

If indeed “all media were once new media,” this is a “truism” exasperatingly difficult to keep in mind.<sup>1</sup> It is one thing to recall that it took a full twenty years for Thomas Edison’s phonograph, which he intended as a dictation device for businessmen, to achieve its primary function as a machine for musical entertainment; or that for two decades radio’s first enthusiasts were convinced it was perfect for two-way transmission rather than for unilateral broadcast, the function it gradually came to acquire in the 1920s. But it is another thing to shift from the history of technological devices themselves to habits of listening, reading, hearing, and viewing—to take seriously, that is, the newness of any given medium. It is remarkably hard to resist the tyranny of normalization and naturalization to see past or through or beyond codes of intelligibility once these conventions have become entrenched and taken for granted. All the more reason, then, to struggle to locate a medium at its moments of emergence, before it figured out what it was good for, or (to deny it autonomous agency) to see what its own practitioners made of it during its earliest stages. Such a mode of analysis operates in the subjunctive mood to imagine what a medium could or might have been, rather than where it came from or what it became. By strenuously entertaining alternatives and possibilities that perhaps were never actualized—multiple hypothetical futures—we put ourselves in a better position to understand the medium and its governing paradigms as they came to materialize.

Early cinema is especially challenging to think about as a new medium. Within a relatively concentrated period, from the first projected moving images intended for public consumption in 1895 to, say, *The*

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*Birth of a Nation* twenty years later, virtually all the fundamental questions about the medium would seem to have been essentially resolved: whether film would tell stories or record reality (tell stories), how spatiotemporal articulation would be achieved between shots (parallel editing, shot–reverse shot, 180–degree cuts); where movies would be shown (nickelodeons, and then palaces); and what audiences would do as they watched them (keep silent and identify with the characters on the screen).<sup>2</sup> Solidified by the introduction of synchronized sound in the following decade, the institution of film would become the central channel of mass culture in the twentieth century, not just supplementing but supplanting print for millions around the globe—arguably a position it still holds today in the twenty-first century. While the hegemony of classic Hollywood narrative during the last century may be overstated, its dominance was clear enough to lead an influential group of psychoanalytic and structuralist film theorists in the 1970s to posit the “cinematic apparatus” as a kind of intrinsic essence whose ideological operations they traced in a number of wonderfully complex but ultimately reductive readings.<sup>3</sup> Even film scholars who began to take early film seriously at about the same time were forced to define their field by a series of *nons* and *befores*: non-linear, non-continuous, non-closure; and before Griffith, before Hollywood, before the nickelodeon, to cite three important book titles.<sup>4</sup>

From this powerful teleological perspective, which presumes to know what cinema is and how it works, the first two decades of moving pictures look rather “primitive,” the term used to describe them as a succession of stumbling, flawed, incomplete efforts to reach maturity and discover the medium’s true nature. Reacting against such evolutionary schemes of progress, scholars achieved a breakthrough of sorts during the 1980s by insisting on crucial differences between emergent and dominant formations. They developed alternative understandings of early film, most notably a model of “the cinema of attractions,” first proposed by Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault, in contrast to the cinema of narrative integration associated with mainstream Hollywood.<sup>5</sup> In this now highly influential formulation, early cinema is defined as a new kind of spectacular modernity driven by astonishment and sensation, working to delight and assault the senses in the immediate present rather than tell coherent narratives. We can never escape our historical situatedness, our knowledge of cinema’s subsequent century of development. But when we take these early

films on their own terms—try to understand these very terms—we begin to reconnect with the newness of the medium.

Such an approach has risks. Stressing rupture, the “cinema of attractions” framework produces a version of film history emphasizing the gulf between incipient and prevailing modes of representation. Within this paradigm, recent “attractions” scholarship has tended to turn away from classic cinema to focus on its prehistory, its roots in urban modernity, especially nineteenth-century visual spectacles such as wax museums, dioramas, and department stores. However illuminating, these readings in some cases strike me as curiously conservative in method, tracing precursor media along the lines of traditional influence studies in art history.<sup>6</sup> In his magisterial recent study *Silent Film Sound*, for instance, Rick Altman argues that we need to examine how a new medium such as cinema initially underwent “a crisis of identity” rather than a discrete birth, but he threatens to undermine his own powerful insights by insisting on absolute historical continuity at the expense of any novelty or difference: “Because representation is always representation of representation, the only way to understand a new technology is to grasp the methods it employs to convince its users that it is no different from its predecessors.”<sup>7</sup> Such a categorical assertion can lead to a reverse teleology that risks cutting off early cinema from its future and losing sight of processes of transition.<sup>8</sup>

Early-cinema scholarship thus appears caught between a rock (a predetermining past) and a hard place (an equally predetermined future), pressured from two different directions. What to do? My tactic here will be to concentrate on a single well-known film, *Life of an American Fireman*, made in late 1902 by Edwin S. Porter working for the Edison Manufacturing Company. As Charles Musser and others have noted, the years 1902 to 1903 mark a crucial period in early cinema, as production companies, rather than exhibitors, began assuming greater control over films and as multishot narratives began to gain ascendancy over single-shot actualities. Inspired by Georges Méliès’s *Le voyage dans la lune* (*The Trip to the Moon*, 1902), Porter would later recall that after seeing such “trick films” he “came to the conclusion that a picture telling a story in continuity form might draw the customers back to the theatres.”<sup>9</sup> What Porter exactly means by “continuity form” is the issue; *Life of an American Fireman* does indeed tell a story, but its formal continuity would seem to be compromised, at least to our eyes today, by flagrant disconnections, redun-

dancies, and obscurely motivated action. What intrigues me about the film is precisely its status as a hybrid located at a key moment of transformation. Rather than being driven primarily by concerns about plot, time, or narrative causality, the film tries out different productions and reproductions of space in ways that, as I hope to show, significantly test possibilities for the new medium of cinema.

Although later I will have recourse to draw on a detailed 1903 Edison-catalog description of this six-minute film, a brief summary of *Life of an American Fireman* is helpful at the onset. The film opens with a long shot of a sleeping fireman, which includes a dream balloon showing a mother and child. After the fireman awakens and paces the floor, we cut to a close-up of a hand pulling a fire alarm, followed by a long shot of firemen jumping from their beds and sliding down a fire pole. The fourth and fifth shots show them climbing into their horse-drawn fire engines and exiting the fire house. The next two shots show the engines running down streets and arriving at the scene of a burning building. The penultimate shot depicts a smoke-filled bedroom with a mother and child, who are carried out, one by one, by a fireman entering through a door and exiting from a window. The ninth and final shot depicts the same rescue as viewed from the exterior front of the house.

Let's begin by looking at what I take to be the core of the film: shots 6 and 7, depicting a succession of fire engines—a dozen all told—racing across the screen diagonally from right to left toward the camera. Taking up roughly a quarter of the movie, these fire runs may strike us today as monotonous if not downright tedious, the least interesting aspect of *Life of an American Fireman*. But they are absolutely crucial for understanding how Porter likely conceived and built the film, step by step. Immensely popular during the earliest novelty years of cinema (1895–97), the fire run foregrounds action, transport, and spectacle, clearly confirming Gunning's model of a cinema of attractions. Yet insofar as separate fire runs could be strung together in serial fashion, one shot reiterated after another ad infinitum, the visual immediacy of a self-contained scene gives way to a more comprehensive sense of linearity that imagines space as a synthetic whole even as actions within that space are not continuous between discrete cuts. Between long shots 6 and 7, in other words, no effort is made to match particular vehicles or streets, and yet in this repetition-without-resemblance, we are made to feel action greater than any of its indi-

vidual agents. The repetition of fire engine after fire engine produces a sensation of endless blurring or merger, creating in effect a single composite grand engine driven by a kind of abstracted motion that doesn't seem to depend on or be measured by chronological time. A throwback or trace of cinema's beginnings, the fire run, repeated, thus gave Porter an already familiar way to construe space as serial, if not contiguous.

