

“Putting the Show Over”: Fade-In Prologues as Border Crossing in the Reception Space of 1920s American Film Exhibition

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Keaton’s Projectionist over the Border

This article will focus on a peculiar practice of US film theatrical exhibition, particularly active in the years 1919–1926, the so-called “fade-in prologue.” It will argue that such theatrical presentations of films, aiming to seamlessly, but theatrically, guide the audience into Hollywood film worlds, present evidence of a non-illusionistic, active mode of spectatorship well into the early years of Hollywood’s classicism¹ – a mode of spectacular address to the audience that plays upon dramatically materializing on stage the diegetic border between films and spectators to better cross it, revealing film as an illusion both flimsily distant and theatrically present. As in one of the most quoted and analysed sequences in film history, the projectionist’s dream in Buster Keaton’s 1924 *Sherlock Junior*,² a sequence where the theatrical logic of vaudeville interruptions comes to clash with the classical film’s aesthetic of narrative integration,³ fade-in prologues in the 1920s dramatize the tension between illusionistic, classical filmmaking and the demands for a more vaudeville, theatre-based and self-reflexive spectatorship that aims to take its audience in on the joke played.

Keaton’s film, and the projectionist’s sequence in particular, remains an active reference for film history, often analysed as part of a double tradition: part “behind-the-screen” movie, and part “rube” film. As a “movie about a movie,”⁴ it demystifies filmmaking, by showing Keaton’s character caught in a

¹ D. Bordwell, J. Staiger and K. Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Production to 1960*, London: Routledge, 1995.

² See A. Horton, ed. *Buster Keaton’s Sherlock Jr.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, for a range of critical approaches to the film.

³ H. Jenkins, “‘This Fellow Keaton Seems to Be the Whole Show’: Buster Keaton, Interrupted Performance, and the Vaudeville Aesthetic,” in A. Horton, (ed.), *Buster Keaton’s Sherlock Jr.*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 29–66.

⁴ C. Ames, *Movies About the Movies: Hollywood Reflected*, Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997.

frenzy of editing that has him “jump” from one space to another without warning – a tongue-in-cheek play on the operations of editing that classical filmmaking had sought to render all but invisible. Yet typically for a “metafilm”⁵ Keaton’s film does not just debunk Hollywood illusion-making by laying bare its mechanics, but it also, and conversely, stays within the conventions of Hollywood “bunk” by having the hero, in the end, win the girl—with help, it should be noted, of the very hokum love-scene, complete with happy family life, being played out on the screen under his perplexed eyes as part of the *Hearts and Pearls* serial. Is the film world, the sequence suggests, real or fake? Life-lesson or mirage? The answer suggested here, paradoxically (but in line with other “behind the screen” movies), is *neither*, precisely because it is *both*: caught in the artifice, the audience can have its cake (the illusion) and eat it too (the self-reflexivity).

Keaton’s film is also, as Thomas Elsaesser has shown, part of the “rube” film tradition – films from the early years of cinema where typically unsophisticated characters, falling prey, as Keaton’s character does in his dreams, to the realistic illusion of cinema, seek then to intervene in the film fiction, often to comical effect.⁶ As he argues, these films represent a disciplining of audiences that happens in the transition years 1900–1910: the “primitives” that have not yet learnt the correct code of distanciation from the narration effect are duly chastised by being mocked by those (us?) who have mastered the new code. “Rube” films, indeed, may have become far less frequent in subsequent decades, suggesting that such disciplining of audiences is an accomplished fact by the establishment of classical modes of storytelling in Hollywood in 1917. Yet, as a trope of reception discourse, the image of the “rube” remains, at least throughout the 1920s, a classic of *publicity* texts, and, beyond, a constant of *fan* discourses, marking the difference between “naïve” spectators and those “in the know” – those who can navigate the specific kind of distanced fascination that Hollywood films demand for maximum engagement, and the simpler ones, whether too old or too young, too emotional or too “primitive,” who will be “taken in” by the increasing illusionism of film fictions. The “rube” trope, thus, marks a continuously evolving frontier straddling spell-binding fascination and sophisticated incredulity, with modern audiences continuously defining themselves in opposition to fictional “other” more “naïve” ones, whether past audiences – as in the myth of the “train-effect” decisively debunked by Stephen Bottomore⁷ (1999) – or more contemporary but exotic film-goers in distant lands and cultures (as in numerous tales brought back by travelogue filmmakers). Keaton’s crossing into the diegetic world, thus, exhibits this perilous balancing act common in classical Hollywood spectatorship: the projectionist is a “rube,” mistaking the film-fancy for reality—but in the film, this is couched in the more sophisticated, 1924 language of irony, where the “mistake” is relegated to a dream sequence.

