The Train as a Mirror of Cinema: John Ford’s The Iron Horse (1924)*

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It is a common assumption that films and trains entertain privileged relations, both from a historical standpoint and as a private experience of modern man as spectator and traveller, despite a major difference in terms of status, the former dealing with images as audio-visual representations, the latter with the transport of goods and passengers. This paper will examine different signifying practices which relate the train to the origins of the “Seventh Art”, and, for this purpose, will be looking at John Ford’s 1924 silent “epic western”, The Iron Horse, his longest film to date and the one that made him famous. The Iron Horse epitomizes what had become known as the “railroad film”, initially at the heart of the debate on film genre since both the Lumière brothers and Méliès – whose works influenced early American cinema – made films that used the train as a central icon of modernity. Interestingly, the very same films were also at the heart of the debate about the essence of cinema, in particular when it came to establishing a taxonomy of film genres. For instance, it has been argued that Louis Lumière’s 1895 Arrivée d’un train en gare de Villefranche-sur-Saône (Arrival of Express at Lyons) is a documentary meant to advertise the Lumière camera technology, while others have presented it as a narrative film because of the way it integrates the units of time, place and character.3 Lumière’s seminal film also relies on the visual practices of academic painting when the locomotive – which slows down rather than stopping, pulling into view the carriages that comprise its mechanical body – vanishes from the frame into the off-screen space on our left. The framing of the shot follows thus the classical rules of dynamic diagonal composition. The locomotive is felt as a threatening intrusion upon our own space, a connotation which is still found in the diagonal line of Hitchcock’s train in Shadow of a Doubt (1943). Choosing an altogether different visual practice, French filmmaker Georges Méliès’s trick voyages also use trains, but to represent the power of imagination. Needless of any railway tracks, they soar along dynamic diagonal lines high into the imaginary world of the féérie fantastique, i.e. a world akin to the supernatural.4 Flying to the moon on a train is actually not very different from the first

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1 As early as 1896, Vitascope produced Elevated Railway, 23rd Street, New York, showing a view of a train pulling into a station that was “so realistic as to give those in front seats a genuine start” (Boston Herald, 26 May 1896, p. 7, Charles Musser, The Emergence of Cinema – The American Screen to 1907 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 118. The pastiche of Lumière’s 1895 Arrivée d’un train en gare de Villefranche-sur-Saône (Arrival of Express at Lyons) film is self-evident.


railway travellers’ impressions of “flying,” and film history deals with a large number of films which explore the close association between trains and cinema, whether literally or metaphorically. When discussing this topic, one has to bear in mind the radical changes in the perception of time and space caused by the industrial revolution, while such changes were experienced in common by both train traveller and moviegoer. As Wolfgang Schivelbusch writes, if cinema “is part of a much longer, dynamic tradition, one that has undergone repeated transformations in its practice while becoming increasingly central within a changing cultural system,” the train has greatly contributed to cinema’s central position in modern culture. This author’s history of the railway journey sees in the industrial revolution in Britain a framework for a collection of railway events which roused the imagination of writers of fiction as well as of early filmmakers. For this reason, several British sources will be called into the debate. On another hand, because this paper focuses on the icon of the train itself as a “protagonist” in Ford’s film, the term ‘train film’ will be used here instead of the broader one “railroad film”.

This paper addresses John Ford’s western epic The Iron Horse as an epitome of industrial progress, of alternating violence and romance in outdoor and indoor scenes, giving the “train film” an impetus and prominence which surfaces throughout the history of cinema until today. Indeed, train and locomotive imagery expresses modern man’s fascination with movement and speed, as the American filmmaker constantly experiments with the wide range of innovative visual and rhythmic effects which the subject matter allows, some of which can be traced back to early cinema.

I. The “train film” as a genre: imagination vs. reality

Spectator and traveller share the experience of being caught in the tension between imagination and reality. Nowhere is this more evident than in the form of The Iron Horse’s narrative, in which tropes such as fairground attractions, the pleasures of travel, and the excitement of adventures all rely on the cross-fertilization of the two contemporary cultural practices, train and movie both addressing the viewers’ imagination and arousing their emotions in unified experiences.

I.i. The on-screen train and the life of the imagination

The alternation of outdoor settings and indoor footage aboard a train carriage was first experimented by George Albert Smith in his one minute long The Kiss in the Tunnel (1899), a film using the new “phantom ride films” which privileged shots taken from the front of the

5 Fanny Kemble, a famous London actress, related her train journey from Liverpool to Manchester in 1830 in the following words: “When I closed my eyes this sensation of flying was quite delightful,” quoted in Wolfgang Schivelbusch, The Railway Journey: Trains and Travel in the 19th Century (Geschichte der Eisenbahnreise, 1977, trans. from German by Anselm Hollo, New York: Urizen Books, 1979), 131.


8 Schivelbusch, The Railway Journey. A useful source on the subject is also Joë Hamman’s Sur les pistes du Far West (Paris: Editeurs français réunis, 1961) relating his life in Montana and South Dakota in 1904 and his contribution to western films until his return to France in 1907, where he started a career as filmmaker. His work is a richly illustrated first-hand source.
train. Smith’s insertion of a kiss scene insisted on the darkness visible through the windows of a passenger car to create a cinema version of the passengers’ tunnel-crossing experience. Later the same year, James Banforth remade the short silent comedy film and its illicit kiss in a railway carriage by adding a shot of a steam train rushing into, and then out of a tunnel. The two versions were experiments in narrative continuity, using railway tracks and indoor carriages with shots edited in succession in order to increase the time of the film screening within a program of entertainment that also included songs, dance numbers and other forms of amusement.

The Kiss in the Tunnel supplied the spectator with the pleasures of the imagination, while also using some of the characteristics of other fairground entertainments, including the dark peep-show booth, the daring idea of a public screening of a “kiss” being liable to censorship. The spectators of this new form of entertainment also related to the screen through their new familiarity with Phantom Rides, enjoying the leap into an imaginary world which they provided. As Frank Gray notes concerning this kind of fairground attraction:

“the film camera was mounted in front of a train engine and its operator positioned the camera so that it faced forward. The operator then began to crank the camera in order to record the changing landscape as the engine moved forward.”