Beyond sheer movement, the fire run was attractive because of the exciting visual appeal of the subject itself, the "wonderful apparatus of a great city's fire department" celebrated in the Edison catalog's own description of the film.<sup>10</sup> "Apparatus" here refers to the entire materiality of firefighting—not just steam engines, hooks, ladders, and pumps but also the horses and men driving these vehicles. As many scholars have noted, an operational aesthetic often runs through early cinema, implicitly linking the workings of the new medium of moving pictures with the institutional operations of other fascinating technologies such as railroads and telegraphs.<sup>11</sup> More pointedly in the case of the fire run, the singular apparatus of men, engines, and horses all energetically straining together in unison invokes what Mark Seltzer has called American naturalism's "machine-body complex" at the turn of the last century.<sup>12</sup> The thermodynamic relays between persons and machines are complicated here by a third naturalist category, the beast: animals whose steaming breath mingles with the smoke of engines to form stupendous "horse effects," as early catalogs frequently described the allure.

Emphasizing the spectacle of the fire run helps us appreciate another rarely discussed aspect of shots 6 and 7: those scores of people on screen who line the streets watching the fire engines go by, one by one. Who are these onlookers, what exactly do they think they are watching, and what is the significance of their acts of witness in relation to the film's contemporaneous audiences in 1903, as well as for us one hundred years later? Their gathered presence on the street calls attention to the predetermined quality of the run, which clearly cannot be a spontaneous event. Because fires rarely break out on cue and therefore cannot be anticipated, we presume that these eager spectators must have been previously alerted to the arriving apparatus. What at first glance may seem to suggest the immediacy of a documentary turns out by virtue of these crowds of onlookers to resemble more closely an arranged piece of theater. Mirroring the very kind of watch-

ing that engaged the patrons of *Life of an American Fireman*, these onscreen viewers offered a focus of identification for early audiences in the absence of the ideal, transcendental spectator position that we have come to associate with classical Hollywood narrative.

Yet before we assume that the fire and its exciting run up were staged simply for the benefit of Porter's moving camera, it's important to realize that fire departments routinely went on such runs as a form of practice in order to prepare for the contingency of a fire. Newspapers in the 1890s would regularly publicize such exhibition runs. A notice for this particular run, for example, in the *Newark Evening News* (on 15 November 1902) announces: "There will be a fire on Rhode Island" and "the firemen will be called out and go through the motions of extinguishing a fire."<sup>13</sup> The phrase "go through the motions" neatly captures the theatricality of daily institutional routine, calling into question any clear dichotomy between concepts of actuality (real) and story (fictional) that sometimes still might confound attempts to categorize these early films.<sup>14</sup> If early cinema frequently functioned as a visual newspaper, as often asserted, the precise nature of news itself at the turn of the last century requires more careful analysis, as an article on the fire run in the next day's *Newark Evening News* suggests. The double headline is "RESCUE FROM FIRE WAS HUGE SUCCESS" and "Lightning Cameras Took Pictures While East Orange Firemen Perform a Realistic Scene"; but the article itself goes on to describe this realistic performance in comic fashion: a desperate woman and her babe in arms, seemingly "doomed to awful death," are valiantly rescued by James White of the "Edison Kinetoscope Company."<sup>15</sup> The joke here is to replace fireman with filmmaker, so that what at first looks like (mock) news about a fire turns out to be perhaps even more interesting news about a filming, with firefighters limited to the role of extras.<sup>16</sup>

In *Life of an American Fireman* itself, the analogy between two newsworthy performances, the wonderful apparatuses of firefighting and filmmaking, emerges most self-consciously toward the end of shot 7, during the transition from fire run to fire rescue. As the last of the engines finishes its run, the camera pans left (the only pan in the film) to follow the vehicle as it pulls up to a row of houses and firemen jump off to prepare to fight the flames. Musser has said of this moment that "the moving camera suggests the immediacy of a news film" (*BN*, 225). But the gradual pivot also suggests quite the reverse—a

planned “demonstration,” to borrow again from the *Newark Evening News* of November 16. At first hesitant but then gaining speed, the pan shifts from run to rescue, signaling Porter’s ambition to move beyond endlessly repeating actuality footage by adding a denouement to his narrative. In this regard, the panorama calls attention to the perfect placement of the camera at a prearranged spot that can seamlessly encompass both the serial movement of the run and the subsequent preparations for rescue from a fixed perspective, which views from a long shot the front of the burning building. Porter enlists firefighting equipment itself to help the eye follow this transition, as the camera during the pan traces the rapid unspooling of a long, thick fire hose, which corresponds to the horizontal plane of the action. In the film’s final shot, with the camera again stationary, Porter similarly establishes a vertical plane of action with the firemen’s ladder leaned up against the house. Hoses and ladders thus act as filmmaking props to construct an elastic two-dimensional spatial grid that invites the eye to follow figures moving up and down the frame as well as back and forth. This network stands in marked contrast to the serial space of the fire run that renders repeated motion endlessly, but only in a single diagonal direction from right to left.

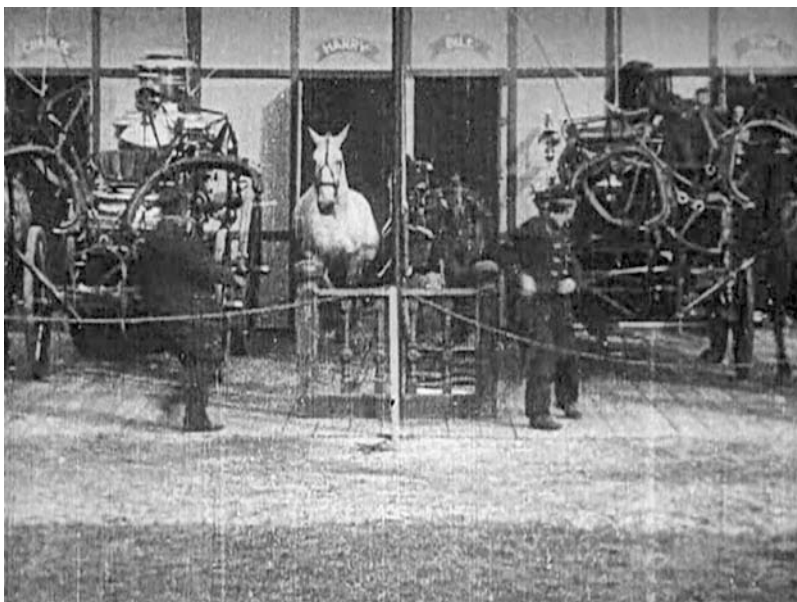
Porter has taken pains earlier in the film to establish such vertical and horizontal expandable gridding, enabling him to experiment with an alternative way to stretch space for the emergent medium of cinema. Shot 3 shows firemen at the firehouse responding to the alarm by sliding down the fire pole one by one in the center of the room, while shot 4, taken from the floor below, shows them, after a brief pause, hitting the floor and jumping into their engines. As in the case of the ladder, a prominent piece of fire apparatus (the pole) is used to establish a vertical plane of cinematic continuity, similar to the serial movement of engine after engine during the fire run but more ambitiously here tying together two contiguous spaces, top and bottom.<sup>17</sup> This gridding becomes explicit in the fourth shot’s *mise-en-scène*: the back wall of the interior of the ground floor of the firehouse is literally painted with heavy black lines, vertical and horizontal, which resemble the rectangular configuration of windows and doors that we see in the next exterior long shot of the firehouse as well as later in the final exterior shot of the burning house.<sup>18</sup>