There is, I would like to suggest in this essay, a third tradition in this American silent film culture that plays so openly and dexterously with the fiction/reality border and that is referenced by this sequence: the theatrical practice of the fade-in prologue. In *Sherlock Junior* this is revealed by the very wilfulness apparent in the staging of Keaton crossing the diegetic frontier as a series of *deliberate* steps, from the projection booth, down the centre aisle, to the front seat, then over the head of the pianist, and finally across the proscenium stage. The sequence, in other words, shows the boundary between film and fiction as more than just a limit (a flimsy screen), as a *space* that extends from the diegetic film world to at least the projection booth (and indeed beyond, into the character’s most intimate dreams).

⁵ M. Cerisuelo, *Hollywood à l'écran: essai de poétique historique des films: l'exemple des métafilms américains*, Paris: Presse de la Sorbonne-Nouvelle, 2000.

⁶ T. Elsaesser, “Discipline through Diegesis: The Rube Film between ‘Attractions’ and ‘Narrative Integration,’” in W. Strauven (ed.), *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006, 205–225.

⁷ S. Bottomore, “The Panicking Audience? Early Cinema and the ‘Train Effect,’” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 19 (2), 1999, 177–216.

The deliberate staging thus points to the *physical* nature of film's reception space – the space that needs to be crossed if the audience, dreaming or not, is to engage with the film fiction. What this suggests is that illusion-making takes place not just in the Hollywood studio, but also at the point of reception, during the exhibition of the film, in the *material* organization of a theatre space that operates as a *continuum* between film and audience. The space the Keaton character crosses, in other words, is more than the mere physical space of the theatre, although it is also that. It is already a space inhabited by fiction generated from both sides, from the film world and from his own fancy. And it is this inscription of film fictional space within theatre space in the culture of 1920s reception that I would like to analyse here, as an example of the “diegetic space” that Thomas Elsaesser has proposed as the key concept of cinema studies (2006).⁸

Perverse Engagements with Classical Fictions

Such inscription of film space within theatre space has been analysed before in the exhibition of early silent films, remarkably in relation to the years of the first cinema of attractions, a cinema where film text meant little without its *experience* in a theatre, as Miriam Hansen has demonstrated,⁹ and where film and theatre spaces were not “segregated.” The models developed in much recent work on film spectatorship that has focused upon early cinema have been put to exciting use in the analysis of film spectatorship in our own age of the spectacle-driven, attraction-loaded blockbuster and remote- (computer-) controlled DVD (streaming) navigation of films, what Richard Grusin calls a “cinema of interactions” that would “return” us to the pre-classical cinema of attractions.¹⁰ Yet this renewal of the discourses of spectatorship has been kept at arm's length from classical cinema. Worse, it is often constructed, and explicitly so, as *anti-classical* Hollywood, with Hollywood spectatorship being equated with a “discipline of silence, spellbound passivity, and perceptual isolation.”¹¹ In this way, classical Hollywood spectatorship has become, in recent scholarship, a parenthesis, an unwelcome, and increasingly unknowable, 80-year hiatus. *Before 1917* and *after 1970*, audiences are modelled as active and participatory, the cinema of attraction is analysed as *also* a cinema of interactions, screen space and theatre space are *not* segregated. *During* the Hollywood classical period, audiences are invariably prisoners of the gaze apparatus: they are inscribed in narration, ideologically sutured into the film, isolated in the dark of the auditorium, spellbound—with the negative, passive connotation of the term being emphasized. Attempting to strike the right balance between the requirements of classical narrative integration and the remnants of vaudeville in the programme of many movie houses in the 1920s, Rick Altman describes the effort to provide standardized music for silent films in the 1920s as “the silencing of audiences”¹² – especially when compared with the rich intermediality of early cinema practices in the 1900s. Yet he must also note that many practices such as the use of popular songs or audience participation did not disappear during the 1920s, but were “shunt[ed] to specific genres and

⁸ Elsaesser, “Discipline through Diegesis.”

⁹ M. Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*, Cambridge, MA, London: Harvard University Press, 1991.

¹⁰ R. Grusin, “DVDs, Video Games and the Cinema of Interactions,” in J. Lyons and J. Plunkett (eds), *Multimedia Histories: From the Magic Lantern to the Internet*, Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007, 209–221.