The Kiss in the Tunnel therefore used both a sensational romance inside the carriage and a spectacular entertainment in the landscape shots. These two characteristic features were to remain central in John Ford’s aesthetics and help characterize the construction of the American production, The Iron Horse. One may wonder how relevant it is to quote this early English film in a discussion of Ford’s epic western, but it will be argued that the parallel between English phantom rides and the American Hale’s Tours shows that it was common practice on both sides of the Atlantic to identify train and cinema experiences. Alternately, significant differences appear when the train is considered a mirror of the cinema and vice versa.

The World’s Fair of 1904 in Saint Louis, Missouri, offered the opportunity for Hale and Gifford to expose their motion picture attraction “Hale’s Tours”, also known as the “Pleasure Railway.” This hugely popular entertainment gave the passengers sitting in a motionless railroad car the illusion that they were on a real train due to the incorporation of motion picture shots from a moving train. Railway travel and cinema were closely

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10 The first on-screen kiss, actually a filmed scene from a Broadway play, was given in Thomas Edison’s 1896 Kiss which, according to Terry Ramsaye, “gave the screen censorship movement its start.” Terry Ramsaye, A Million and One Nights: A History of the Motion Picture (London: Franck Cass & Co., [1926][1964, 263.
12 A central event in Vincente Minnelli’s family melodrama Meet me in St. Louis (1944).
13 Raymond Fielding, “Hale’s Tours: ultra-realism in the pre-1910 Motion Picture,” in John L. Fell, ed., Film Before Griffith (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), 116-130. See also, Ramsaye, A Million and One Nights, 429: “It was an odd sort of sideshow arrangement, a kind of theatre. A replica of a railway coach [...] Inside, the seats also simulated the arrangement of a railway car. When the show started there was a clang of bells and the car apparently began to move. At the distant end in front of the audience a motion picture panorama of speeding scenery started. The car swayed on its rockers and wheels spun. There was a moderately successful illusion of travel.”
associated in this show: “the size of the screen” filling the open front, “the distance of the screen from the car, and the distance of the projector from the screen” are aspects of the entertainment that imitated the movie theatre’s basic principles, while these “were intended to provide an image which covered the entire field of vision of the car’s occupants and which was life size.”

The screen image claimed to be an authentic reproduction of the railway traveller’s views, but ironically, one’s view on a train was dependent on side-windows and – as in the case of European train compartments because corridors had been moved to one side of the carriage to avoid disturbance by the passage through the middle – only one side of the scenic landscape was visible. The difference between European and American passengers is worth keeping in mind, for on European trains, “the traveller is not, in actual fact, free to move around beyond the compartment that he occupies, while the American cars provide the traveller with a great freedom of movement.” Hale’s Tours capitalized on American travellers’ expectations of railway travel by changing their habits of moving freely in the carriage as if travelling on a European train and never leaving their seats. Thus it seems that the motion picture, “which had been photographed from the cowcatcher of a moving train”, provides an interesting case of cultural mediation between two different forms of entertainment – travelling on a train and sitting in a theatre watching a movie.

I. ii. Travelling as the essence of the train film

If the train was thus becoming part of cinema’s “apparatus”, train travelling had been offering a pleasant means of escaping from dreary everyday reality since the early beginnings of cinema. This seems to apply to another early Lumière film, Leaving Jerusalem by Railway (1896) which, contrary to the violent intrusion of the industrial world into the spectator’s viewing habits that occurs with Arrival of Express at Lyons, depicts a train leaving a station, thus carrying the spectator away from his seat into a foreign world. The camera was seated, so to speak, on the train, so that camera and train were united in this experimental early cinema film. Interestingly, rather than the pleasure of a ride at an uncanny speed through space, one is transported to a world which mirrors the exact reality of one’s ordinary space-time experience. This is an aspect of train-film entertainment which was emphasized by Hale’s Tours, in which viewers were actually provided with a realistic

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14 Fielding, “Hale’s Tours”, 121.
16 Ibid., 104.
17 Fielding, “Hale’s Tours”, 121.
18 In his eponymous screen adaptation of Stefan Zweig’s 1922 short story, Letter from an Unknown Woman (1946), Max Ophuls uses a similar apparatus: screens move swiftly as if on a movie screen behind the window of a motionless “carriage”, while food is provided to a romantic couple who are sitting in a Viennese nineteenth century coffee shop. The “Hale Tour” effect is inserted in the film to visualize the heroine’s (Joan Fontaine) highly emotional imaginary life as she tells Stefan about trips in the Middle East with her parents, trips which we know are forgeries. In parallel with her descriptions of places she has never actually visited, the window backdrop actually shows Hale Tour landscapes filming trips in distant countries such as Switzerland as if from a train window. In addition to the overlapping landscape travel images – the ones she describes and the ones we actually see on the window frame – an insert shows us how the owner changes the trip views in succession by pulling down separate screens, smoothly runs the show by pedalling on a bicycle, an echo of the manual source of smooth movement during the shooting and the projection of early films.
imitation of the physical sensations of travelling: “The illusion of the ride was to be heightened by the use of an unevenly laid track which would cause the car to sway and vibrate, thus suggesting a high rate speed.”

In *The Iron Horse*, the two different sources of entertainment – sitting while travelling – actually coexist within a single scene. During the race between the Union Pacific train and a solitary pony-express rider, Dave Brandon (George O’Brian), Indians appear in the establishing shot and it is understood that they are actually pursuing the hero and therefore racing with the train as well. Dave’s horse collapses under him, but he is able to catch up with the train and jump on its tail-end platform just in time. The camera intercuts between shots of the outdoor scene to shots of the inside of the carriage, framing the railway chief contractor’s daughter, Miriam Marsh (Madge Bellamy), who is watching the chase from her seat by the window. She is seen in profile, which makes the analogy between the train window and a film screen highly suggestive of a spectator in a movie theatre. Moreover, there is a slight vibration of the train window – alias screen – which materializes the illusion of speed experienced by the traveller as in Hale’s Tours. Miriam’s present time is that of a spectator enjoying a wild chase as pure entertainment, but it is also the present experience of speed which makes it possible for the train window – alias camera eye – to keep up with the Indian horsemen pursuing the pony-express rider. When she notices Dave, her former childhood admirer pictured in the opening sequence, he suddenly intrudes upon her privacy. She is distracted from her spectator’s excitement and compelled to hide by Dave, who warns her that she might be a target for the Indians’ rifle shots through the window pane. She retrieves a reality, her own danger, while her return to present reality is also paired off with an emotional crisis by the reminiscence of her childhood romance as they recognize each other. In addition to the spatial motif of the train window as screen or screen as train-window – i.e. movement on the screen – the present time of the subject is called to our attention. Thus the two times of fiction and non-fiction are collapsed, so that the fusion between the train and cinema not only relies on our perception of space but also of time, within the then much discussed new space-time dichotomy.