Windows and doors figure prominently in virtually every shot in the film, suggesting yet a third way Porter is trying to imagine and reimag-

ine relations of space in *Life of an American Fireman*. His experimentation is on display most dramatically in the notorious final two shots of the film, the rescue of mother and child as seen first from the inside and then from the outside of the house. By calling the ending notorious, I don't mean to revisit from scratch the well-known controversy surrounding the two versions of the film. Early-cinema scholars two decades ago established beyond a shadow of a doubt that the film's version belonging to the Museum of Modern Art (featuring a dozen or so cross-cuts back and forth between interior and exterior) was in fact made during the 1930s or 1940s—and is not the version submitted to the Library of Congress for copyright purposes. The latter, with no parallel editing at all, closely approximates the film as exhibited in 1903.<sup>19</sup> This critical crux is instructive for exposing the teleological pressures on an earlier generation of film historians intent on explaining an otherwise rather bizarre kind of repetition by discovering evidence of cross-cutting well in advance of D. W. Griffith.<sup>20</sup> Early cinema is not Hollywood cinema, as *Life of an American Fireman* so vividly demonstrates. But we still may not fully understand the relation between these final two shots, usually simply dubbed a temporal overlap (common enough in other early films) or “duplication signifying simultaneity.”<sup>21</sup> For one thing, the shots do not simply show the same actions twice, as frequently asserted, because the crucial reunion of mother, child, and fireman that concludes the film is only visible from the exterior. Second, it isn't clear that Porter is even much interested in telling a story set in continuous time. Nor is it fully satisfying to claim that Porter, Rashamon-like, is experimenting with multiple points of view, a technique implying a sort of radical relativity or subjectivity that seems outside the logic of this film.<sup>22</sup>

Focused on formal questions of temporal and narrative continuity, early-cinema scholars pondering *Life of an American Fireman* have tended to pay less attention to the film's rendering of space, what I will be calling *spatial causality*. Here's where windows and doors come in. As I have been arguing so far, *Life of an American Fireman* works through a number of different ways to construe how a body moves through space unilaterally (the fire run) and two-dimensionally (the film's various systems of horizontal-vertical grids). Doors and windows suggest a third possibility, allowing for an effect of three-dimensional interiority-exteriority. Both shots 4 and 5, for example, taken inside the firehouse and then outside, highlight this effect by





**Figure 1** Fire horse rushing from opening. Frame enlargement of shot 4, *Life of an American Fireman*, Edison Manufacturing Company, 1902–03. Printed with permission from disc 1 of *Edison: The Invention of the Movies*, Kino International, 2005.

dramatizing the powerful movement of horses from the back to the front of the frame, as the 1903 catalog describes the fourth scene: “As the men come down the pole . . . six doors in the rear of the engine house, each heading a horse-stall, burst open simultaneously and a huge fire horse . . . rushes from each opening.” This spatial effect is accentuated by the camera’s focus on a white horse boldly emerging from blackness (see fig. 1). The catalog’s description of the next scene (shot 5) is similar, with “the great doors swinging open, and the apparatus coming out” (EC-BN, 216–17).<sup>23</sup> In both cases, the wonderful apparatus, the motivating energy of the moving picture, bursts forth from dark interior recesses to move toward the camera, not diagonally across the frame, as in the fire run, but more directly toward the front of the image. These opening portals create an illusion of depth significantly different from theatrical space, where entrances and exits most often occur from the wings of the stage.

We can appreciate this difference most markedly by returning to the film’s penultimate shot, the interior of the burning house. A woman

rises from her bed in a smoke-filled room, briefly looks in dismay directly at the camera, turns to go to a window at the rear of her upstairs bedroom to cry for help, then faints back onto her bed. The fireman enters the room through a door frame on the right, sees the woman, removes the curtains and breaks open the rear window, picks up the prone body, and carries her out the window. From start to finish, the large window dominates the scene, offering us (and the trapped woman) a tantalizing view of an exterior space (another house across the street) that represents safety and freedom. As when the fire apparatus bursts through doorways in shots 4 and 5, here the window functions as an aperture drawing the eye—and the film apparatus—away from a claustrophobic and potentially fatal interior toward another more inviting exterior scene. The woman's initial frontal look has established a direct sight line between the camera lens and the window, which in effect double one another. While the final two shots thus certainly denote a simultaneity of sorts, they also suggest an intriguing kind of causality, whereby the promise of the window compels the camera to follow the rescue to the outside, so that one rendering of space calls forth or begets another. When Porter cuts to the exterior in the final shot, the window plays an equally crucial role, framing the desperate woman gesturing for help from the very beginning of the scene. The window enables vision but prohibits movement. Only when the barrier between inside and outside is broken by the fireman's smashing of the window can bodies then be released from one space to another (see fig. 2).

Here it might be instructive to compare an important British predecessor, James Williamson's five-shot *Fire!* (1901), which has an ending similar to *Life of an American Fireman*. The penultimate interior shot of *Fire!* shows a fireman rescuing a man in an upstairs bedroom by entering and exiting through the same window, while the final shot, without temporal overlap, shows the rescue by ladder from the outside. But the shaded window is simply a point of access; we see virtually nothing of the exterior world beyond it, nor do we see the man actually being carried through the opening. During the interior scene of *Life of an American Fireman*, by contrast, the window offers a clear, sustained view of the world outside, a desperately desired but seemingly unattainable space because we have as yet no inkling that a ladder will enable the upstairs rescue. Until the fireman and woman leave through the window, this outside remains only pure possibility, a second story (pun intended) means of escape that in defying conventional



**Figure 2** The rescuer breaks the window. Frame enlargement of shot 8, *Life of an American Fireman*, Edison Manufacturing Company, 1902–03. Printed with permission from disc 1 of *Edison: The Invention of the Movies*, Kino International, 2005.

stage exits suggests a different way the new medium of cinema could move bodies through space.<sup>24</sup>

Yet does my emphasis on spatial causality solve the puzzle of *Life of an American Fireman*'s double ending? The question of time remains, as Musser remarks:

The problem highlighted in these two cuts is one that faced all filmmakers of this period—temporality. . . . Film, which is presented unfolding in time, demonstrates a tendency to make temporal relationships explicit. Continuity of action, embryonic at best in lantern shows, likewise became a central problem for early cinema. The mechanistic prejudice of film historians in the past has been to assume that early filmmakers were attempting to match action, just doing it badly . . . but neither Porter nor Williamson was attempting to match action between contiguous spaces. (*BN*, 207)

But then what *were* they attempting? If time, the temporal flow of action, doesn't necessarily serve to connect shots, then what does? And why the repetition? After all, it would have been possible for