¹¹ M. Hansen, “Early Cinema, Late Cinema: Transformations of the Public Sphere,” in L. Williams (ed.), *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995, 134–154: 139.

¹² R. Altman, *Silent Film Sound*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, 280.

to designated portions of the new program that was developing as a compromise strategy."¹³

In 1999, however, Janet Staiger argued for a bolder direction in reception studies, one based on "the proposition that the entire history of cinema in every period (and likely every place) witnesses several modes of cinematic address, several modes of exhibition, and several modes of reception."¹⁴ Such studies, she claims, would start by recognizing that "it is not at all clear [...] that the conditions of exhibition for the classical narrative cinema are uniformly environments to promote a voyeurist cinema, an absorption into an illusion, and a 'static,' passive spectator."¹⁵ In line with other historical case-studies of reception that support Staiger's hypothesis of "perverse" modes of spectatorship¹⁶ (notably Carbine 1990¹⁷ or Debauche 1999¹⁸), and in the search for what Ian Breakwell, introducing a collection of testimonies of 1940s-1960s cinemagoers, calls the "uncanny interplay between screen image and real-time events in the auditorium and in the world beyond the muffled doors,"¹⁹ this essay would like to offer one limited example of what a configuration of a *non*-voyeuristic, *non*-passive reception might look like in the middle of 1920s theatre exhibition in the US – a practice that, as Staiger suggests, offers a more active possibility of audience engagement with film fictions – a self-reflexive mode of spectatorship very much active even in the first decade of Hollywood classicism in which audiences, like Keaton's projectionist character, are invited to experience reception space as a *continuum* between theatre and film space: the practice of on-stage, "fade-in" prologues.²⁰

Border-crossing at the Theatre, a Key to a Coherent Theory of Silent Film Pleasures

The rich and colourful history of theatrical practices in US movie houses of the 1920s has, of course, been recognized before, most notably in Ben Hall's study of motion picture palaces and their exhibition practices.²¹ Stage presentation acts, their grandiose excesses and their integration within exotic big palace architecture, along with the commercial infrastructures that are developed in the late 1920s to allow more theatres to offer on-stage entertainment of a diverse nature before, or after the film, are profusely studied and illustrated in his seminal study of 1920s big palace exhibition practices. Richard Koszarski, in his authoritative and wide-ranging introduction to 1920s Hollywood cinema and film

¹³ Ibid., 388.

¹⁴ J. Staiger, "Modes of Reception," in Gaudreault, A., G. Lacasse and I. Raynauld (eds), *Le cinéma en histoire: Institutions cinématographiques, réception filmique et reconstitution historique*, Paris: Méridien-Klincksieck, 1999, 306-324: 315.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ J. Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception*, New York and London: New York University Press, 2000.

¹⁷ M. Carbine (1990), "The Finest Outside the Loop: Motion Picture Exhibition in Chicago's Black Metropolis, 1905–1928," *Camera Obscura*, 23, reprinted in Abel, R. (ed.), *Silent Film*, London: Athlone Press, 1996, 234–262.

¹⁸ L. M. Debauche, "Reminiscences of the Past, Conditions of the Present: At the Movies in Milwaukee in 1918," in M. Stokes and R. Maltby (eds), *American Movie Audiences: from the turn of the century to the early sound era*, London: British Film Institute, 1999, 129–143.

¹⁹ I. Breakwell and P. Hammond (eds), *Seeing in the Dark: A Compendium of Cinemagoing*, London: Serpent's Tail, 1990, 8.

²⁰ To be clear, Keaton's film does not offer an example of an on-stage prologue (and no film, to my knowledge, offers such an example, though on-stage entertainment before the film of the Fanchon and Marco "variety" type is profusely illustrated in *Footlight Parade* (Lloyd Bacon 1933). Keaton's film, however, suggests that the perception of reception space as a continuum between fiction and reality is an active possibility in the 1920s. In this activation, fade-in prologues are obvious historical participants.

