

*Delia ENYEDI*

## 3D Attractions: Recycling the Monomyth in Post-Cinema

**Abstract.** Forays into the origins of cinema have lead André Gaudreault to correct the use of the collocation “early cinema” in regard to the approximate period 1890-1910 with the term “kine-attractography”, thus designating the use of recording and projecting devices into already existing forms of popular entertainment. Nowadays, the narrative engagement standardized by the institutional cinema is infused with digital stereoscopy which promises audiences an immersive experience. The emerging clash between “attractions” (as proposed by Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault) and narration could never be resolved by separating their dominance during various periods in film history. When confronted with technical innovations such as sound and color, cinematic storytelling strived to balance the re-acquired attractional dimension of the medium. The paper compares the post-cinematic intermediality of 3D filmmaking with that of kine-attractography and discusses the monomyth as its favored narrative solution.

**Keywords:** 3D filmmaking, attraction, narration, monomyth, post-cinema.

In a famous account related to the rise of the studio system, acclaimed writer F. Scott Fitzgerald returned to Hollywood at the peak of cinema’s conversion to synchronized sound that started in the late 1920s. At the time, MGM stood as the major studio least affected by the national economic crash and the consequent Depression. Irving Thalberg’s creative vision and control had resulted in a house style dominated by prestige films destined for first-run theaters, feature films oozing glamour by means of cast and composition. In 1931, Fitzgerald seemed the perfect choice to polish the narrative of such a Jean Harlow vehicle, an adaptation of the best-selling sex farce *Red-Headed Woman* (1932).

**Delia ENYEDI**

Babeş-Bolyai University, Romania

Email: delia.enyedi@ubbcluj.ro

EKPHRASIS, 2/2016

POST-CINEMA ATTRACTIONS

pp. 73-82

However, Thalberg's decision to keep experienced screenwriter Anita Loos apprised of the project revealed the delicate status of the principles of narrative composition along the development of sound films. As it turned out, Fitzgerald didn't rise to the task. Loos later explained that his scripts "just wouldn't play" adding that "there was a knack to dramatic writing which some very legitimate talents can't master" (qtd. in Schatz 118). But with her own transition from silent cinema to talkies screenwriting often supported by dialogue specialists, it became clear that the medium had bid a difficult farewell to the early practice of simply developing a story idea with a director.

The introduction of the three-color Technicolor in the 1930s once again challenged cinematic storytelling, already component of the classical Hollywood style. To the showcasing of the new technology in *Becky Sharp* (1935) critics responded by bemoaning its dominance to the prejudice of the dramatic material. A restrained mode of design was to be demonstrated with *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* (1936) in which the toned-down palette not only balanced the narrative, but also actively supported its main plot points. But that didn't stop a *Variety* editor to proclaim, one year later, that "Color is king in Hollywood. But he sits on an uncertain if not shaky throne" (qtd. in Higgins 2007, 76).

Gradually, the aesthetic possibilities inaugurated by sound and color went from technical challenges to standard modes of production, from disrupting the viewer's experience to enhancing diegetic absorption. Thus, the promise of cinema to create on-screen second degree realities took two significant steps forward, towards approaching the everyday sensorial experience of the audience. But the digital version of 3D technology in film raises questions on whether it should be placed as a third step in this seemingly linear evolution or whether it echoes practices prior to the birth of cinema.

### **From attractions (back) to kine-attractography**

"The cinema of attraction(s)" has remained the irrefutable cornerstone for correcting the diachronic perspective on film history. While in French "le cinéma des premiers temps" had replaced "le cinéma primitif" since the 1960s, "early cinema" was only later adopted in English to differentiate the period before approximately 1910 from primitive experiments in recording and projecting motion. It was in the stimulating context of the post-Brighton congress (1978) that Tom Gunning, in collaboration with André Gaudreault, center-placed the highly influential concept of "attractions" in relation to cinema. Gunning's later oscillation between the plural and the singular form of the term was resolved in the 2006 reprint of his seminal essay *The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde*. By unifying these alternatives, two distinctive sources and consequent interpretations of the concept are highlighted.