Porter to allow the space of shot 8 to give birth to the space of shot 9, so to speak, without going back in time—by starting the final exterior scene, for example, with the moment the woman is carried through the window, not when she first appears at it. This hypothetical scenario, in fact, closely resembles the 1903 catalog account, which describes the mother's rescue and then a "dissolve to the exterior of the building," where the frantic mother kneels on the ground to implore the firemen to return into the burning house to save her child. The catalog thus retains the sort of suspense we attribute to literary narrative, the withholding or deferral of certain kinds of information that the film renders all too visible in its need to show the fate of each and every body in each and every shot. While cinematic suspense would become effortless once analytic editing or cross-cutting took hold a few years later, Porter's 1903 film denies itself this pleasure by already presenting us with the rescue of the child in the previous interior shot. While it may be reasoned that Porter needed to begin the final shot where he did in order to explain the appearance of the ladder and to depict the iconographic reuniting of mother and child, his decision to stay with the interior shot until the child is carried out the window suggests less a concern about plot than, again, a more abstract preoccupation with the movement of bodies through cinematic space. In popular chase films produced around the same time, filmmakers kept a scrupulous respect for the integrity of the self-sufficient frame, refusing to go from one shot to the next until all bodies moving through the single frame had departed, effectively emptying space. The logic driving *Life of an American Fireman* similarly seems to require that a body moving from point A to point B be shown at all costs to exit point A, and hence Porter's decision to go back in time to preserve the coherence of the body in space.<sup>25</sup>

In emphasizing spatial relations over temporal flow, the film runs counter to a modern philosophical tradition inaugurated by Kant in *Critique of Pure Reason*, where he defines space as secondary and external in contrast to the internal subjectivity of time. For Kant, Gilles Deleuze notes, "time is no longer related to the movement which it measures, but movement is related to the time which conditions it."<sup>26</sup> This philosophical denigration of space finds its technological counterpart in the many claims made on behalf of railroads, telegraphs, telephones, and other modernizing inventions of ostensibly instantaneous transmission whose breathtaking speed would serve to annihilate all distance. Although the 1903 Edison catalog similarly



**Figure 3** The fireman's dream. Frame enlargement of shot 1, *Life of an American Fireman*, Edison Manufacturing Company, 1902–03. Printed with permission from disc 1 of *Edison: The Invention of the Movies*, Kino International, 2005.

emphasizes the rapidity of the firefighting apparatus (whose aroused firemen don “their clothes in the record time of five seconds” and whose horses “are hitched in the almost unbelievable time of five seconds” [EC-BN, 216]), *Life of an American Fireman* visually appears to harken back to the prior medium of magic-lantern slide shows whose “well-developed spatial constructions” lead to action that is “retarded, repeated,” as Musser asserts (BN, 226). But at the same time, by dwelling on portals between spaces otherwise seemingly self-contained, the film opens up new possibilities for the fledgling medium of cinema.

The problematic relation between shots 8 and 9 is almost always discussed in isolation from the rest of the film, but it seems to me directly related to Porter’s equally enigmatic opening scene, the fireman’s dream. Here we have yet another striking organization of space, as the frame is split into two parts (by no means a first), with a dream balloon or bubble appearing screen right of a sleeping fireman a few seconds after the film opens (see fig. 3). The scene presents the “Life” of the film’s title, pushing it beyond mere action—the fire run and rescue

so common in the earliest years of cinema—to attempt a richer and more complex biographical subject. Just as the pan in shot 7 signals an ambition to reach a conclusion that moves beyond mere movement, so here the inclusion of the solitary fireman’s dream as a prologue to action bespeaks an ambition to give the new medium a subjective dimension. Certainly Porter’s turn to biography is not unique here, as late-nineteenth-century magic-lantern shows such as *Bob the Fireman* also sought to convey the daily routine of a British working-class folk hero.<sup>27</sup> The dream vision itself was also a longstanding convention, not only in Western religious paintings but also in secular German drawings from the nineteenth century that anticipated the thought balloons of early-twentieth-century comic strips, as John Fell noted long ago.<sup>28</sup>

Porter himself had invoked such bubbles a few months earlier in his ten-shot *Jack and the Beanstalk*, but to different effect, I would argue. In his filmed fantasy tale, the balloon is always accompanied by the onscreen presence of a good fairy, who “directs” his dreams for him, as a catalog description puts it.<sup>29</sup> But in the absence of any mediating agents, the bubble in *Life of an American Fireman* is less a phantasmagorical revelation than a more inwardly motivated mental picture. In this regard it is a thought- or anxiety balloon rather than a vision or dream—a rather ambitious (if ultimately unsuccessful) attempt by Porter to see how and if the emerging medium of cinema could directly visualize internal psychological states. Here simultaneity makes perfect sense, because we are meant to understand that what we see to the right of the dozing body of the fireman is taking place inside of him—clearly on a different ontological plane even though sharing the same frame. Once the fireman awakens and begins pacing back and forth, the bubble vanishes. As in the film’s final two shots, the relation between interior and exterior becomes paramount, and here as there, Porter establishes a kind of spatial causality by making it clear that the sleeping body depicted in one space activates another circular space, the tableau of a mother putting her child to bed. The bubble figuratively is about as close to a window as you can get, allowing us to see inside the man’s head.<sup>30</sup>

But the material mechanism that allows us to move from outside to inside remains obscure, and the entire film from this point on can be read as an effort by the fireman to realize his vision, that is, physically (re)connect with mother and child. He finally achieves his dream in the film’s concluding shot, in effect breaking through the thought-

balloon's barrier, just as the window has been broken in the penultimate shot. In this regard, the mother framed by the rectangular window in the final shot recalls the initial circular framing of mother and child by the thought balloon. So we see that Porter's production of space in the film is clearly gendered: mother and child are captured in domestic scenes or vignettes in shots 1, 8, and 9 that render them fixed and static, helplessly waiting for rescue, while the opening scene of the pacing fireman establishes a principle of superabundant masculine energy that serves as the powerful force of liberation throughout the film.<sup>31</sup> Juxtaposing manly action against feminine immobility, this gendering of space is intersected by a second pattern in the film that finds both male rescuers and female victim oscillating starkly between two ontological states—panicked arousal and unconsciousness—with nothing in between until the end. Just as the fireman in the first shot suddenly awakens to anxiety, and the trapped woman in the penultimate shot conversely passes out in distress when she sees her bedroom on fire, so too the sleeping firemen in shot 3 abruptly jump out of their beds with the sounding of the alarm. This third shot thus complicates the film's gendering of space by suggesting a kind of fraternal domesticity (men sleeping together in an intimate setting) subject to the same animating forces that trigger the movements of the fireman and the family he has envisioned. But what motivates or organizes this particular pattern of repetition? A clue lies in the film's second shot.

If the final two shots might occasion complaints today about too much repetition, the first pair would seem to give us too little. From an anxiously pacing fireman, we unexpectedly move to a close shot of a disembodied, fragmentary hand and arm opening a fire-alarm box and pulling down a handle to sound the telegraphic alarm (see fig. 4). While the first shot gives us some broad sense of the biographical "life" of the fireman, this second shot is essential for more narrowly motivating the entire chain of action that follows, starting with the firemen awakening in the firehouse (shot 3), moving through the fire run and rescue, and ending with the reunited mother and child—the iconographic tableau that echoes the opening and gives the film a certain kind of symmetry.<sup>32</sup> Precisely because we never see the fire until the end of the film (unlike Williamson's *Fire!*, which establishes the cause of action in its very first shot), the alarm is all the more crucial for functioning literally as the switch that turns on the plot.