²¹ B. M. Hall, *The Best Remaining Seats: The Story of the Golden Age of the Movie Palace*, New York: Bramhall House, 1961.

culture, notes the disruptive potential of such stage presentations, with famous examples of film premières where the film is shown almost as an afterthought, after several hours of rich, multi-sensory, and not necessarily coherent on-stage shows.²² Indeed, even when recognizing the grandiose specificity of US film reception in the 1920s, film history has, by and large, struggled to reconstruct some sort of coherence in the 1920s context. Koszarski, for instance, devotes an entire chapter to colourful exhibition techniques in the 1920s, a sign of their importance in understanding the pleasures of classical cinema. Yet he also reacts to the mutilations of films at the hands of enterprising showmen (from accelerated projection speeds to unwarranted cuts to fit into the evening programme) by wondering if “even the most nostalgic viewer [would] wish to exchange current viewing conditions for those of the silent era.”²³ At best, as is shown in the detailed work of Phil Wagner on the presentation acts of Fanchon and Marco,²⁴ the theatrical component of the show is analysed in its relationship to the larger 1920s culture but, as far as film is concerned, as a *separate* discourse, essentially unrelated to the films shown. The question of the understanding of 1920s cinema pleasures, thus, remains largely unanswered, and the impact of exhibitors’ *theatrical* efforts on the reception of films largely untested, leaving historians who rely on film texts only with a meagre understanding of what pleasures audiences could take from silent film shows in which film was but one component of the whole programme. And yet this is precisely the issue that Keaton’s film suggests should be raised: the tantalizing possibility that film reception, well into the classical period of the 1920s, happens in a space in which audiences should be understood not just as (passive) viewers of film, but as active users playfully engaged with fiction film *as fiction and as visual artefact* through the self-reflexive co-construction of the theatre space as diegetic space – a space where any fictional border comes to be dissolved, crossed, and crisscrossed.

Fade-in Prologues: Leading the Audience into Fictional Worlds

Though possibly limited (a 1922 poll by the exhibitors’ magazine *Motion Picture News* estimates that a mere 3% of movie houses in the US staged prologues – and not just fade-in ones – on a regular basis),²⁵ the practice of prologues remains important as it opens the door to an understanding of the *culture* behind film presentations that, in exhibition discourses at least, were popular until the late 1920s when Vitaphone and other synchronized sound shorts replaced most stage presentations.²⁶ In their columns advising exhibitors, trade magazines such as *Motion Picture News*, *The Exhibitors’ Herald* and *Film Daily*, offer regular examples of the practice, emulations of the larger New York or Los Angeles shows (staged by showmen Sid Grauman or Roxy Rothapfel), often in much smaller movie houses, with all the problems inherent in adapting expensive, big-house prologue ideas to small, budget-tight movie houses, far away from Los Angeles or New York.²⁷ Clearly, and in spite of the costs involved and the frequent criticisms directed against them, stage prologues to films remain a “best practice” of theatre management, a horizon to be emulated by enterprising showmen around the country, and an integral

²² R. Koszarski, *History of The American Cinema: T. 3, An Evening’s Entertainment, the Age of the Silent Feature Picture*, New York: Charles Scriber’s Sons, 1990, 56–65.

²³ *Ibid.*, 61.

²⁴ P. Wagner, “‘An America Not Quite Mechanized’: Fanchon and Marco, Inc. Perform Modernity,” *Film History* 23 (3), 2011, 251-67.

²⁵ Poll published in *Motion Picture News*, November-December 1922, 26 (21–25). The poll was jointly conducted with the magazine, Columbia University, and the Babson Statistical Organization, on a generous sample of 10,000 (out of an estimated total of 16,000) theatre managers, representing large and small cinemas around the country.

²⁶ R. Koszarski, “Laughter, Music and Tragedy at the New York Pathé Studio,” *Film History* 14 (1), 2002, 32-9.

²⁷ See, for instance J. Harrower, “Small Town Houses,” *The Film Daily* 38 (55), 1926, 26.

part of the 1920s understanding of film reception. As such, fade-in prologues, a sub-category of prologues staged in the 1920s (although the difference between the two is not always clear in 1920s exhibition discourse),²⁸ are useful less as a historically unconvincing attempt to “pin the viewer down”²⁹ or reconstruct concrete contexts of film shows, than as an example of discursive practice that provides “a sense of what the historical prospects were for viewing at a given time by illuminating the meanings made available within that moment.”³⁰

The importance of fade-in prologues to our reconstruction of the pleasures of cinema lies, therefore, in the fact that, as in Keaton’s dreaming navigation of the fiction-reality border, they are instigated first in order to “ease” the theatre audience into the diegetic world of the film. A positive review, in the *Exhibitors’ Herald* (April 1921), makes this precise point when describing the prologue staged for *Bob Hampton of Placer* (Marshall Neilan 1921):