I. iii. Topicality and news items in train films

Press releases are another form of realism found in train films. Ford’s movie ends with a piece of news in the form of a “telegraphic message” sent to President Grant, on May 10, 1869, announcing the completion of the Pacific Railroad in four capital letters: D.O.N.E. This is the kind of news likely to appear on a newspaper headlines and as such recalls the press columns related to train news. The newspapers were wont to devote their columns to

19 Fielding, “Hale’s Tours”, 121.
20 This is known as Zeno's paradox: the time and space for the traveller’s experience is quite independent of the movement of the train in an altogether different space-time of its own: “Permanence is an illusion, ultimate reality is ceaseless change”, J. T. Fraser, *Time, The Familiar Stranger* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987) 255.
21 Albert Einstein published in 1905 his five volumes among which his study of mass and energy showed that time and space are separate but interdependent and that this interdependence is the fruit of the observer’s eye. This very brief reference is meant here to recall the general interest and divulgation of such questions as the theory of relativity in the 1900s. By welding train and camera in both filming and projecting, movement becomes a major source of interest of the 1900s.
frightening pieces of “train news” reporting on accidents and attacks and capitalising on another type of emotion that train life could cause. The topicality of accidents and emotion is found in series such as The Hazards of Helen (1915), as stated explicitly by the titles of some episodes like The Escape on the Fast Freight (episode 13) or The Wild Engine (episode 26).22 Train attacks combine spectacular attractions23 in key scenes as well as a narrative structure, often developed into episodes. Edwin S. Porter’s The Great Train Robbery (Edison, 1903) is a well-known case in point. Charles Musser writes that “Porter included one emblematic shot of the outlaw leader Barnes shooting his gun directly at the camera and audience”.24 The film historian adds that the shot was labelled “Realism” in the catalogue, and that this extra shot could be placed at either the beginning or the end of the film.25 Spectators of train films would therefore also expect scenes of violence and murder as well as narratives of intimacy and romance. Ford’s The Iron Horse includes Indians with just such scenes of attack and robbery and murder in three episodes involving Cheyenne Indians. A first attack is directed at the workers while they are working on the railway tracks. The men are seen busily hammering away until they are suddenly interrupted by Indian assailants. Rifles immediately replace the hammers, as the workers force the enemy to retreat, and then return to their hammering in a coolly, business-like manner. Two other Indian attacks are edited into the film so as to dramatize the otherwise dreary and repetitive chores. The first one is a train robbery: the rushing train is brought to a standstill by obstacles on the track, and looted during a burlesque scene of pointless destruction of goods. Help is called for by using the telegraph (an echo of The Great Train Robbery), but the attempt is a tragic failure as the young telegraphist is shot down. The second attack proves even more deadly, as the hostile Indians race around the besieged railroad men hiding under the train. Here, the film seems to address the anxiety of travellers who, rather than enjoying the sensation of “flying”, were aware of real dangers, which might come from the train itself and not only possible attacks by outlaws. As a railway traveller wrote in 1829: “It is really flying, and it is impossible to divest yourself of the notion of instant death to all upon the least accident happening.”26 In Ford’s scenario, victory is sought by escaping in order to seek help with a steam-engine “flying” away – and rushing back some time later with a rescue train filled more workers. The speed of the steam-engine is not only a means of rescuing the train from an attack, but is shown in such a way that it might cause an accident by its own excess of speed.

The general excitement of traveller and spectator alike can thus be seen to be fuelled by the common features of the experience of space-time which traveller and spectator might share in a “train film” and the tension between the life of the imagination and the

22 Press literature on train passengers being murdered on trains actually existed. Schivelbusch gives examples in Europe, like that of a famous murder of a solitary first class passenger on an English train in 1864. The same year, the British internationally known magazine Punch printed satirical caricatures showing “Travel Companions suspecting each other as potential Killers”. Similar examples are found in the American press. Schivelbusch, The Railway Journey, 84-92.
24 Musser, The Emergence of Cinema, 354.
25 Ibid., 352-354.
strong sense of reality, echoed by comments in the daily press. This idea can also be explored as a characteristic form of narrative with its aesthetics and historical concerns.

II. Train and camera on “parallel tracks”27

The parallel between travelling space-time and entertainment space-time is firmly rooted in the common qualities of both film and rail, which Schivelbusch recalls by quoting Britain’s famous scientist Newton: “A perfect road should be smooth, level, hard and straight.”28 The technical issue at stake in the world of railways depends largely upon the point of contact between wheel and rail. In similar fashion, cinema seems to be dependent on the smooth running of film on its spool or reel, with the crank as a form of mediation between the movement of a scene and the motion of the pictures created on the screen.