**Figure 4** Opening the door to sound the alarm. Frame enlargement of shot 2, *Life of an American Fireman*, Edison Manufacturing Company, 1902–03. Printed with permission from disc 1 of *Edison: The Invention of the Movies*, Kino International, 2005.

In a superb recent discussion of *Life of an American Fireman*, Paul Young demonstrates the profound significance of the insertion of the alarm:

[It generates a] technological analogy between telegraph and cinema by placing the spectators in a relationship to the film that parallels the fireman's relationship to the alarm: Both machines not only transmit information about one space into another space, but also bring private subjects out into the open, turning them from singular figures with individual dreams to participate in an idealized "American" experience, broadly defined as everyday heroism for the fireman, and sensationalistic technological amusement for the audience.<sup>33</sup>

Young alludes to the collective, nationalizing impulse of the telegraph, a power celebrated early and often during the rapid growth of the new medium, as William Channing himself, the inventor of the municipal telegraphic fire alarm, noted in 1855: "[The telegraph is the] nervous



system of the nation and modern society. . . . Its wires spread like nerves over the surface of the land, interlinking distant parts.” He went on to address his own more specialized invention: “Its purpose is to multiply points of communication, to cover the surface of the municipal body as thickly . . . with telegraphic signaling points as the surface of the human body is covered with nervous extremities or papillae.”<sup>34</sup>

And so we have three intimately linked spectacular technologies operating in the movie: firefighting, filmmaking, and telegraphy. The Edison catalog’s section “Scene 2.—A Close View of a New York Fire Alarm Box” spells out the connection between the “apparatus” of the alarm, as it explicitly calls it, and the “wonderful apparatus” of the fire department (men, machines, and horses [EC-BN, 216]) by emphasizing “the electric current” (BN, 216) that spreads like nerves (to borrow Channing’s phrasing) across the great city to broadcast an alert about the fire. The analogy that Young draws between telegraphy and early cinema thus seems to depend on a third more abstract force in *Life of an American Fireman*, nowhere to be actually seen in the film (unlike the telegraphic alarm) but governing the organization and arrangement of space itself. Befitting a Thomas Edison production, electricity serves as the invisible medium animating movement, at least for the first three shots, especially between exteriors and interiors. The second close-up shot signals this movement from outer to inner, showing first the alarm-box exterior, clearly lettered “Fire Alarm Telegraphy Station,” and then a surreal (to us, today) arm and hand (the hand of God, the hand of the film director?) opening the door—the first of many throughout the film—to tap the electric current hidden within.<sup>35</sup> Dismembered agency made flesh, the nervous extremity (to recall Channing again) that opens the door thus effectively replays in public fashion the film’s more private beginning scene, which also had established in a single shot an exterior (the dreaming fireman), whose anxieties give rise to an interior space (the thought bubble envisioning mother and child).

Lest my comparison between the fireman’s head and the fire-alarm door seem excessive, let us return to the Edison catalog’s account of the first scene, which tells us that the fireman “suddenly awakes and paces the floor in a nervous state of mind, doubtless thinking of the various people who may be in danger from fire at the moment” (EC-BN, 216).<sup>36</sup> The fireman’s “nervous state of mind” in shot 1 links up

with the telegraphic alarm's discharge of electrical nerves depicted in shot 2, establishing a clear and powerful relationship between these two otherwise loosely connected shots by virtue of the wonderful apparatus that homologizes the body of the fireman with the body of the city. No wonder there's no need to show the fire itself. If we look closely again at the first scene, moreover, we notice that there is not just one balloon but two, as the catalog implies: "The rays of an incandescent light rest upon his features with a subdued light, yet leaving his figure strongly silhouetted against the wall of his office" (EC-BN, 216). Reading like an advertisement for Edison's most famous product, the incandescent light rays create a visual bubble surrounding the fireman, who in this sense is subject to the same invisible electrical impulses by which he generated his own vision of a family. But then who is it that dreams the dreamer?

Instead of trying to answer this unanswerable question, let me close with some comments on method. In my argument's progression, I have increasingly relied on the 1903 catalog of *Life of an American Fireman* to illuminate the underlying logic of the film—perhaps a dubious proposition. This catalog matches neither the copy of the film in the Library of Congress nor the one in the Museum of Modern Art in its rendering of the final two shots; the catalog, then, seems to offer simply a third (print) version with no particular authority. Young, for example, at one point in his discussion somewhat dismissively calls the published account "speculative."<sup>37</sup> But for me, that is precisely the point: the writer of the catalog is not so much describing the film's action as explaining its rationale. Earlier, much briefer catalogs by production and distribution companies were intended to sell films as well as describe them; but by 1902, that selling function was left mainly to advertisements in trade journals like the *New York Clipper*. This meant that more extensive and interpretive catalog entries could be written for the film's exhibition, serving in effect as scripts for the live lecture that often accompanied the showing of the film.<sup>38</sup>

While the new medium of cinema was slowly moving in its first decade toward greater diegetic self-sufficiency, it wasn't quite there yet in 1903, a condition that's difficult for us now to imagine, as Noël Burch bluntly asserts: "It is so self-evident today that a film must tell its own story that we are often unable to read such narratives."<sup>39</sup> In visualizing the wonderful apparatus of firefighting, *Life of an American Fireman* clearly draws on a whole range of precur-

sor cultural formations, media spectacles, and popular discourses that would have been familiar to turn-of-the-century audiences: Currier and Ives prints, magic-lantern shows, fire-run films, staged “fighting-the-flames” outdoor disaster shows. Yet as Musser remarks, Porter is also attempting to rework this popular material in new ways (*BN*, 220), especially by experimenting with cinema space, an abstract concern that perhaps outweighed his interest in narrative coherence. I am trying to do two things at once, then: to read the film closely as a carefully crafted whole (more so than some early-cinema scholars tend to do), so that the formal difficulties of the double ending are closely related to the film’s opening (its thought bubbles and articulation of shots); and second, to allow for gaps in the film’s story by relying on the printed catalog as a kind of theoretical supplement to fill in by way of explanation what the film itself cannot make fully visible, that is, electricity’s special nervous vitality. While the wonderful apparatus tries to comprehend itself in images (the telegraphic alarm shot), we need the words of the catalog to help tell us how it works its magic.

Despite my best efforts to make *Life of an American Fireman* seem conceptually coherent, it is not. By the fourth shot, the nervous pacing of the fireman (the first action in the film) has given way to the “thrilling” bursting forth of the horses (as the catalog highlights)—a conversion of energy from invisible electric currents to more obviously motivated motion through tangible passageways. Instead of regarding the film as a unified entirety governed by a single underlying logic, it makes more sense to treat it as a shifting visual field or series of inter-linked experiments with which Porter tries to imagine how bodies can move through cinematic space or, rather, how moving bodies construe new kinds of cinematic space that are not necessarily dependent on time, action, or plot. Creating effects in one-, two-, and three dimensionality, the film by fits, starts, and repetitions follows men, machines, and horses moving across streets, up ladders, down poles, and through doors and windows, as interiors and exteriors produce and reproduce one another. I have called this process spatial causality, an alternative way to think about the problems of continuity raised by this film.