The setting would consist chiefly of a backdrop painted to represent the Bad Lands in the style of the famous Frederick Remington backgrounds. A band of Indians, in war paint, occupy the stage. The band indulges in various Indian sports, an Indian wrestling match, or a war dance could be utilized. Throughout the action, however, one of the band stands statuesque in the pose of a sentinel, eyes shaded and his gaze directed steadily at a promontory in the background. [...] At a grunted command from the leader, the Indians hastily gather up their gear that is lying on the ground and exit in single file on a dog trot with a break into the picture before the stage is emptied.³¹

Colourful and picturesque, this prologue may also be diegetically motivated. The novel which the film adapted, Randall Parrish’s 1907 *Bob Hampton of Placer*, does indeed open with a battle between Sioux Indians and sixteen US Army soldiers. The transition, “before the stage is emptied,” is a smooth journey through fictional spaces, with characters actually managing the process Keaton’s character could only dream of. Surprisingly but possibly thrillingly for a film about Custer’s “Last Stand,” the audience is here positioned on the Indian side, the representation of which borrows its imagery from the most legitimate visual tradition.

The positioning of the audience as fiction-ready is more explicitly what the manager of the Beldorf Theater in Independence (Kansas) has in mind for this prologue to D. W. Griffith’s *Way Down East* (1920):

[Manager Wagoner] used a house, painted a canvas with a window cut in, showing a drawn shade. This occupied the side of the stage, while a big back drop represented a rural setting, with a bunch of real corn shocks arranged at the left. In the forefront, an old well and wooden bucket completed the set. Seated near the well a man in overalls shucked

²⁸ For the sake of clarity, I have restricted myself to sources that explicitly deal with the fade-in prologue. By 1927 four groups of pre-show entertainment could be distinguished: short silent films preceding the feature, an atmospheric prologue, a variety prologue, and short films with synchronized sound, such as Vitaphone shorts. See P. J. Scheuer, “Prologue Rivalry is Keen,” *Los Angeles Times*, 20 November 1927. This essay is concerned with the second type, which, as Scheuer indicates, was pioneered by Sid Grauman in 1918 in his Million Dollar theatre in Los Angeles.

²⁹ B. Klinger, “Film History Terminable and Interminable: Recovering the Past in Reception Studies,” *Screen* 38 (2), 1997, 107–128: 114.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Exhibitors’ Herald*, April 1921.

corn, while a girl in country attire stood at the churn. Another girl entered from the house and rang a big farm bell, then two more farmers came from out of the cornfield. All “washed up” at the bowl beside the house, when one girl entered the house and lighted an oil lamp on the kitchen table, so that its rays shone through. Then all went inside and sat down to supper. At this point other lights were dimmed and not a word spoken, the picture cut in at the dimming, creating a pleasant atmosphere.³²

Reminiscent of the tradition of “tableaux vivants” active in nineteenth century museology³³ and evocative of both the rural atmosphere of the then well-known melodrama and its stage version, this prologue also shows a remarkable effort to provide a seamless transition into the film: both a sensory transition (“the picture cut in at the dimming”), and a diegetic one, as its representation of the winding-down of the day points to the first shots of the film where Anna and her mother are shown sitting in the evening light. It could also echo a later scene in the film and function as a delicate and distanced preview of the first dinner scene at Bartlett Farm, where the bucolic atmosphere is thrown in jeopardy as Anna meets the Squire again. Beyond these references to the film, the echo further points to a more general positioning of the audience as fiction-ready, offering, as it does, a representation of the “story-telling” moment: just like the farming family “washed up” at the end of their day, ready to share anecdotes around the dinner table. In all of these senses, such prologues bridge the gap between film and audience, with a suggestion of further potential. Modern copies of the film open with a flurry of moralistic intertitles in which Griffith situates his story within what he presents as a millennial, moral fight to make men practise monogamy – a moral position clearly seeking to establish some sort of common ground with the audience. With its emphasis on dimming the lights and transitioning into the picture, this description of prologue further suggests that Manager Wagoner of the Beldorf may have done away with such intertitles and “cut in” the film to transition with his stage view of rural domestic peace – thus establishing a common, fictive ground with the film’s audience through an appealing dramatic evocation, rather than a moralising discourse.

Spoilers and Classical Narration

To lead the audience into the film, prologues point out plot elements that will be relevant to the film experience, in effect, offering a pre-mediation of the narrative, in ways more directly relevant to the film experience than the “atmospheric” example used for *Way Down East*. In a prologue described as being used at three key theatres in Washington, DC, in 1919, for the Emile Chautard film, *The Mystery of the Yellow Room*, the audience is treated to a didactic prologue that tells it in no uncertain terms where to look in the film for narrative clues, and what to watch for in this upcoming mystery: light, cat, old lady, long hand.

