

Essay on the Origins of Film

By Ion Martea

There are multiple debates concerning the origins of film. Photographers in the nineteenth century were anxious to find a way to capture movement, almost from the moment they discovered the art of photography. It took less than half a century, and by the 1870s, Edward Muybridge has already made significant advances, managing with the use of the zoopraxiscope to exhibit successfully a series of moving images. Muybridge was a scientist, so for him the experiments did not serve an artistic purpose. That is why, despite their historical importance in the development of technology, his pieces are rather foreign to film as we understand it.

The birth of film as an artform can be pinpointed conveniently to 1895, with the first public exhibition of a number of one-minute single shots directed by the Lumière brothers. *L'arrivée d'un train à La Ciotat* [Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat] (1896) has all the attributes to earn it the accolade of being the first film, particularly as it was shown originally to a large audience. However, as the popularity of television and home video has proven, film spectatorship can also be solitary. The acceptance of film as a solitary experience, not only a collective one, has allowed the earlier mavericks (who only managed to offer screenings of their output to one spectator at a time) to claim the invention of the medium.

The recently discovered Roundhay Garden Scene (1888) is probably the earliest film, followed swiftly by works by two other Englishmen: William Friese-Greene working in the UK (1889), and William K.L. Dickson, the celebrated employee at Edison Manufacturing Company, in the USA (1890). These are all raw pieces, running several seconds, yet they all share two elements lacking in Muybridge's work, namely a continuous rather than cyclical sequence, and most importantly the occurrence of certain emotional experiences to images that are potentially ideological in essence.

Pinpointing the true birth of film, as opposed to the conception of it, is therefore a more difficult task than one would expect. What is the first production that is both technically and ideologically essential for this early period?

A case can be made for a little known and less celebrated production by William K.L. Dickson and his fellow cinematographer William Heise, *Dickson Greeting*. In a dark background, a man in his early thirties, Dickson himself, with a hat in his right hand, smiles and greets all of us. It is a simple

greeting, yet it is impossible to resist taking the gesture as a symbolic welcome into the world of film.

William K.L. Dickson's inventions of both the kinetograph and the kinoscope stand as two of the most important developments in the industry. The convention that film should be 35mm wide is another of his essential decisions. Even the Lumière's cinematograph is a slight improvement on Dickson's work. Therefore, the solitary greeting, coming from the inventor himself, is all the more intriguing.

As opposed to the Lumière technique of recording social events as historical documents, from the very beginning, Dickson saw the potential of using the moving image to tell a story, primarily through performance. In Dickson Greeting, judging from the body language, he is clearly performing for the camera, aware of the effect this might have over the spectator. It is then to assume that the greeting into the world of motion pictures was fully intended by the filmmaker.

A contemporary journalist from the New York Sun covering the first presentation of the kinetograph to a group of 147 members of the convention of women's club in America in May 1891 remarked: 'As they looked through this hole, they saw the picture of a man. It was a most marvellous picture. It bowed and smiled and waved its hands and took off its hat with the most perfect naturalness and grace. Every motion was perfect. There was not a hitch or a jerk.'

Film's ability to reproduce naturalness seemed to have been noted at the dawn of the industry. However, Dickson was the one to develop this potential by consistently staging events to be filmed. The point was not to show the magic of motion pictures through visual effects, as pursued throughout the 1890s by Émile Reynaud and Georges Méliès, but to create sequences that looked like snippets of reality. The staging is less apparent in Dickson Greeting, although it is implied by the mere process of posing for the camera, but the directorial technique is evident in less successful pieces such as Men Boxing (1891), in which two men seem to do anything but box.

One other important element introduced in Dickson Greeting is the tradition of constructing a narrative through a single/leading performer, in clear opposition to the contemporary European shorts, primarily concerned with establishing a social context. Hollywood, throughout most of the 20th century, rarely questioned the idea that individualism is intrinsic to American culture. Instead, it got hold of the concept and used it scrupulously, ultimately leading to severe criticism of single-mindedness and over-

simplification of film narrative.

Of course, such generalisations bring with them exceptions to the rule. However, the persistence of leading characters in early American film did create a certain cultural expectation in the audience that they should be able to identify with the emotions of a single individual, and through him or her to access universal ideas. Yet, this tradition was not necessarily the expression of a national trait, but was arguably a result of the technical limitations of the kinetograph, which did not make it easy to work with a large cast.

The sheer rawness of early film is often off-putting and can make the films seem uninteresting to modern audiences. However, it is precisely this crudeness that helps us identify the essential elements of film. Dickson Greeting is neither the first film, nor the most celebrated one, yet its symbolic magnetism of establishing film as a technical invention capable of developing a meta-linguistic artistic narrative, makes it as one of the most intriguing productions in the history of the medium. Dickson welcomed us; we could not resist the temptation to come in. We believed in his performance and allowed ourselves to be charmed by the illusion of motion pictures. In that, the film is unique.