I anticipate that early-cinema scholars might object to my argument on a number of grounds. Some may dismiss it as going over old territory. Here I would simply point out that for all the attention this film has received, very few commentaries have noted the significance of its doors and windows.<sup>40</sup> When portals do come up more generally in dis-

cussions of early cinema, the focus tends to be on match cuts (or lack thereof), because scholars, despite themselves, still seem haunted by the terms set forth by classic Hollywood narrative that we continue to accept as givens.

Others may fault me for failing to contextualize *Life of an American Fireman* more broadly in relation to early cinema as a social practice, which entailed rather rich conditions of exhibition, reception, and the formation of counter public spheres. While on the empirical level, evidence about reception is extremely scanty for this period, certainly on the theoretical level I may be guilty as charged, since early-cinema scholars have devoted a great deal of scrutiny to questions of early-cinema spectatorship. For *Life of an American Fireman* more specifically, Young has made a clear and compelling case, as I have suggested, for the film's various representations of technological spectacle in relation to American nationalism; rather than basically reiterate or even expand his claims, I want to shift the critical conversation back to questions of form, which preoccupied the first generation of serious early-cinema scholars during the 1970s but have largely fallen by the wayside of late, as if all these technical matters have now been resolved. But I would hold that in trying to situate any medium historically as a new medium, formal issues once assumed to be laid to rest need to be revisited with particular care. By examining how Porter's film fuses technique and technology, I have challenged myself to see if his emergent wonderful apparatus linking firefighting, filmmaking, and telegraphy could sustain the kind of detailed close analysis we devote to literary texts as well as classic Hollywood narratives.

Still others may complain that I've made one six-minute film carry a lot of critical weight, more than it can bear. Perhaps. But rather than see this particular film as exemplary or typical of early cinema, I have been careful to respect its singularity, treating it as one multifaceted film at one pivotal moment in cinema history. New media studies, I would argue, works more effectively on a case-by-case basis, not simply in terms of the particular media being analyzed but also in terms of the discrete objects of analysis within any given medium. In a field as complex as early cinema, generalities don't get you very far (to paraphrase William Blake). The trick is to pick your new-media objects and moments carefully. Here I would strongly defend my choice of *Life of an American Fireman*, long regarded as a locus classicus by film historians for its formal peculiarities (especially the

double ending and bubble opening) at a key period of transition, when self-contained, one-shot actualities and trick films were giving way to longer, multiple-shot works that exploited the nascent medium's potential for narratization.

Narrative has long been a subject of interest for literary theory and criticism, and insofar as questions of plot may transcend the differences between verbal and visual media, then the critical methods of literary studies would seem to offer useful ways to analyze the peculiarities of *Life of an American Fireman's* efforts at ordering a sequence of shots. As in my previous discussion of suspense, the question here centers on how the new medium of film was teaching itself to tell stories, specifically the role that repetition played in that process of giving or withholding information. What literary narratologists treat as a problem of coherence, moving the narrative forward through the dialectical interplay between repetition and difference, film scholars treat as continuity, articulating temporal, spatial, and causal relations between a succession of discrete images. Such continuity, for most Hollywood movies at least, would come to reinforce an ideology of mystification designed to render invisible or gloss over the disjunctions, cuts, and artifice of the medium. But for *Life of an American Fireman*, so focused on space and spatial relations, repetition seems to carry an import above and beyond matters of editing efficiency, as Burch has suggested in pondering the relation between the film's final two shots:

[T]he fact that once these two shots were filmed, it was decided to connect them in a manner implying an obvious non-linearity rather than disturb the unity of the spatial viewpoint, seems to be to say a good deal about the *alterity* of the relationship these early films entertained with the spectators who watched them. Does it not suggest that the feeling of being seated in a theatre in front of a screen had, for spectators then, a sort of priority over the feeling of being carried away by an imaginary time-flow, modeled on the semblance of linearity which *ordinary time* has for us?<sup>41</sup>

In linking the space of viewing with the spaces on screen, Burch implies a sort of pleasure on the part of early-cinema spectators with the process of repetition itself: the rescue seen once more, the mother reunited with her child, the nuclear family (real or imagined) restored, showing us once again what we already know. And yet the film seems

equally as committed to giving us an exciting beginning, middle, and end, along the lines of hundreds and hundreds of classic Hollywood narratives to come.

This is not an evolutionary linear model of progress, as Porter's subsequent career makes clear. Soon after *Life of an American Fireman* Porter made *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903), which in keeping with hugely popular stage versions, presented a series of largely static, iconographic tableaux already familiar to audiences, who were alerted in advance to the emblematic content of each shot by intertitles (among the earliest in cinema). This pictorial, theatrical production was followed by *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), still commonly regarded as the mother of all American film narratives (although to my mind, for that reason a less interesting example of new media than *Life of an American Fireman*). But a few years later, in *Life of an American Policeman* (1905) and *Life of a Cowboy* (1906) Porter was making films (protosequels?) that still raise serious questions about temporal and diegetic coherence, as if he hadn't quite learned or mastered his own "lesson" in *The Great Train Robbery*—displaying, that is, a seeming disregard of the very narrative conventions he himself had helped to establish. In this specific sense, *Life of an American Fireman* in its various experiments with transmitting bodies through space and between shots can be said to encapsulate or stand for the oscillations and equivocations of Porter's career as a whole, as he probed the possibilities and limitations of the emerging medium of moving pictures.

Finally, what would it mean to conceive a cinema based on principles of spatial causality that we have noticed in *Life of an American Fireman*? It would suggest an abstract mode of representation inviting the eye to follow figures in space rather than cause-and-effect plots. The sheer corporeality of bodies would be foregrounded, yet by the same token the motivation for action might remain beyond the camera's reach, subject to metaphysical forces (such as electricity or gravity) with powerful but invisible presence. The screen would seem to stretch in three dimensions, not by mimetic illusions of deep focus but, rather, by passageways soliciting motion back and forth between interiors and exteriors. Time could run forward, backward, stand still, or simply not matter. It may seem now that I am describing the cinematic dreamworks of Stan Brakhage, who urged his audiences in his 1963 manifesto, "Metaphors on Vision," to "imagine an eye un-ruled by man-made laws of perspective."<sup>42</sup> While I would be rather reluc-

tant to claim Porter as an avant-garde visionary before the letter, I do think it is fair to see both Porter and experimenters like Brakhage as striving to imagine otherwise against ways of seeing that in the case of Porter were just beginning to take hold in cinema. If in the end, *Life of an American Fireman* may not quite know what to make of its own wonderful apparatus, then why should we?

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## Notes

*Life of an American Fireman* is available on DVD in two compilations: *Edison: The Invention of the Movies* (Kino, 2005); and *More Treasures from American Film Archives, 1894–1931* (National Film Preservation Foundation, 2004). Charles Musser's VHS compilation also contains the film: *Before the Nickelodeon: The Early Cinema of Edwin S. Porter* (Distributed by the New York Museum of Modern Art, 1982).