Before the picture is flashed on the screen, the rising curtains reveal, in the centre of the

³² “Prologue in Pantomime on Way Down East,” *Motion Picture News*, 29 July 1922. According to the AFI Catalog this is not the prologue that was staged as part of the road show release of the movie and in some performances of which Lilian Gish appeared. “Way Down East,” AFI Catalog, <https://catalog.afi.com/Film/18291-WAY-DOWNEAST?sid=e6a32f51-5efc-4e79-93ac-dcd69e69a713&sr=12.113546&cp=1&pos=0>, accessed 29 November 2020.

³³ A. Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

stage, the mysterious "Yellow Room" with the barred window at one side. The lights are subdued, an air of mystery pervades the entire scene. A green hued spot light discloses, in an aperture at one side, the cat, whose lingering "m-e-o-w" precedes important action in the film story. The green light fades, to show at the other side, in an aperture, the mysterious old woman who hovers near the castle containing the "Yellow Room," always near when trouble occurs. She predicts evil in her muttering voice. [...] In the dim light a skulking figure is seen. As the dim light sweeps back and forth across the stage, the figure each time seen is nearer the "Yellow Room." A long hand reaches for the door knob. Then flashes on the screen the scene from the film of the long hand and the clutching hand of the mysterious assailant. He seizes the girl; she screams, draws back, secures a revolver and fires. The "kick" comes from a real scream and a revolver shot behind the screen, timed with the film. The picture follows in its entirety.³⁴

The suspenseful scene will thus be seen twice in the same evening: once on stage, with added sound effect, once in the film, in a logic that harks back to *The Great Train Robbery* of 1903 and the shot of bandit Barnes shooting at the audience—the logic of an attraction that can be displayed for its own power. An added kick to this prologue, it should be noted, may also come from the fact that the audience will recognize a recent winner of a local beauty contest as the actress playing "the girl."³⁵

Do such prologues enhance the narrative experience of the film, or do they give too much away? In 1921, the *Exhibitors' Herald*, a magazine catering for theatre managers around the country, offers its professional advice by suggesting four different types of prologues that can be used in all movie houses, with the Marshall Neilan movie about General Custer, *Bob Hampton of Placer*, as their example. The fourth type is the most spectacular, and, to us, the most un-classical:

For the spectacular prologue the closing scenes of the production provide the basis for one which should bring audiences out of their seats. The setting of General Custer's headquarters should be used with the bookshelves and entire back wall painted on a transparency. The dialogue should be based upon Bob Hampton's discovery of the real perpetrators of the murder which has resulted in his dismissal from the army and his plea to be permitted to ride with his old company in the campaign which is just about to start against Sitting Bull. General Custer gives his consent and the entire party exits to endorse for the last campaign, as the lights in back of the transparency disclose a tableau based upon the famous painting of "Custer's Last Stand." [...] As [Custer] falls, the entire stage should be darkened and a spotlight play on the flag waving in the breeze of an electric fan.³⁶

While the entire plot of the film revolves in fact around *not* knowing who killed the hero's father (for most of the film, the hero believes that the father of the girl he loves killed his own father, thus prohibiting their love), the magazine suggests basing "the dialogue ... upon Bob Hampton's discovery of the real perpetrators of the murder"—a spoiler that does not seem to bother the editors in their belief that the staged scene "should bring audiences out of their seats." In bringing the film world down to

³⁴ "Unique Lobby Display Advertises Latest Kerrigan Film," *Motion Picture News*, 20 (22), 22 November 1919, 3743.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Exhibitors' Herald*, April 1921.

the theatre audience, prologues thus suggest a distanced and self-reflexive mode of spectatorship that may run counter to the classical demands of the audience's integration into the narrative by foregrounding, as seems to be the case here, the *theatrical spectacular* in the film and making it more important than traditional narrative demands.