II.i. The smooth regularity of the machine

Of the four “Newtonian” qualities, smoothness is the most desirable one for a railway track. Trains may indeed have become a favourite topic because the smooth motion of the railway carriage and the smooth unravelling of the film were kindred technical worlds. The very irregularities in the illusion of train travelling mentioned above show a contrario that smoothness was a desired quality. A second “Newtonian” quality worth discussing is that the track ought to be straight, as shown by the English illustrations of the time, transforming the winding roads of stagecoach travels into arrow-like straightforwardness.29 In Ford’s film, the rail workers are expected to lay straight tracks, as underlined repeatedly by the shots of the building site (one actually facing the camera at a straight angle). Smoothness and straightness were essential for an English railway in order to save energy and time, even if this meant cutting passes through hills or digging tunnels. The American point of view was rather different: “the expense of avoiding a hill or valley, by a prolongation of the route, in a manner to maintain uniformity in its vertical direction, is less than that of cutting and filling.”30 The construction of twists and turns was described by the contemporaries as a characteristic of the American railroad, which can be seen as an adaptation to natural obstacles. In the dialogue of Ford’s film, the two opinions are opposed: Deroux (Fred Kohler) insists that the railway track should have a “loop” and bend into his territory by declaring that there is no straight pass in the mountain. On the other hand, Dave’s father had shown him a “pass” – i.e. a naturally straight way – that would make the imagined railroad straight, before he was murdered, so that we identify with Dave when he is told by Miriam “our money is turning low. Unless we can find a shorter cut than Smokey River we’re done.” She is implying that it is less expensive to trace a straight line than a circular one, a view that echoes the contemporary debate between different ways of dealing with the natural difficulties caused by the landscape.

Symbolically, the struggle between Dave and Deroux – who bribes Miriam’s fiancé and

29 Ibid.
head engineer Jesson (Cyril Chadwick) to kill Dave and deny the existence of a pass – is a significant episode in more than one way. The land speculator and usurper of Cheyenne identity, Deroux, who wants the trail to curve into his own lands, is not only a scheming capitalist for whom the railway is a means to bring business to his territory, but a villain attempting to deprive the railway of its highly symbolic qualities represented by its straight trajectory. The struggle also emblematises the moral allegory which the conflict illustrates: by telling the building contractor, Thomas Marsh (Will Walling), about the pass, Dave – who miraculously survives the attempt to murder him – is also telling his boss about building a “straight” railroad, and implicitly how to stick to “straight” morals. “Straight” is meant both literally and metaphorically in this episode, an interesting means of transforming the excitement of the adventure story into an American myth of moral values. On the contrary, in Picturesque Colorado (1911) a train is seen moving cautiously forward across a steep canyon in a railroad bend via a camera on another train behind.31 In this short film, it is the view of the train in a loop which is the source of entertainment.

II.ii. Class levelling in railways and movie theatres

Other characteristics common to the history of cinema and the history of railroads equally contribute to the scenario of The Iron Horse, among which the changes they brought to the awareness of social hierarchy. For example, Thomas Gray’s claim in 1821 that the “iron railway” is superior to other “methods of conveyance” addresses “every class of society”.32 The same argument is found in the advertising of moving pictures shown in fairground exhibits.33 Likewise, the association of the railway and moving pictures as popular entertainment was at the root of technological progress in the 1900 Paris Exposition Universelle. The elevated “moving walkway”, nicknamed “Rue de l’Avenir” (Street of the Future), completed by an elevated train, had three different conveyor belts, each of a different speed, which provided a popular entertainment for all classes of society. As Anne Friedberg has remarked, the French equivalent, the trottoir roulant, transported spectators through the exhibition grounds “as if they were goods on a conveyor belt.”34 Within the train-movies dialectics which is developed in this paper and its relation to John Ford’s The Iron Horse, “spectators” is a major keyword as it points to entertainment of a scopic kind from a moving point of observation, since the visitors – either walking or merely standing – were channelled along a linear and smooth flow from which they could not escape, and

31 Picturesque Colorado, Rex Motion Picture Co, 1911, 3 minutes, DVD 1: 1880-1907, Edison, Lumière, Méliès. The film is available in the 5 DVD collection The Movies Begin - A Treasury of Early Cinema-1894-1913 (2002) with Program Notes by Film Historian Charles Musser (Ed. KINO International K236), accessed in Paris Bibliothèque Nationale in 2013. Similar to the excitement of the railroad experience is 4000 feet up the mountain side in a bucket, which takes the viewer to the top of a mountain, and the use of a vehicle in The Garden of the Gods, filmed from the front seat, as in the Phantom Rides.
were being “mesmerized” by the surrounding sights, including open windows that enabled them to see inside people’s flats.

The same egalitarian promise of “scopic pleasure” is illustrated by the nickelodeons, which appeared in 1905 in Pittsburgh and two years later in Philadelphia and Chicago. The storefront theatre became the dominant site of the exhibition because of a growing audience base and low, five-cent admission fees. Continuous shows were organized from early in the morning to late at night to meet working hours and free time. As Vachel Lindsay wrote in 1915: “The photo-play penetrates in our land to the haunts of the wildest or the dullest.”

Similarly, The Iron Horse relies on a variety of social types in its representation of the ideally classless (though exclusively white) society which it addresses. For example, two groups of comic characters typify lower-class passengers (and spectators): the group of Irish workers singing as they hammer steadily at the rails, and the customers of Judge Haller’s (James Marcus) saloon. This carriage is known to the characters as “Hell on Wheels”, while the title of Judge refers to the court sessions Haller holds in his saloon, turning his establishment into a sort of law court. As to upper-class passengers (and spectators), their group is restricted in the film to Marsh, his daughter Miriam and his associates. However, in the last battle against the Cheyennes, the social spectrum includes Italians in the common rescue party, and other women such as Ruby (Gladys Hulotte), the “modern woman” who acts as a foil to the more self-controlled and demure Miriam.

Rather than social differences, therefore, Ford’s attempt to focus on the differences between social types contributes to the universal quality of the modes of entertainment which characterized the experience of modernity. Moving walkways were free rides which any citizen rich or poor might enjoy, and train and film were experiences similar to every class of society.

II.iii. Authenticity and The Iron Horse

Ford’s camera work pushes the train-cinema motif one degree further when the film provides useful views of the equipment of American railway cars; for example the reconstruction of furniture equipment with the use of stoves for heating. The sets for the scenes inside the train are all the more interesting as the shooting team lived aboard a train during film production. Indeed, most American trains were fitted with conveniences for long-distance travelling. Schivelbusch explains that the large riverboats had established a standard of comfort for long journeys which the trains adopted as their model. However, bad colds and everyday hardships is what Ford recalled, and these memories have little to do with the comfort of “a steamer on rails” as Pullman carriages were described: “Baths, both tub and shower, barbershops, manicures, lady’s maids, valet service, news tickers, 35

35 This American ideal differed from British or other European railways which preserved class distinctions by proposing four different classes in terms of carriage comfort. There were significant differences, as upper class travellers turned to reading in response to boredom, while lower-class carriages were spaces of more active participation in the joys of talk and other festive forms of revelling (Schivelbusch, The Railway Journey, 77-83).