- 1 David Thorburn, Edward Barrett, and Henry Jenkins, series forward to *New Media, 1740–1915*, ed. Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey B. Pingree (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), vii.
- 2 Although periodization schemes differ, 1917 is the most common date given for the end of early cinema. For a discussion of time frames, as well as an extensive analysis of classical cinema's formal and institutional features, see David Bordwell, Kristen Thompson, and Janet Staiger, *The Classic Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985).
- 3 See, in particular, Jean-Louis Baudry, "The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in the Cinema," in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1986), as well as essays in the same collection by Raymond Bellour, Nick Browne, Laura Mulvey, Mary Ann Doane, Teresa de Lauretis, and Stephen Heath. See also Jean-Louis Comolli, "Machines of the Visible," in *The Cinematic Apparatus*, ed. Teresa De Lauretis and Steven Heath (New York: St. Martin's, 1980); and Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Briton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Guzzetti (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1982).
- 4 See *Film before Griffith*, ed. John Fell (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1983); *Before Hollywood: Turn-of-the-Century American Film*, ed. Jay Leyda and Charles Musser (New York: Hudson Hill Press, in association with the American Federation of Arts, 1986); and Charles Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California

- Press, 1991). (Further references in the text to *Before the Nickelodeon* are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically as *BN*.) As their titles indicate, this trio of books reflects the basis for three common critical approaches to cinema studies: auteur, institution, and exhibition practice, respectively.
- 5 See André Gaudreault, "Narration et monstration au cinema," *Hors-Cadre 2* (April 1984): 87–98. See also the following articles by Tom Gunning: "Non-Continuity, Continuity, Discontinuity: A Theory of Genres in Early Film," *Iris 2*, no. 1 (1984): 101–12; "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde," *Wide Angle 8* (fall 1986): 63–70; "'Primitive' Cinema—A Frame-Up? or The Trick's on Us," *Cinema Journal 28* (winter 1989): 3–12; "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In) Credulous Spectator," *Art and Text 34* (spring 1989): 31–45; "Now You See It, Now You Don't: The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions," *Velvet Light Trap 32* (fall 1993): 3–12; and "The Whole Town's Gawking: Early Cinema and the Visual Experience of Modernity," *Yale Journal of Criticism 7* (fall 1994): 189–201. For one response to Gunning that insists on a far shorter historical frame for attractions (1895–97), see Charles Musser, "Rethinking Early Cinema: Cinema of Attractions and Narrativity," *Yale Journal of Criticism 7* (fall 1994): 203–32.
  - 6 For an excellent collection of such approaches, see *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, ed. Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1995). See also Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2001).
  - 7 Rick Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2004), 18–19.
  - 8 Such a critique is briefly noted by Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1991), 24. For an elaboration of this critique against the work of Noël Burch, see Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, "Linearity, Materialism, and the Study of Early American Cinema," *Wide Angle 5* (spring 1983): 4–15.
  - 9 Edwin S. Porter, quoted in Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon*, 209. At the risk of valorizing the solitary artist-author, I emphasize the active agency of Porter in the making of the film for two reasons. First, as my subsequent analysis suggests, the film is deliberately crafted in terms of its shot composition and succession of images; and second, attributing agency to the film rather than the filmmaker is an even more problematic proposition that risks giving the new medium a self-evident ontology it may not possess.
  - 10 The entire 1903 Edison catalog is reprinted in Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon* (see "Edison Films, February 1903," 215–18 [Document 11]); for the term "apparatus," see 216. (Further references to the 1903 Edison



catalog quoted in *Before the Nickelodeon* will be cited parenthetically in the text as EC-BN.) I am indebted to Musser's masterful archival research as well as his comprehensive, detailed analysis of *Life of an American Fireman*.

- 11 See Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907*, volume 1 of *History of the American Cinema* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, ), 55–57, 353–54. On operational aesthetic more generally, see Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), 72–89.
- 12 Mark Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
- 13 Cited in Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon*, 212.
- 14 For a recent deconstruction of the fiction-documentary binary in film, see Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2001), especially 225–63.
- 15 Quoted in Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon*, 213.
- 16 Musser shrewdly notes that the spectacle of filmmaking in effect supplanted the spectacle of local firefighting, especially because many volunteer companies by this time had themselves been eclipsed by professionals (*Before the Nickelodeon*, 222).
- 17 Charles Musser notes that this is the first time Porter links two contiguous spaces on a vertical plane; see “The Early Cinema of Edwin Porter,” *Cinema Journal* 19 (fall 1979): 30.
- 18 This painted gridwork resembles the backgrounds of the time-motion studies done in the 1880s by Eadweard Muybridge, who borrowed the idea from photographic anthropometric grids pioneered by J. H. Lamprey starting in the late 1860s; see Elizabeth Edwards, “Ordering Others: Photography and Classification in Art, Science, and the Everyday,” ed. Chrissie Iles and Russell Roberts (Oxford, Eng.: Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 56. On Muybridge and the grid, see Robert Taft, “An Introduction to Eadweard Muybridge and His Work,” in Eadweard Muybridge, *Muybridge's Complete Human and Animal Locomotion* (New York: Dover, 1979), x. For an important discussion of grids (including windows) in relation to modern art, see Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 9–22, although surprisingly Krauss does not mention time-motion studies. A number of elements in *Life of an American Fireman* work against the film's emphasis on vertical and horizontal linearity, including the curved trolley lines in shot 6 and the firemen's (phallic?) water hoses, which are aimed and directed by the men but whose powerful hydraulic forces, bending and twisting the hoses wildly every which way, escape total control. In this regard it is also worth noting the many excited dogs that run throughout the film (especially in shots 4 and 7). Unlike the powerful horses, these charm-

- ing creatures are not hitched and therefore are not subject to any human control. Adding an air of contingency to events, the animating effects of animal movement in early cinema deserve further analysis.
- 19 For a definitive analysis of the two versions, see Musser, "The Early Cinema of Edwin Porter," 1-38; and André Gaudreault, "Detours in Film Narrative: The Development of Cross-cutting," *Cinema Journal* 19 (fall 1979): 39-59.
  - 20 Griffith by himself certainly did not invent cross-cutting *ex nihilo* as he claimed, but his name is often automatically associated with the technique in most conventional film histories.
  - 21 Noël Burch, *Life to Those Shadows* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1990), 206.
  - 22 Burch claims that in the last shot "*all the action is seen over again*," translating the film's enunciation as follows: "'Here is a scene shown from one viewpoint; now here it is seen from another'" (*Life to Those Shadows*, 205-6). See also Musser's remarks about "same actions" and multiple perspectives (*Before the Nickelodeon*, 226), although Musser treats these two shots as overlapping and complementary, as repeating key elements without being identical.
  - 23 Although the catalog notes six doors opening in the fourth shot, we can only see four, likely indicating that the description was based more on profilmic aspects rather than a viewing of the film itself. Perhaps even more striking than the many doors and windows in the film is the hole in the floor, in shot 3, through which the firemen slide down the (linear) pole. Like the doors and windows, this hole also serves as a portal allowing the movement of bodies from one space to another, in this case drawn vertically downward by the invisible agency of gravity. I am indebted to Musser for this insight.
  - 24 Two earlier films by Porter are interesting in this respect. *How They Do Things on the Bowery* (1902) has a similar sort of temporal overlap, presenting action that progresses from an interior to an exterior, but it does not show any passageway or means of egress and ingress between inside and outside. *Appointment by Telephone* (1902), on the other hand, does show a plate-glass window between outside and inside that allows a wife on the sidewalk to spy her philandering husband inside a restaurant, but this window takes up the whole frame, and thus functions less as a portal than a transparency. Porter would continue his fascination with windows in *The Great Train Robbery*, as Jonathan Crary has remarked: "Through the open side door of the mail car we see the 'static' landscape outside the train rushing past in a blur. Thus from scene 2 to scene 3 there is a complete exchange of positions and vectors, from an occupation of a stable ground against which the tran-objectile moves, to a scene where this literally moving objectile, with which our own position is identified, becomes the 'ground' against which the earth shoots

past, unrecognizable in its rush or 'whirling.' . . . Here both the train and the landscape through which it moves become intertwined as reversible, mutually conditioned lines of flight, the recession of one inseparable from the advance of the other. Directions—whether diagonal, horizontal, or vertical—cease to have any privileged significance within the non hierarchical unfoldings of this spatial system" (*Suspensions of Perception* [Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999], 345–47).