Materializing Film Worlds, Materializing Audiences

In this borderland between the film and the audience, prologues are intermedial affairs, whether they reference a spectacular scene of the film by quoting a film image as a background to the staged scene (as in a prologue used at the Strand theatre in Seattle, Washington, for the 1921 Cecil B. DeMille film, *Fool's Paradise*, where the key fantasy attraction in the film, the ice-ballet sequence, is re-enacted on stage "with a large drop painted especially to represent the scene in the photoplay" with "snow [falling] on the dancers during their entire performance"³⁷), or whether they literally interrupt the film, transposing whatever scene was taking place on the stage, adding a moment of theatrical display, then allowing the film to resume. In the pursuit of this attraction-based and theatrical logic, narrative interruptions are indeed frequent, and come under the heading of the fade-in prologue not so much as "prologues" (since they may take place before the film but also, intriguingly, during the projection) but rather as "fade-in" transitions from the film and back into it with little, if any, visual break. Some of the examples that one may find in the trade press and its best-practice examples suggest that the requirement of having prologues precede the film is not as stringent as the name would seem to imply. Thus, at the Strand in Brooklyn (New York), Edward L. Hyman, the manager, offers a fade-in prologue that interrupts the film projection, even though the scene referenced in the staged event is merely the fourth shot of the film – so that a more general prologue could safely have been staged *before* the start of the film without losing its relevance, but without the fade-in and fade-out effect that seems to have been very much the key to the success of this particular presentation. The film in question is Maurice Tourneur and Clarence Brown's *Last of the Mohicans* (1920):

When a colonial interior was reached in *The Last of the Mohicans*, (...) Edward L. Hyman caused the projection to cease while a stage setting fashioned after the scene was revealed and a colonial madame with her harp gave a solo. This was followed by a tenor selection given by a beststockinged gentleman of the period, after which two dancers properly costumed danced "The Pavlowa Gavotte." The picture was interrupted for only a few minutes and at a period in the continuity which was opportune.³⁸

The film scene here, interrupted and reproduced on stage, is indeed a long shot crowded with people dancing, but the film, in full classical narrative mode, quickly moves from the establishing "master" long shot to a series of close-ups of the main characters who are all present in the scene. It thus eschews a more attraction-based exploitation of its staging by refusing to linger on less diegetically motivated elements (such as, for instance, the dancing, the costumes, the historical authenticity of the sets and costumes– all elements that the prologue does develop). The on-stage spectacle provides this attraction, at a potential cost of breaking the illusionistic spell of the film, thus requiring a dual and *competing* gaze from the audience as both engrossed in the diegesis and self-reflexively aware of its

³⁷ *Motion Picture News*, 29 April 1922.

³⁸ *Exhibitors' Herald*, 22 January 1921.

material, staged origin.

Another example of this practice (this time in 1919, at the Rialto theatre, Dayton, Ohio) shows that such materialization of the film medium on stage does matter as it allows a parallel materialization of audiences whom the theory of the Hollywood classical cinema has variously portrayed as “silenced” or “distanced”:

During the showing Mr Seifert furnished a surprise by having the curtain raised where the star as a pseudo-Spanish nobleman is entertaining the heroine with his mandolin. The Seifert Symphony Orchestra struck up a Spanish number and on the stage came a quartet of Spanish dancers and singers. After a ten-minute exhibition, the curtain was lowered and the picture resumed amid applause at every performance.³⁹

Clearly, such practices are non-illusionistic, yet provide added pleasures for 1920s audiences who invariably manifest themselves with “applause at every performance.” This pleasure comes *despite* the fact that such practices reveal film not as an immaterial diegetic shadow world, a transparent “window on the world,” but as a concrete photographic medium, a form of photography that can be animated or not, stopped, doubled with sounds, and so on. Watching film, such prologues suggest, is a total theatrical experience; there is more to cinematic pleasure than mere immersion in the film plot, there is also recognition that the diegetic border exists as a border to be toyed with and experienced through the senses. Foregrounding sensory pleasures, even to the point of narrative incoherence, is what such fade-in prologues are about, as is shown, for example, by the prologue staged for the Olive Thomas film *Out Yonder*. In the film, Thomas plays the part of a daughter of a light watchman. The prologue uses this general maritime background to reinforce the sensual appeal of the film by staging a Botticelli moment:

Accordingly, an elaborate special setting was constructed, the screen was “flooded,” the lights were tested with the picture in operation, so that just the right degree of illumination would be assured, and [the theatre manager’s] stage feature planted at that point in the story. At the proper moment the screen was raised, leaving the picture upon the setting. It quickly disappeared as a sunrise effect was put over, and, as day dawned, a young woman, apparently nude, rose out of the sea, climbed over a set rock and donned the overalls and shirt that Olive Thomas wears in the ensuing scene. Again the picture was flashed upon the setting, the screen was lowered into place, and the girl in the setting became Olive Thomas in the picture.⁴⁰

Here, considerable effort is made to minimize visual or narrative discontinuity by offering a scene that will reinforce the film in multiple ways: aesthetic (the painting connection), symbolic (Thomas as Venus), sensory (light, colours), sensational (“Thomas” naked), and as an intermedial reinforcement, by merging the film space and the theatre space into one continuum. Much of the pleasure thus derives from a crossing and merging of film space with that of the theatre; an invitation to audiences to dream the film beyond the screen.