The bridge linking Gunning's cinema of attractions to Sergei Eisenstein's "montage of attractions" prevails. In the theatrical direction envisioned for the Moscow

Proletkult institution in 1923, the Soviet director and theorist supported the “agit-attraction theatre” (77), a revolutionary form of theatre turning to the spectator as constitutive material:

An attraction (in relation to the theatre) is any aggressive aspect of the theatre; that is any element of the theatre that subjects the spectator to a sensual or psychological impact, experimentally regulated and mathematically calculated to produce in him certain emotional shocks. (78)

Mirrored in Gunning’s approach of early films, “the cinema of attractions directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle” (2006, 384). Eisenstein himself further enhanced the audience as common denominator for both the theatre and the cinema in his 1924 essay *The Montage of Film Attractions*. In it, he expressed the conviction that both mediums made sense only as “forms of pressure”, reformulating film attraction as “any demonstrable fact [...] that is known and proven to exercise a definite effect on the attention and emotion of the audience” (40-41) pursuant to the purpose of the production.

But even from the examples illustrating the status of attractions in theatre, Eisenstein turned his attention to silent cinema, depicting the lyrical effects of Chaplin scenes and the attraction produced by the mechanisms of his movement as being inseparable (78). Thus, it is significant that from the very first theoretical use of the concept, attractions opposed but did not exclude narration. Instead, attractions differentiated themselves in the overall artistic construct. This assumption was later validated in regard to the narrative regime of early cinema, in which narration has been identified as present, although often subordinated in a barely perceptible form to the dominant system of monstrative attractions (Gaudreault and Gunning 373). As for monstrative cinema, it revolved around the shot as its basic unity, understood as a micro-story. When not singular, but integrated into the equation of a multi-shot film, this system favored the reduction to minimum of the connection between shots, thus the process of narration was not deliberately activated, other than functioning on a profilmic level.

The practices associated with the cinematic system of monstrative attraction, mainly the significant role played by the monstrator, together with Eisenstein’s own techniques of theatrical representation opposing dramatic illusions reinstalled the influence of popular entertainment in the conceptualization of the cinema of attractions. Regarding the monstrator, his task was to assume the role of a film lecturer, guiding the audience in decoding early films during the projection in a manner similar to that of the masters of ceremony present in the fairground. In Eisenstein’s case, his aesthetic was one of subversion, of challenging the conventions of bourgeois realism by inserting acts originating from the circus or the music-hall. With the support of various examples of journalistic texts dating from the first half of the twentieth century, this derivation of the term attraction was further proven, demonstrating its frequent use

in common language for praising or criticizing a moment of visual appeal inserted into silent films, prior to Eisenstein developing it in his theory.

To conclude, attractions in early film share with theatre their role of constructing instances of shock stimulating the immediate response of the audience, as well as a significantly longer history common to the attractions of nineteenth-century popular entertainment. I propose André Gaudreault's discussion of cinematography beyond the Eisensteinian etymological adaptation and along this heritage, namely the core analytical schema of cultural series in relation to an overarching cultural paradigm (Gaudreault 2011, 64-65), as an instrument for investigating the digital embodiment of attractions and their confrontation with post-cinematic narration.

### Towards 3D attractions

From Gaudreault's standpoint not only the terminology defining early films remains improper, but film history incorrectly identified its founding figures. Thus, Thomas Edison or the Lumière brothers should not be seen as inventors of cinema, but as the inventors of the devices with which cinema would only later be made. His basic argument is that "ruptures and changes of paradigm do not necessarily occur at the same time as the invention of new techniques or new devices" (2011, 7). Instead of seeing films from before approximately 1910 as *primitive* or *early*, Gaudreault dismisses the term *cinema* altogether. Instead, he proposes the term *kine-attractography*, understanding this period not only as a point of departure for cinema, but also as "a point of arrival" (2011, 33), of fulfillment, for cultural practices revolving around image. Only afterward was institutional cinema gradually validated by production norms and a specific language.

Indirectly, Gaudreault's conclusion offers an explanation on why attractions were to a lesser extent linked to the introduction of synchronized sound or Technicolor in film. Some associations do exist. Charles O'Brien marks the year 1933 as the moment when music ceased to function as a "special attraction" (29). In an interesting mirrored approach, the collocation can be found describing the photographic color processes from before the 1920s, also referred to as having the status of "special attraction" (Salt, Ryan). In these examples, adding a *special* status to attractions signals transitional periods in which experiments of adding synchronized sound effects or coloring techniques to film had not yet led to satisfactory results. Experimented since the second half of the nineteenth century, they needed decades of perfecting before integrated as filmic aesthetical instruments depleted of their attractational quality. This is a crucial aspect separating the cinema of attractions (or *kine-attractography*) from the sound and color turning points in film history. The cinema of attractions, once perfected, did not disintegrate into standardized film language, but instead went "underground, both into certain avant-garde practices and as a component of narrative films" (Gunning 382). I argue that digital 3D films might complement this repertoire of attractions resisting integration.

