

Stéphanie Louis

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2022

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/18834>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Rezension / review

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Louis, Stéphanie: Enfin le Cinéma! Arts, images et spectacles en France 1833-1907. In: *NECSUS\_European Journal of Media Studies*. #Rumors, Jg. 11 (2022), Nr. 1, S. 376–384. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/18834>.

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## **Enfin le Cinéma! Arts, images et spectacles en France 1833-1907**

Stéphanie E. Louis

NECSUS 11 (1): 376-384

URL: <https://necsus-ejms.org/enfin-le-cinema-arts-images-et-spectacles-en-france-1833-1907/>

With multidisciplinary collections dating from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th, the Musée d'Orsay has regularly been integrating cinema into its permanent exhibition. Films, as works of art, are increasingly shown in its exhibitions, and film programming is a regular feature of the museum's activities. The last major exhibition with an explicit focus on film, Renoir père et fils / Peinture et cinéma, took place from November 2018 to January 2019. Running from 28 September 2021 to 16 January 2022, the exhibition Enfin le Cinéma! Arts, images et spectacles en France 1833-1907 (Cinema at Last! Arts, Images, and Shows in France, 1833-1907) invited visitors to a rather radically different approach. In 2017 the general curatorship was entrusted to Dominique Païni, working in association with two curators from the Musée d'Orsay: Marie Robert for cinema and photography, and Paul Perrin for painting. While Païni's long career as an exhibition curator testifies to a constant concern to point out the aesthetic coincidences between cinema and the other arts, the scope of this exhibition is broader. Enfin le Cinéma! attempts to cross-reference the history of the arts, popular images, and entertainment of the late-19th and early-20th centuries.

Following a multidisciplinary approach, the exhibition proposes a resolutely cultural analysis of cinema as a fact, even before its artistic value was recognised. It places the invention of the Lumière Cinématographe and the advent of the cinema spectator within the environment whereby they emerged: the 19th century, with its fascination for the observation of life and the spectacle of bodies, and whose landscapes and rhythms were profoundly transformed as modernity took hold. Films thus appear here as one medium among others, alongside photographs, printers' images, drawings, paintings, decorative objects, or optical toys. The aim is to underline the intermedial nature of early cinema,

and to examine this period before the introduction of film rentals by Pathé and the advent of cinema shows with seated audiences. This transition is subtly suggested in the exhibition's design.



Fig. 1: Vue de l'exposition Enfin le cinéma ! au musée d'Orsay. Photo : © Sophie Crépy / musée d'Orsay, 2022

As soon as visitors enter the museum's nave, an architectural feature of the former Orsay station, they are confronted with a suspended screen. Moving around the screen, they can see a programme of Pathé and Gaumont fiction films: this is a deliberate scenographic evocation of the viewing conditions of the early days. Further on, the entrance to the exhibition is situated in the middle of an immense film frame, which masks the rest of the rooms. This film frame represents the audience of a cinema, and it also appears at the end of the exhibition, where the creation of the first cinemas is evoked. Visitors can sit down and watch some of the films from that period. Before that, the display is organised around four main themes, identified by the curators in the film production of the early days: the city, nature, the human body, and history. By way of introduction, at the beginning of the exhibition there is a very dark antechamber. The myth of Pygmalion and Galatea is evoked as a metaphor for cinema, and the way it was treated by artists and filmmakers. Animating the inanimate is a problem that finds a new resolution with the possibility of capturing and restoring movement.

The development of the central discourse of the exhibition then begins with the 'spectacle of the city'. Projected on a series of three screens suspended in the middle of one of the rooms, films bear witness to the frenetic movement of the city, while lantern slides and paintings give this world bright colours. Next to Le Bon Marché, a triptych of images by Félix Vallotton depicting shopping in the big Paris department store, Gabriel Biessy's painting *Colonne Morris*, of an advertising kiosk at night, reminds us that the city sometimes sleeps, unless city dwellers rush to a show.



Fig. 2: Vue de l'exposition Enfin le cinéma ! au musée d'Orsay. Photo : © Sophie Crépy / musée d'Orsay, 2022

Then there are the 'movements of nature' captured by photographic or drawn scientific images, pictorial representations of wind or smoke, or decorative objects with floral motifs – always confronted with films, this time on the big screen. The spectacle of time is not forgotten: the passage from day to night with a diorama, the seasons evoked in Claude Monet's painting series of the Rouen cathedral, or via glass lantern slides. The next two rooms are devoted to the 'body put to the test', either through sports, fairground rides and attractions, or artistic performance. These appear on phenakistoscope discs, automata, sculptures, posters, and press images. As a counterpoint to the exhibited body, covert observation through the figure of the voyeur also raises questions about the commodification of images of the female body.