³⁹ “Unique Lobby Display Advertises Latest Kerrigan Film,” *Motion Picture News*, 20 (22), 22 November 1919, 3743. In this case, the film shown is *A White Man’s Chance* (Ernest C. Warde 1919), with a Mexican background theme that is enough to justify this ten-minute “Spanish” dancing during the film.

⁴⁰ “‘Fade-In’ Replaces Prologue in Cameraphone Presentation,” *Exhibitors’ Herald*, 24 April 1920.

That such prologues question some of the basic tenets of classical spectatorship can be further seen in the debates that exist around them in the 1920s. An exchange of views between director Sydney Olcott and showman Sid Grauman, published in *The Motion Picture Director*, sums up the main lines of debate between film production and exhibition in 1926.⁴¹ Olcott, one of the important commercial directors of the 1920s, makes three main points against the practice: prologues are bound to be inferior to Hollywood films as they cannot compete with the skills or finance of Hollywood products; prologues (and all presentation acts in general) will further ruin the film by imposing cuts so that it fits into the programme schedule; and, most importantly, prologues are basically redundant:

The average motion picture feature is built for an evening's entertainment. Its length and structure is such that it constitutes a complete show in itself. It is balanced with comedy, pathos, humor, tragedy, adventure, pictorial beauty and a hundred other properties not available on the stage. Therefore it follows quite naturally that anything which precedes such entertainment is either superfluous, repetitious, or irrelevant.⁴²

Classical film studies, by and large, have long sided with such pleas from industry insiders that film texts be treated with absolute respect, and dismissed disruptive exhibition practices as so much noisy and incoherent "ballyhoo." Yet prologues do have a logic which, beyond narrative integration, understands film less as a text than a *sensual experience*. Grauman's 1926 answer to Olcott specifically points to the need to "appeal to all the senses" of the audience in order "to create in the spectator a responsiveness to the dramatic qualities of the photoplay" that will "sweep the spectator from the prologue to the opening of the screen drama," *à la* Keaton. Yet, paradoxically, sensual involvement here is created through processes that simultaneously reinforce the theatrical self-reflexivity, by positioning film *as* film, and the projection screen as a border to cross. Furthermore, here one is aware of a subtextual drama between the production and exhibition branches of the motion-picture business, a fight for control over the film's meaning, and a resistance, in the theatres, to the producers having complete control of meaning – a fight, that is, to assert a role for the audience that goes beyond that of passive consumers.

Presence, the Illusion

Prologues, thus, give away the plot and decrease the suspense of films, interrupt the narrative flow, embody it in concrete live bodies and objects on stage, force cuts in the film unwarranted by the narration, and, in general, make short shrift of the intention and auteur debates in filmmaking. But in their insistence that film be an experience, and a full sensory one at that, they point to a remarkably coherent theatre culture which strives to have films meet their audience, to put, in the parlance of the day, "the film over" the stage barrier⁴³. The questioning and foregrounding of the border between the real and the fictive, a border that Hollywood classical filmmaking had learnt to subdue and render transparent, is thus a central activity of spectatorship that such theatre culture proposes.

⁴¹ S. Olcott and S. Grauman, "Do Prologues Make or Mar a Picture," *Motion Picture Director* 2 (10), July 1926.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ The expression "putting it [the film] over" is frequently found in 1920s theatrical exhibition literature to denote successful exhibition strategies and a film that has "gone over well." It is also the title of a regular column published by *Film Daily* containing exhibition advice for all film exhibitors.

In this active and creative reception, audiences are invited to negotiate meaning actively with the film. Fiction characters routinely step out of the picture, or jog into it from the theatre space of the proscenium at the foot of the screen. Film experience, in this reception culture, is thus positioned as one of self-conscious theatrical illusion, rather than one that would propose diegetic illusion as its central, or unique, goal—an alternative mode of address that coexists with the illusionistic gaze celebrated by theatre managers throughout the 1920s. When putting the show over, 1920s showmen break down the screen border and replace it with a fluid combination of spaces that interact together in pleasurable ways—an interaction that is best defined as an enjoyment, conscious or not, of film illusion as illusion of presence: as a bit of magic.