- 25 See Tom Gunning, "Non-Continuity, Continuity, Discontinuity," 91; and André Gaudreault, "Temporality and Narrativity in Early Cinema, 1895–1908," in *Film before Griffith*, 311–29. Gaudreault remarks that "before releasing the camera to a subsequent space, everything occurring in the first location is necessarily shown" (322). For a discussion of these chase films in relation to biomechanics, see Jonathan Auerbach, "Chasing Film Narrative: Repetition, Recursion, and the Body in Early Cinema," *Critical Inquiry* 26 (summer 2000): 798–820. For an interesting analysis of early cinema's "doorway problem"—how multiple figures can exit in one shot and reappear in the next without temporal overlap—see Barry Salt, *Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis* (London: Starword, 1992), 58–59. Salt's discussion of dissolves is also pertinent here (52–54), since every transition between shots in *Life of an American Fireman* is marked by a dissolve akin to magic-lantern practice, suggesting again that the film tends to stress space over time. I should point out that once mother and child are carried out of the bedroom in shot 8, two firemen enter to hose down the flames. While this ending to the shot enables enough seconds to transpire to equal the time taken to reunite mother and child in the final shot (thus matching the duration of the temporal overlap), the two firemen also suggest a spatial sort of equivalence at work: directly after two bodies leave the scene, two more enter to replace them.
- 26 Gilles Deleuze, introduction to *Kant's Critical Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984), vii. For the relevant passages, see Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998), 157, 180–81. For an interesting discussion of the implications for social theory of Kant's subordination of space to time, see Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies* (London: Verso, 1989), 10–42.
- 27 Musser reproduces slides from this lantern show in *Before the Nickelodeon*, 219.
- 28 See John Fell, *Film and the Narrative Tradition* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1974), 112.
- 29 Cited in Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon*, 203. The pointed gendering of space in *Life of an American Fireman* stands in marked contrast to Williamson's *Fire!*, whose rescued victim is a man. For an interesting comparison of the two films, see Martin Sopocy, *James Williamson: Studies*

- and Documents of a Pioneer of the Film Narrative* (London: Associated University Presses, 1998), 46–60.
- 30 The relation between the fireman and his dream vision may in fact be more dynamic and reciprocal than I imply, insofar as the man is aroused from sleep the moment the woman in the bubble seems to face her dreamer. The bubble therefore may not be so self-contained. For a discussion of this shot, see Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2002), 188–89. Doane argues that “since the mother and child are never connected in any other way to this particular fireman,” the shot’s superimposition depicts an event happening elsewhere more likely than a dream about his own family, but surely these two alternatives (the internal and the simultaneous) are not mutually exclusive.
- 31 A case could be made for a second role for women in the film, that of public onlooker, but a close scan of shot 6 reveals only men among the spectators. While the next shot does show some women in the background looking on as the fire engines pull up to the burning building, they are planted near the houses (presumably their own), which again emphasizes that they exclusively occupy domestic space.
- 32 In a kind of structuralist series of brackets in the film, the first shot of the family matches the final ninth shot of their reunion; and the second shot of the alarm, motivating the chase and signaling the hidden interior force of electricity (as I will shortly argue), matches the interior bedroom filled with smoke and fire in the penultimate eighth shot. This allows the third and fourth shots, the firemen leaving their beds and jumping off their engines, to align with shots 6 and 7 (the fire run), leaving shot 5, the thrilling emergence of the apparatus from the fire house, at the center of the film.
- 33 Paul Young, “Media on Display: A Telegraphic History of Early American Cinema,” in *New Media*, 248.
- 34 William F. Channing, quoted in Joel Tarr (with Thomas Finholt and David Goodman), “The City and the Telegraph: Urban Telecommunications in the Pre-Telephone Era,” *Journal of Urban History* 14 (November 1987): 54–55. See also Amy S. Greenberg, *Cause for Alarm: The Volunteer Fire Department in the Nineteenth-Century City* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1998), 137. Channing was the son of the famous Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing; a study is thus waiting to be written about the relation between telegraphy and transcendentalism in antebellum America. For an intriguing discussion of telegraphy and spiritualism, see Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2000), 21–58.
- 35 Even this seemingly strange second shot borrows from preexisting visual convention, as evidenced by an unidentified 1890 illustration entitled

- “Sending the Alarm,” which shows a man (seen in full figure) opening a door to a fire-alarm box; see Lowell M. Limpus, *History of the New York Fire Department* (New York: Dutton, 1940), 284. Porter’s closer-in focus was presumably intended to allow audiences to read the lettering on the door.
- 36 The word “doubtless” in the passage calls attention to the conjectural status of the catalog as a whole. Published the same year as *Life of an American Fireman*, Georg Simmel’s claim in “The Metropolis and Mental Life” is pertinent: “The psychological basis of the metropolitan type of individuality consists in the *intensification of nervous stimulation* which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli” (in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. and ed. Kurt H. Wolff [New York: Free Press, 1950], 409–10). For an explicitly American cultural context that zeroes in on a single year, the very same year that Porter’s film was released, see Tom Lutz, *American Nervousness, 1903: An Anecdotal History* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1991).
- 37 Paul Young, “Media on Display,” 247.
- 38 For such a presumption—that this particular catalog description serves as running commentary—see George C. Pratt, *Spellbound in Darkness: A History of the Silent Film* (Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, 1973), 29. See also Burch, *Life to Those Shadows*: “[I]n deciphering the films of this remote period . . . the ‘externality of the narrative instance’ . . . is better articulated in the catalogues than it is on the screen” (201).
- 39 *Ibid.*, 189.
- 40 For a brief discussion of the film that remarks, in passing, that “the action moves out the window with the rescue,” see A. Nicholas Vardac, *Stage to Screen: Theatrical Method from Garrick to Griffith* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1949), 182. More recently, Doane suggestively reads the window in shot 8 as a “semiotic barrier” that characters cross in order to “transgress the spatial/temporal limits of the frame” (*The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 190).
- 41 Noël Burch, “Porter, or Ambivalence,” *Screen* 19 (winter 1978–79): 104.
- 42 Stan Brakhage, “Metaphors on Vision,” in *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), 228. For an important comparison between early and avant-garde cinema that explicitly mentions Brakhage, see Tom Gunning, “An Unseen Energy Swallows Space: The Space in Early Film and Its Relation to American Avant-Garde Film,” in *Film before Griffith*, 355–66. Gunning analyzes three features of early cinema space—superimposition, direct address, and camera movement—but does not discuss how bodies move. I am less interested in the Brakhage-Porter link itself than in suggesting how early cinema might have tended toward a certain kind of post-

modern abstraction before it became modern. For a discussion of the nonchronological relation between modernism and postmodernism, see Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984). For an interesting discussion of recent digital media that frequently draws on cinema for comparison, especially Ver-  
tov's experimental *Man with the Movie Camera* (1929), see Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001).