36 Charles Musser, The Emergence of Cinema, 417-447.

libraries, current periodicals and hotel and railroad directories. As far as Ford’s train was concerned, “these were, in fact, Pullman carriages from the Barnes circus company, as the locomotives used for the concluding sequence of the Golden Spike ceremony were the original locomotives – the Jupiter (CPRR) and the UPR 116 – which met on May 10, 1869” to celebrate the “wedding of the rails” of the Union and Central Pacific Railroads at Promontory Summit, in Utah. “The company lived on the train, for a mess hall they erected a circus tent. Madge Bellamy, the film’s efficient, colourless leading lady was given a berth in the train’s observation and sitting room section.” As for Ford, who “elected to bunk with the extras,” making the film meant filming pioneers, and one had to live like the pioneers to make a proper film about them, a notion that calls to mind Vachel Lindsay, for whom with the advent of the movies “The possibility of showing the entire American population its own face in the Mirror Screen has at last come.”

The quest for not only an illusion of authenticity but an actual experience of past travelling conditions seems to have been one of Ford’s guiding principles for the reconstruction of the historical past, but among these the landscapes and natural surroundings were not overlooked, neither were emblematic characters. While the scenes depicting the cattle herd on its way to Cheyenne were shot on location (actually in New Mexico), the opening scene which introduces Abraham Lincoln (Charles Edward Bull) talking to Davy and Miriam, was shot in Springfield (Illinois). This scene actually illustrates Ford’s understanding of authenticity in a particular way: when several hundred sheep suddenly came into view, Ford decided to allow for some improvisation which added an authentic touch to a historical reconstruction with Lincoln. In another scene, an Old West character “who fired live ammunition around George O’Brien’s scrambling body” also illustrated the concern for authenticity, while Ford’s camera recording used a faithfully reconstructed train carriage for maximum veracity of both characters and setting.

The Iron Horse can thus be seen to address the common experience of traveller and spectator as a narrative form displaying smoothness and fluidity while sharing common references such as the development of visual pleasure in a modern space-time figure of energy and mass movement, technological progress and major historical landmarks.

III. From horsepower to the power of myth

As a reviewer of the film wrote in 1925: “no director has thought, until now, of

38 Schivelbusch, The Railway Journey, 115-117.
40 Kirby, Parallel Tracks, 212.
42 Ibid.
43 Lindsay, The Art of the Moving Picture, 57. For an assessment of the limits of the so-called melting-pot in Ford’s film, see Kathryn Kalinak, How the West Was Sung - Music in the Westerns of John Ford (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 34-38.
44 Eyman, Print the Legend, 86.
45 Ibid.
freighting his engine with an entire theme and setting it at full pace along the track to adventure’s end.”\(^\text{46}\) In an era of industrial expansion and belief in technological progress as the surest path to happiness, the engine is indeed the main protagonist of the film.

The near personification of the steam engine in \textit{The Iron Horse} is partly achieved by its dramatic competition with horses. Several early films include comic and dramatic scenes staging the competition between horses and trains in a close, interactive relationship. In a burlesque vaudeville tableau called \textit{Les Quatre cents farces du diable}, the skeleton of a horse harnessed to a train-coach is shown rearing up on its hind legs. As a result, the coachman of the phantom carriage collapses backwards, kicking his feet in the air. The coach has stalled and the passenger’s head and shoulders are seen sticking out from the window in protest. In addition to the burlesque farce, one can also read this skeleton horse as an image of the victory of train engines over horses as far as the topical subject at the time, locomotion, is concerned.\(^\text{47}\) Such an example of an early Meliès film echoes a more general “dystopic motif around the turn of the century [highlighting] the terrors of big-city traffic, particularly with respect to the hazards of the electric trolley” writes Ben Singer in an article with several illustrations from \textit{Life}, and one from \textit{New York World} (1897) called a “Horse Smashed Cable Car Window”: the engraving shows the terrified passengers of a trolley-car as the head of a horse smashes into their car window, with an effect which though claiming to be sensational realism, is also grotesque.\(^\text{48}\)

\section*{III.i. Horses vs locomotives}

The opening title to \textit{The Iron Horse} reads: “To the honour of and memory of George Stephenson, the Scottish engineer, and the men of every nationality who have followed in his footsteps since England led the way by opening the first railway in 1825.” Despite this homage to steam engineering, horses are still actively present in the film’s reconstruction of the past. Three scenes directly related to the film’s title, the oxymoronic “iron horse” – a term believed to have been coined by the Indians at the time – explicitly deal with the parallel between horse power as a traditional means of locomotion, and horsepower as steam-power, thus achieving a “commodification” of the “iron horse” emblem. In the first of these scenes, a steam-engine is stuck on its tracks on a steep slope: it has to be pushed by Chinese workers from behind and hauled by teams of horses in front. Film photographer George Schneiderman recalled:

\begin{quote}
Up in Truckee, there was so much snow that the engine froze and couldn’t be moved. [...] They attached fifty head of horses to the locomotive, but it still wouldn’t budge. Finally, Ford rigged up a dolly shot and tried to slide the camera past the engine rather than the other way around.\(^\text{49}\)
\end{quote}

The reversal improvised with the help of film technology allows the main theme – the


\(^\text{47}\) A 1906 French film, \textit{Dans les nuages, la chevauchée fantastique} by George Méliès. Malthète, \textit{Méliès}, 122, pl. 163. Quoting Méliès’s films is relevant inasmuch as these were distributed in the US at almost the same period as in France. More generally the distribution of French films has been discussed in detail by Richard Abel, \textit{The Red Rooster Scare – Making Cinema American, 1900-1910}, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).