Fig. 3: Vue de l'exposition Enfin le cinéma ! au musée d'Orsay. Photo : © Sophie Crépy / musée d'Orsay, 2022

Then, around the theme of history, the exhibition first questions realism and the limits of cinematic representation. Léon Belly's painting *Pèlerins allant à La Mecque* (Pilgrims Going to Mecca), hung under a filmed view of a caravan of camels in the desert, poses the insoluble dilemma of colour and movement. But very quickly, on another wall, coloured film views suggest that film has gone beyond the art of the stained glass window and the poster. Further on, Sarah Bernhardt's voice, recorded on a disc, reminds us that the quest for realism also involves sound, just as stereoscopic views raise the question of relief. The last room, before the exhibition's conclusion, confronts epic history paintings with a mosaic of three screens on which filmed historical re-enactments are shown simultaneously. From biblical scenes to the arrest of the Bonnot gang and the assassination of Marat, we are invited to observe the circulation of representations from one medium to another. However, observing the mosaic of screens opposite the paintings is not easy. Finally, the exhibition curators chose to take the visitor right up to the advent of cinema, and what it implies in terms of the collective and socialised reception of moving images. Today, this positioning is 'political', as Marie Robert states, at a time when individual and solitary consumption of images is exploding. In that sense, it is somewhat regrettable that other individual film viewing devices pre-dating the Cinématographe were not included; they would have made it possible to underline the shift of the filmic image into a collective viewing device with the Cinématographe.



Fig. 4: Vue de l'exposition Enfin le cinéma ! au musée d'Orsay. Photo : © Sophie Crépy / musée d'Orsay, 2022

Overall, the technical aspects are largely left out of the exhibition. For example, some images resulting from optical toys are projected above the texts at the beginning of the sections, but without really being linked to the object from which they result or its functioning. This could have been the subject of some parallel explanations, but in the age of COVID-19 it is clear that providing explanatory sheets or interactive terminals was not viable for this purpose. The exhibition does, however, offer a specific route for children, which is extremely clear and complements the one for adults. Another element that could have been dealt with in the section on history, especially since the exhibition focuses on France, is the capacity of the cinematic image to serve as an archive. Indeed, Boleslaw Matuszewski's 1898 brochure 'Une nouvelle source de l'histoire, création d'un dépôt de cinématographie historique' received some coverage in the French press at the time.

The exhibition meets many other challenges brilliantly. The diversity and balance in the selection of documents presented in each of the sections manages not to suggest a hierarchy between these different types of representation. The exhibition presents works by masters and by anonymous artists, all of them representative of the visual environment in which early cinema was immersed. Works produced by women have also been highlighted. The exhibition therefore makes a proposal that is new, by

adopting the angle of visual culture as well as stimulating in the echoes it manages to create with the present.

The construction of the exhibition's purpose has benefited fully from several months of exchanges between the three Parisian curators, whose sensibilities and methodologies complement each other. But the fruitful exchanges were not limited to this trio. The exhibition's credits remind us that the curators were joined by a scientific committee composed by Ivo Blom, Camille Blot-Wellens, and Benoît Turquety. Beyond this restricted circle, the exhibition catalogue includes contributions from 65 authors, mostly academics and curators of heritage collections, which bear witness to the quality of the scientific exchanges that surrounded the exhibition's production. Certainly, one of the challenges brilliantly met by *Enfin le Cinéma!* is that this exhibition is based on a rich and solid scientific foundation, and does not confine the comparisons it proposes to aesthetic speculation.

Vanessa R. Schwartz wrote several texts for the catalogue. Since the exhibition has now travelled to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (under the name *City of Cinema: Paris 1850-1900*), we asked her a few questions to find out more about this international cooperation and the transposition of this 'so French' exhibition to an American context. We emphasise that this exhibition was closely co-organised by LACMA. The American curatorial team consists of Britt Salvesen, Leah Lehmbek, and Vanessa R. Schwartz. Their expertise has obviously contributed greatly to the Paris version of the exhibition.

**Louis:** The Musée d'Orsay team mentions close relations with you before the temporary exhibition in Paris. Could you describe the concrete aspects of this cooperation?

**Vanessa R. Schwartz:** When our project began, before COVID, we had the opportunity to meet in person in Paris for initial meetings where we discovered both our common investments in the intermedial context that helped herald the advent of film, as well as our different emphases. We set out two perspectives: how film can be seen as the culmination of the arts and popular culture of the 19th century, or as the herald of the 20th century. I think both shows ultimately say a bit of both but I think in Paris, perhaps due to the Orsay context, as in a circuit of French-style fine art museums (not that it was founded that way, but that is another story) and the long-standing contribution of Dominique Paini, lead curator, to the history of the avant-garde and film in the 20th century, *Enfin, le cinéma!* was projected forward by formally underscoring that the popular culture of the 19th century paved the way for the preoccupations of the avant-garde of the 20th century. For the LACMA version we were more interested in the

emergence of film in the 19th century argument, drawing on our location and audience to imply thinking about the fact that in the past there was another place that people could think of as the 'City of Cinema', before Los Angeles. One early debate among us had to do with whether the shows would focus on France and Paris exclusively. Our French colleagues were more hesitant to take this direction, perhaps for fear of being labelled chauvinistic. Our point of view was that Paris had played a disproportionate role in the history of commercial and artistic culture in the 19th century and that there is a generative, if not exclusive, way to frame the cultural and social developments that were particular to the French capital (department stores, the Worlds' Fairs, the 'invention' of photography) for the purposes of our exhibition.

