lenk, Martin Loiperdinger (Hg.): *Oskar Messter. Erfinder und Geschäftsmann*. Basel: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern 1995 (KINtop. Jahrbuch zur Erforschung des frühen Films 3), S. 205–207. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/16079>.

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New York – Domitor 1994: »Cinema Turns 100«

Projecting Contexts, Receptions, Technologies, and Films

That the opposition between *history* and *theory* in cinema studies often represents a mere rhetorical posture is fairly agreeable. Yet, the relationships and the differences between these (two?) divergent perspectives are not unworthy of constant discussion. The *Third International Colloquium of Domitor*, held in New York City on June 13-19, 1994, embodied, once more, the problematics and the heuristics of such endless confrontations, with the result of an expanded *palimpsest* of approaches for early cinema studies.

Organized by Museum of Modern Art and New York University, and more specifically by Eileen Bowser, Antonia Lant, and Charles Musser, *Domitor '94: Cinema Turns 100* provoked fundamental debates that far exceeded simple scholarly celebrations of a centennial. From the screening sessions of the first three days and the challenging keynote address read (and stoically defended) by Jacques Aumont to the heterogeneous paper deliverings of more than forty scholars, the conference quite often exhibited methodological borders and historiographic edges. In this sense, as Roberta Pearson perspicaciously noted in her closing remarks, if there was such a thing as a first phase of early cinema studies, that stage now appears certainly concluded. Recent developments in historiography, social history, and cultural studies, in fact, are transmuting several familiar debates from simple re-visionistic gestures into a wider arena of competing discourses.

Being in New York City everything naturally started with the exhibition of the work of Thomas Alva Edison. The first screenings presented at MoMA were the rarely mentioned (and hardly seen) motion picture experiments Edison conceived and distributed initially for the peep-hole kinoscope – including the famous Blacksmith Scene which the American inventor used to demonstrate his device to the press in May 1893. Together with the American Mutoscope and Biograph, or Rector Veriscope, it was also possible to see several (sometimes newly restored) shorts produced by Marey, Demeny, Lumière, and Méliès for France; Hepworth, Warwick, Paul, Williamson, British Mutoscope & Biograph for England; Italian shorts on King Umberto I visiting the navy shot by Italo Pacchioni or on Pope Leo XIII ›blessing the camera‹ realized by Vittorio Calcina. Particularly interesting was also the documentation of an anthropological expedition in Central Australia headed and shot by Walter Baldwin Spencer in 1901, later object of an aesthetic analysis by Australian historian Arthur

Cantrill during the conference. But *Domitor 1994* showed something more than a simple variety of cinematic applications or contexts.

At first, the choice of Jacques Aumont as keynote addresser and in place of the late Christian Metz might have probably appeared as ending up in an old-time confrontation between two different *moods* of film studies. If the former is mainly focused on textual analysis, semiotics of *récit* and linguistics of points of view, the latter, fueled by the more recent directions of early cinema studies, is attempting to establish significant relationships between production or technical circumstances and aesthetic, narrative, or receptive developments. In the end however, Aumont's provocative talk, titled »When is Primitive Cinema?«, had quite a vivid and fruitful impact.

The French scholar essentially (re)claimed the legitimacy and the space for a film discourse with no obligation of punctual historical determination, that is, not necessarily devoted to issues of social, sexual, or racial *representation*, but autonomously centered on the registration of *new patterns of images* and *new visual figurations* for early cinematic re-productions. Inevitably (and perhaps paradoxically), such position could now only represent a critical vanguard among early cinema scholars who are fundamentally concerned with the historical genealogy and effectuality of the rise of the cinema within modern societies. The vast majority of the contributions presented at the conference, in fact, dealt with the cultural intertexts of film productions and exhibitions in the very first years of the century.

Among these multidisciplinary excavations and approaches one may report, among others, the technological juxtapositions at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904 (T. Gunning), the poetic uses of the telephone in early fiction films (Y. Tsivian), the popular stereotypes of vaudeville shows (J. Mottet) or of comic strips (D. Riblet), the figurative influences of picture postcards (D. Crafton) or narrative intertitles (C. Dupré La Tour), and even the oral interpositions of eloquent showmen (A. Gaudreault and G. Lacasse).

In such methodological midst, a particular space was left also for researches of non-fiction textualities. Not only were studied anthropological expeditions in Australia as I mentioned above, but also significant relationships of early ethnography with museum visualities (A. Griffiths), actuality films with illustrated magazines (R. Crangle), public taste for visual ›reality‹ in Paris or in Russia at the turn of the century (respectively, V. Schwartz and N. Noussinova). Together with auteuristic accounts on Alice Guy (A. McMahan) or on Oskar Messter (M. Loiperdinger and H. Pulch), several papers investigated conditions and modalities of cultural receptions. Among others, the intellectuals' appropriation of cinema in Poland (M. Hendrykowska), the contemporaneous use of films by cultural nationalism in Ireland (K. Rockett), or the political investments in the movies by African-Americans in the United States (C. Regester).

Other papers intriguingly developed analyses of emerging visual ›constructions of the body‹ at the end of the 19th century through the bio-professional

account of pioneering entrepreneur George Demeny (M. Braun), through the so-called ›fake prize fight films‹ of the 1890s (D. Streible), or even through Edison's representations of dance performances of Native Americans (K. Backstein).

As it should appear evident, these studies are widening traditional borders of historical documentation and questioning ordinary methods of historical treatment and evidence. In particular, these contributions refuse a common assumption, namely that images alone can satisfactorily account for the cultural history that surrounds them. Thus, the cultural evidence that an historical investigation pursue has to be obtained through patient works of intertextual inquiries which temporarily suspend (or at times renounce to) a pure and traditional analysis of film-texts, but which may fruitfully re-approach them with new questionings and different prejudices – as Tom Gunning pointed out in one of his remarks.

Although I could not be present to all the panels – which were at times contemporaneous – the impression expressed by Roberta Pearson at the end of the conference seemed to me well-defined. *Domitor 1994* perhaps represented a transitory and fundamental shifting point among early cinema historians. This (still) young scholarly *lignée*, in fact, after producing unprecedented historical researches, had recently started questioning its own historiographic approaches. The realm of the historical discourses and the continuous unearthing of ›modern‹ spectacles, ›early‹ audiences, and ›lost‹ films, had conversely enhanced new historiographic *visions*, where cultural issues of social, sexual, and racial representation play fundamental roles.

However, what is still left to discuss is the legitimacy of an exclusive and unblended historical approach for early cinema studies. In this sense, it should not remain unheard Aumont's solicitation for the space of a discourse, purely visual and analytic, which does not necessarily pay speculative debts to cultural or historical amalgamations (e.g. former photographic reproductions, ethnic or gender renderings). On the contrary, as literary critic Jonathan Culler sharply remarked commenting the situation of critical studies, an obsessive practice of historical investigations may result problematic: » [...] *while meaning is context-bound, context is boundless*. This is something lawyers know well; context is in principle infinitely expandable, limited only by their resourcefulness, their clients' resources, and the patience of the judge.« (Jonathan Culler, *Framing the Sign: Criticism and Its Institutions*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1988, 148 [italic GB]).

Domitor 1994 seemed to have shown to lawyers-historians, once more, but with particular emphasis, that the traditional visual analyses uttered by the 'Devil's advocate' could nevertheless intertwine with, or effectively inform, the current kaleidoscopic expansions of historical verisimilitudes.