\(^\text{49}\) Eyman, \textit{Print the Legend}, 86.
constant progress westward of the railway – to come through with great visual effect. The debate about the superiority of the steam-engine over the horse is briefly recalled in this heroic-comic sequence.

In the later sequence with the pony-express rider discussed above, “horse power” in its older and modern forms is depicted as the train speeds away and is caught up by the horseman. The scene celebrates a heroic figure of the American pioneering spirit, but it also tells the history of motive power, showing the horse as it

... raises and sinks its body at every alternate motion of the limbs”, literally ‘lifting’ its mass incessantly with a somewhat irregular hobbling – as illustrated decades earlier by the analysis of the horse’s movement in Eadweard Muybridge’s photographic study of horse movement – while “the locomotive engine rolls regularly and progressively along the smooth track of the way. 50

The concept of “motive power” which was, as if naturally, named “horse-power” – still in use today – is at the core of these scenes in Ford’s film. The fact that smoothness and evenness result in the intensified speed is also a major improvement, and the mediation of the wheel – which is sometimes shown in a quick close shot in the film – plays an important part in the apparatus. 51 In Ford’s film, Corporal Casey (J. Farrell McDonald) signals to the stoker that he must slow down in order to enable the rider and his horse to reach the platform, but the general impression is that the two are moving at the same speed. Interestingly, after Dave has jumped off his exhausted horse and climbed onto the train, the horse disappears altogether, which exemplifies the idea of progress as a change from natural to industrial motive power. 52

The third instance of a parallel between horse and steam-engine in The Iron Horse turns to the latter’s advantage when, during the second deadly Cheyenne train attack, Dave and Casey steal the locomotive and leave the battlefield to seek help. This time, the horse-riders are powerless in trying to keep up with the engine, and Deroux (now acting as a Cheyenne chief) is seen in a close shot as he worries about his defeat. The transfer of motive power from horse to engine is thus finally completed to the advantage of the latter, indicating these three scenes as a progressive leitmotiv for the film.

With its richly evocative title, The Iron Horse, the parallel between horsepower and the locomotive is dramatized as the contribution of the mechanized “horse-power” towards a single end: the building of the first transcontinental railroad and the dream of uninterrupted locomotion “from sea to sea”. For Lynne Kirby, it is a metaphor rather than an oxymoron, in the sense that the two words create the new concept of a machine with a friendly character, a neologism which “encouraged its acceptance in an age of mixed public sentiment about

51 C.F.D. Marshall, A Centenary History of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway, London, 1930, in Schivelbusch, The Railway Journey, 11, and an accompanying plate. There was no direct transfer of motive power to coal and steam by horses, but the transfer of horse movement to wheel is clearly part of the general transformation of motive power.
52 Moreover, such horsemanship belongs to the traditional world of circus acrobatics, and points to the previously mentioned early cinema “attractions”. On the concept of “attraction” and early film, see several papers in Wanda Srauven ed., The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006).
the monstrous intrusion of the railroad on the “virgin land”. The film carefully associates workers, horses, and the engine in a “friendly” community viewed through close medium shots. Yet there seems to be more to it than a dramatization of the technological transfer of locomotion from animal to machine, since the film is frequently referred to as an “epic western”, suggesting that the icon of the train is part and parcel of the western genre, as if it embodied the American Dream itself.

The overall structure of Charles Kenyon’s scenario for The Iron Horse relies on the interweaving of genres: the epic or action film, the western, melodrama and romance, and the reconstruction of past history. Far from jarring with one another, the variety of genres contributes to variety within a single picture, the picture of the foundation of the nation. The main plot, that of the historical building of the transcontinental railway, is interwoven with fictional subplots, mainly an “intimate photo-play” within a love triangle: Dave, Jesson and Miriam, and a “photo-play of action” focusing on the exploitation by the whites of the divisions between Indian tribes (the Cheyenne vs. the Pawnees). The cross-cutting between sequences borrowed from the comedy of manners and those of political tragedy creates a strong change of tone, which endows the film with constant tension, each genre depicting the tensions caused by rivalry, jealousy, ambition and egotism. One is reminded of Richard Dyer’s view that the western as a genre is a mix of several genres, which justifies its ambition as a form of art total addressing variegated audiences but also including different expressions of audience emotions.

The western as a genre claims to endorse the universality of myth.

III.ii. Ford’s epic western: the train film and National History

As we have seen, the train shared the literary tradition of the travel narrative with cinema from the first days of their union in the era of European Imperialism. It echoed Whitman’s celebration of the pioneer who, with the help of train technology, “interlinks all geography, all lands”. After World War I, cinema was the site of the re-examination of nationalism and culture which depended on train culture, just as the imperialist struggle for colonial power had. Thanks to extending railway networks, travelling had brought about a change in the scale of space which also appears in screen adaptations of novels.

In the building of the railway across the American continent, another specific trait to be remembered is its relation to nature. The wilderness is a key element in the film, as Ford’s choice of distant landscapes and cattle herds as metonymic icons of the American continent amply documents. Contrary to Europe, the mechanization of transportation was not perceived as the destruction of a traditional culture, as mentioned above, but as a means of creating a new civilization out of the uncharted wilderness. Hence the American perception

53 Kirby, Parallel Tracks, 201.
55 Friedberg, Window Shopping. That Hale and Gifford, the inventors of Hale’s Tours, may have seen Grimoin-Sanson’s Cinéorama at the 1900 Paris Exposition is a possibility which is documented by Fielding, “Hale’s Tours”, 118.
57 Kirby, Parallel Tracks, 220-228.
58 See the example from Ophuls’s Letter from an Unknown Woman, supra, note 18.
of “machinery and industry as forces that do not destroy nature but appear as a 'railway journey in the direction of nature.'”\textsuperscript{59} The train in the distance in \textit{Picturesque Colorado}, mentioned earlier, can also document such an interest in wilderness and landscape scenery as emblematic of the new civilization being conquered by the building of the transcontinental railroad.