COVID presented immense curatorial challenges for both teams because we lacked normal access to the objects we might consider for inclusion. Without seeing things 'en vrac' as we know, matters of quality and conservation challenges can lead to travel and display issues and matters of general aesthetic consideration regarding installation are more difficult. Three things offered a brighter side to these constraints: we became used to Zooming with each other, we acquired new materials through doing research on the internet, and we made sure to mine the rich catalogue of films before 1907 in France, especially at Gaumont-Pathé, that are less well-known in the scholarly community, not to mention by the public, and which we could access at a distance and whose 'condition' was really not at stake. The LA team were also dedicated early risers which made working with our French partners possible over many time zones, and perhaps we did this more regularly than we might have done before COVID because this was the only way we could meet after February 2020. When things started to open back up we were fortunate that our French partners started to get back to the materials, and we also had emissaries in the form of a USC doctoral student who was in Paris and who Facetimed with us from various collections. Additionally, two of the three of the LA team travelled to Paris for the opening at Orsay in September (and flew transatlantically for the first time in two years!). We could finally see some of the objects we hoped to include, go to the Gaumont-Pathé archive, and also meet with our peers at the Cinémathèque and see the new installation there focused on Méliès as an anchor of film history. Because our show opened five months after the one in Paris, and because our checklists were far from entirely overlapping, this helped enormously.

**Louis:** One might think that exhibitions are more about popularising research. This is indeed a challenge that the Paris exhibition brilliantly meets, while remaining scientifically demanding. Generally speaking, in what way do you think that interactions



between museums and researchers can be stimulating? Do you have any particular examples with this exhibition?

**Schwartz:** Perhaps not all shows benefit equally from such points of cooperation but in this case we were imagining a large-scale show with a historical orientation. We present many media forms, especially many that are not the traditional purview of fine art museums. Luckily, many scholars have done a good job in offering interpretations of the visual culture being described, and curators have already absorbed much of what has been written. For scholars, however, participating in what the French call 'vulgarization' of research is not as enticing as spending time making research discoveries and saying new things. Yet through the act of adapting research knowledge to the museum setting, some new and different ways of thinking came to the foreground. For example, as much as we thought about Paris as a physical place, the form of film reminded us of how easily it also circulated, and this allowed us to connect the idea that the world came to Paris in the World Fairs with the experience of cinema operators going around the world, which shaped our exhibition organisation and its argument. Both elements were known, but the physical space of the museum exhibition brought forth that connection more centrally.

It may seem obvious to say, but to argue that there was an intermedial exchange in the period and to actually see it in real space through exhibition not only affords contemporary museum-goers a clearer window into the argument but it also helps them consider the on-going intermedial circuits that remain, allowing them to understand that such intermediality is not a result of recent developments such as post-modernism, 20th century globalisation, or the rise of digital culture. I do want to note an interesting source of tension, however. Scholars, and until recently, museum curators, assumed a position of expertise and special knowledge that has bestowed us with authority and value added. Professors, I think, are far more attached to maintaining that perspective, holding out in the defense of expertise as necessary to our mission to educate, while museums seem much more sensitive to meeting audiences where they already are and to making the material speak in very resonant contemporary ways that are not simply about relevance (all scholars believe our work is relevant rather than antiquarian) but rather more responsive to what they imagine their audience's perspective to be in an effort to engage in greater conversation. Whether it is at the risk of their special mission and value remains to be seen.

**Louis:** After Paris, the exhibition will travel to the United States. In Los Angeles, the context and the exhibition space are obviously different. Will the exhibition be adapted to this context, for example, by offering more images related to the United States?

**Schwartz:** We have always said we had two exhibitions with a shared subject. In Paris it may be the case that the focus on the city of Paris is less informative or compelling for a French audience. The show there is more oriented towards formal comparisons. But in a place that keeps producing romantic visions of Paris in popular culture (the latest of which is *Emily in Paris*) and in a city known as the symbolic capital of the film world since the 1920s, and now home to a new museum belonging to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences, we offer the story, simply put, of film and its emergence from the culture of 19th century Paris, or 'before Hollywood'. In fact, one could wear the bucket hat we will sell in the museum shop that says 'City of Cinema' around LA and everyone would assume it referred to Hollywood. Our show hopes to denaturalise that everyday response. Although we do not attempt to explain what happened after 1907 that allowed for Hollywood to emerge as the world capital of the movies, we hope to demonstrate that the history of mass commercial visual culture predates Hollywood. There was nothing inevitable about the emergence of film as the art form par excellence of the 20th century either, and we offer many reasons, but especially social ones such as its global reach and the birth of the movie theater, to help establish film's cultural authority. For many viewers, our story will suggest that we should see Paris as more than a quaint city littered with traditions such as cafés and bakeries. Instead, they will understand it as the crucible in which 'modern life' and cinema came together to crystallise the achievements of one century and to serve as oracles of things to come in the next.