The myth of the construction of the nation in \textit{The Iron Horse}, is rooted in a general conception of the railway as a metaphor for the pioneer's re-appropriation of nature within the encapsulating Adamic myth. The story of the building of the transcontinental railroad “engages a potent historical and ideological myth that enthusiastically links the story of the railroad with the story of America – a story of Manifest destiny, the mid-1840s doctrine that justified white American expansion and incorporation of Western lands” \textsuperscript{60} The presence of Abraham Lincoln at the beginning of the film and during the course of the narrative seems to confirm this symbolical significance.

William Fox considered the production of \textit{The Iron Horse} an act of rivalry with \textit{The Covered Wagon} released the previous year\textsuperscript{61} and a review of James Cruze's 1923 film directed by Clayton Hamilton gives weight to Ford’s epic narrative of the transcontinental railway crossing as a reply to Paramount’s \textit{The Covered Wagon}. The critic discusses the genre in the light of the “great drama” which “focuses attention on individuals”, but the epic “deals with the larger problem of whether or not thousands […] of people linked together by common allegiance to a communal ideal, shall achieve an undertaking which is of permanent importance to all subsequent mankind.”\textsuperscript{62} The film was acclaimed for the “communal struggle” and the “civilizing undertaking” it staged on a continental scale of “dauntless pioneers” who had started out westward in 1848 from what was to become Kansas City, to arrive safely in distant Oregon. The film shows “the long train of covered wagons”, and “we see this wagon-train trekking over illimitable prairies.” Mile-wide rivers, mountain ranges, and other elements of nature are listed, before the wagon-train ultimately reaches its goal, “doubling the map of the United States”. The spectators are implicitly and necessarily American, feeling “proud to be Americans.” The paper concludes on a eulogy of James Cruze who “was immune from conferences and independent of committees” in Hollywood, and the film's epic quality is not only due to its subject matter, but also to its “epic mood”. These remarks concerning Paramount’s epic western give Ford’s own achievement a multi-layered set of contextual echoes. His film works with similar ingredients, natural obstacles and a communal purpose, the construction of the railway constituting the central focus of most scenes. Hamilton describes the obstacles of the pioneers as “hostile savages” and from within, “disloyalties”, and says “we do not particularly care” whether the hero and the heroine get married in the end. Actually they stand on either side of the two locomotives and tracks, and once the Golden Spike has been hammered in place and the message sent to


\textsuperscript{60} Kirby, \textit{Parallel Tracks}, 199.

\textsuperscript{61} Richard Koszarski, \textit{An Evening’s Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 86. See also Eyman, \textit{Print the Legend}, 78.

the White House, they leave the frame to be seen no more. The subject of the film is thus emphasized as a travel narrative turned into an epic drama about “crossing”, as a possible modernizing of the biblical crossing of the Red Sea staged with universally admired skill by Cecil B. DeMille for his 1923 epic drama *Ten Commandments*, produced for Paramount the year before. Crossing can be understood as yet another narrative expression of movement – both on trains and within train films—and the experience of modern space-time.

It is therefore relevant to examine Ford’s film not only from a narrative point of view, but also from an aesthetic one, and Vachel Lindsay’s 1915 influential analysis of what a film should be provides philosophical context to my personal reflection on the subject.

**IV. Ford’s “cinematism”: movement as raw material in *The Iron Horse***

Vachel Lindsay’s aesthetic analysis of what a film should be explores the poetic concept he calls “splendor”, viewed as an essentially cinematic characteristic: “the human soul in action, that arrow with wings which is the flash of fire from the film”. He approaches this poetic concept through the prism of cultural features that define American identity: “crowd splendor” and “patriotic splendor.” *The Iron Horse* relies on shots of workers as crowds, huge cattle herds swimming across wide rivers, the American wilderness seen as the “Promised Land” prophesied by Lincoln – visions created through extreme long shots, depicting the impetus of natural forces on the move. These scenes seem to resonate with the motive power of the horses and the train engines, endowing them with expressiveness which both aestheticizes and reconstructs the past. That vision is the “Ford touch”, as illustrated by his above quoted impulsive decision to shoot a sequence with a flock of sheep in the opening sequence: “We’ve got to get this in the picture. Run out there and stop the sheep herder.” The intercutting with vignettes of stereotyped individuals, foregrounding characters struggling for their survival, turns them into a crowd energized by their common basic needs, hunger and poverty.

Lindsay’s attempt at defining the novelty of cinema as an art in its own right gives the concept of movement and modern space-time a central role. The very choice of the “iron horse” for a filmic object implies that the achievement of the railway is an epitome of an “inanimate thing”, transformed by cinema into a moving one. There are reflexive devices which allow for a mise-en-abyme of cinema as pure movement in *The Iron Horse*, as my previous discussion of the film within the film already suggested. Other telling examples can be found, as during the screening of Marsh and Jesson’s talk about finding a pass, it can be noticed through the windows in the background that the landscape is moving, suggesting that the characters are on the train. This is confirmed by the opposite use of another backdrop framed through the window of the carriage in the next sequence, on the same set, showing Deroux with Marsh. Because the shots inside Marsh’s office also frame the background window, people are now seen walking by in the street. The set which was “on wheels” is now part of the town; only movement in the background was necessary to suggest the difference. While Hale’s Tours entertainment described earlier imitated a railway journey, here the editing of a set with an upstage window indicates what is simultaneously going on indoors, as well as out of doors. We note the vibration of the wheels that impacts

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63 Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture*, 21.
64 Eyman, *Print the Legend*, 82.
their bodies, as the framed landscape slides by, behind the window, confirming the impression that the characters are, indeed, aboard a moving train. While this effect undeniably reinforces the realism of the sequence, the use of the set that displays both town life with people walking and rail travelling on wheels with landscape flying through the same window also draws attention to the art of the filmmaker who is addressing the potential cinéphile within each viewer.

_The Iron Horse_ offers further examples of his constant preoccupation with movement, more particularly with visual effects that draw our attention to the flow of cinematic energy in which he believed. The final encounter scene between Dave and Deroux uses a backdrop screen to set off a hand-to-hand combat in the foreground, once again as a film within a film. Dave first attempts to silence a sniper’s rifle shooting at the workers from a distant hut, and when he reaches it, appropriately confronts the sniper. Because the hut has no door at the back, the fighters are seen as dark silhouettes against a bright background, turning into suggestive shadows on a screen what is actually a climax in the plot. This sophisticated composition emphasizes the allegorical significance of the fight between good and evil. But when a close shot frames Deroux’s two-fingered hand, Dave realizes he is fighting his father’s murderer and kills him. Then, as Dave is seen standing motionless, expressing his grief, horsemen are seen riding at full gallop across the background space like pale shadows on a screen. The backlighting which first made Dave an ideal figure has shifted to a frontal lighting framing his deeply upset features, while the shadows are now used to inscribe his inner contemplation and reminiscence of his father’s past tragedy within the general present action, i.e. the battle outside the hut.

Such examples testify to the constant care brought into the creation of the general rhythm of the uniting scenes, as if they were a musical score. The presence on the set of musicians, among whom Danny Borzage, whose task was “to help the cast of _The Iron Horse_ get in the proper mood”,⁶⁵ provides yet another proof of Ford’s intention to transform the animated objects into a musical pantomime of sorts.⁶⁶

These details tend to invite the viewer to approach the film from a purely cinematic point of view, rhythm and framing becoming the essence of cinema itself. The regular repetition of the sound of hammering, beating in unison, is easily imagined thanks to close shots which frame the heads and shoulders of the workers who seem to performing a dance, thus reinforcing the film narrative’s epic dimension through rhythm. All this turns into diegetic music, after a song, “Drill ye terriers”, appears during a title and is appropriated by the workers themselves in a close-up.⁶⁷ The song epitomizes the rhythm of the film and the general acceleration of movement which gradually increases the tension of the action. The dialogues themselves help to express the desperate need to win the competition which the workers share. Short verbal jousts are indicated in the titles between workers employed by the Union Pacific company as they quarrel over the speed of track-laying. As illustrated by the following extracts, the dialogue indicates class and ethnic differences:

Casey to Slattery: Hurry up with yer crawling shovelers; me min are stumbling over thim.

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⁶⁵ Eyman, _Print the Legend_, 90.
⁶⁷ See Kalinak, _How the West Was Sung_, 23-48.
Slattery: “Is that so! Listen—I slowed them up a-purpose so’s we wouldn’t be leavin’ ye behind” [...] 

Engine driver to Casey: “Why don’t you Iatalians quit loafing and lay some tracks?”

The Irishman Casey: “You sitting in a cab!”

The editing also contributes to the rhythm of the film: for example, the steady acceleration of the workers (montage editing\(^{68}\)) reaches its climax in the very last moments of the film, when the two groups of workers hasten the rhythm by hammering faster and faster. They do so of their own accord, illustrating the power of freedom in a system based on competition. This acceleration actually contributes to a series of devices that make the film progress from diversity to unity, dramatizing the general theme of union and political reconciliation by the semantics of marriage – Dave/Miriam, but also “the wedding of the rails”, i.e. the driving in of the Golden Spike which seals the nation’s union.

Moreover, the screening of mass movement makes Ford’s film even more remarkable. His establishing shot on extreme long shots of distant valleys and equally distant mountains and hills recurs several times as a space needing to be filled in. While these views emphasize the distance the railway is yet to cover, their length and dramatic impact increase as the film progresses. The sequences showing the attacking Cheyenne warriors who race down hilltops and along the rivers that reflect their image, or cattle swimming across the river are rendered more effective due to the editing of the two in succession, while the volumes of the warriors’ tribe and the cattle herd invade the empty space of the hills and the river. Deliberate lengthening of the duration of each shot actually ends up by slowing down the tempo of the film, while broadening its space and prolonging the time the spectators spend attending these scenes. The contrast with the speed and crowding of other scenes is all the more striking.

From a cinematic point of view, the frame becomes more and more crowded, in resonance with the time when the settlers kept moving from North Platte to the new town of Cheyenne. The screen is increasingly packed with people running from one point of the frame to another, and the same effect is created with even greater impact when the cattle is stampeded towards the irresolute workers who have to climb upon the train to avoid being crushed. The train has by then become part and parcel of the characters’ lives, in a way which was to be commodified as a common-place expression of human struggles for power and freedom.\(^{69}\) The general effect of these shots is the creation of a sort of abstract movement animating the screen surface. Figurative conventions disappear in a general commotion which celebrates cinema as pure movement.

**General conclusion**

If the steam engine in *The Iron Horse* is a privileged theme for the camera and its “moving pictures”, the filmmaker himself seems to confirm Vachel Lindsay’s early dream of

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\(^{69}\) See for example Cecil B DeMille’s sound film *Union Pacific* ten years later, which could be discussed as a remake, if not a pastiche of Ford’s film, when silent cinema was by then forgotten by audiences. The train also plays a significant role in some of Hitchcock’s major films, and it also has a central role in the dramatic screening of Cukor’s 1955 *Bhowani Junction*, yet another film where the train is an epitome of a struggle for national unity.
“magicians” who would “derive strange new pulse-beats from the veins of the earth, from the sap of the trees”\footnote{Lindsay, The Art of the Moving Picture, 175.} by capturing, in this mythic “train film”, the essence of movement. As Eyman writes: “Ford created his first masterpiece, and staked out his territory as America’s tribal poet”.\footnote{Eyman, Print the Legend, 90.}

This analysis has sought to underline that as a 1924 work of art *The Iron Horse* achieved great complexity of expression while seemingly focusing on a mere machine. The narrative uses material from the national history of the United States, selecting a highly significant episode during which the excitement of competition achieves a dream of successful Reconstruction after the tragedy of the Civil War. It also includes a wealth of human types and highly differentiated plots, though they are all concerned with a single task and ambition, the building of the transcontinental railway. In so doing, the film captures the excitement of speed and technological progress as well as the predominant presence of the wilderness. In an age when trains are now so common as to have become part of our daily routine, the viewing of this film draws our attention to a fragment of the past when steam engines embodied an experience of the imagination and of reality which cinema has been able to retain on its own ever since, but which it originally owed to the world of trains, steam engines, and travelling at great speed across the countryside. It could indeed be hypothesized that without trains, the history of cinema would be sorely lacking a major figure in its unique achievement as a work or art, i.e. the expression of movement and modern space-time.