Along the three waves covering the period from the 1950s to the 1980s (Paul), 3D films have demonstrated, with their almost regular revival, an unprecedented interest of the public for a three-dimensional cinematic experience. Regardless of predictions in duration, their current appeal signals a success, even if fragile, in the battle with alternative practices of film consumption such as video streaming platforms and various devices enabling access to them, which apparently keep twenty-first century audiences out of theatres. The digital 3D embodiment of attractions aims to offer a sustainable answer to this crisis. As before, the promise of 3D technology in film has been that of enhancing perceptual immersion by effacing the physical limits of the image, with protrusion, the defining aspect of 3D technology, placing the screen movement beyond the frame and forcing diegetic absorption to assume a diminished role. The sustainability of both aspects has been criticized from the standpoint of their implications. The movement beyond the frame acknowledges there is a frame to be surpassed (Paul, Sandifer), and in order to become a durable aesthetic digital 3D technology seems forced to downplay its effect with regard to narrative engagement (Higgins 2012).

But scholars such as Alison Griffiths and Thomas Elsaesser analyze digital 3D filmmaking by supporting their arguments with practices from before 3D films. Griffiths discusses technologies like IMAX in relation to the panorama, 360 degrees representations of topographic views and landscapes, which “immerse spectators in the represented space and give them a heightened sensation of moving out of the immediate and into the hyper-real (6). Elsaesser highlights the succession of 3D practiced before 2D in mechanical imaging, giving examples such as the stereoscopic slides displayed in the entertainment industry and even in the military, prior to the development of cinema (221; 231-232). Both scholars invoke a period of image related practices in which Gaudreault also follows the filiation of kine-attractography and proposes an analytical framework to address its intermediality.

Borrowing a concept formulated by Louis Francoeur, Gaudreault introduces the concept of “cultural paradigm” to film in order to define a “polysystem” to which “various forms of signification [...] are subordinated as subsystems” (Francoeur qtd. in Gaudreault 2011, 64). In the given case, the larger system becomes late nineteenth-century stage entertainment, and the subsystems, defined as “cultural series”, consist of music hall, shadow plays, circus arts, etc. In relation to them, kine-attractography strived to find a place, as his example of Georges Méliès proves in a definitive manner. Far from being a cinéaste, as cinema did not yet exist, Méliès used the new device called the Cinématographe within the cultural paradigm of the stage show, recording and projecting the images on the screen of the Robert-Houdin theatre.

This schema of interpretation could successfully address the current status of 3D attractions. As exemplified above, the reference to practices of pre-cinematic origin eliminates 3D as a successor of sound and color in film, in cinema’s apparent quest to respond to an audience seeking a sensorially enhanced fictional everyday-like experience projected on the silver screen. In a reversed perspective, twenty-first cen-

tury spectators enter a projection hall with a post-cinematic everyday experience, presuming a daily based minimal interaction with 3D information (e.g. 3D mapping accessed on a smartphone), and entertainment alternatives such as 3D video-gaming, all stimulating an aesthetics of consumption (interactivity, immersion, narrative control, etc.). Emulating Gaudreault's demonstration, post-cinema stands as the cultural paradigm, subordinating the cultural series of, among others, information, video-gaming, as well as cinema, all in which 3D technology strives to carve out a space. These cultural series shape each other by forcing the boundaries of three-dimensional entertainment, similar to the way in which image recording devices inserted themselves in various forms of theatre or vaudeville acts.

The way in which 3D films accomplish this is by echoing the nineteenth century entertainment model of haptic immersion displayed panoramas or stereoscopic slides, with spatiality remaining the key instrument of coagulation. Space is no longer witnessed in a three-dimensional artificially constructed version, but entered and sometimes altered by the viewer's experience. Besides spatiality, there's a distinct but equally important dimension to be considered. Not only technologically simulated 3D space, but also presentational presence stems from a common pre-cinema milieu. The monstrator conducting kine-attractography shows, originating from the fairground, was the agent simulating a sense of presence for the spectator watching events recorded in the past. Significantly, the sensorial distinct experience of a spectator watching the same film in 3D and in IMAX resembles that of the early twentieth-century spectator guided by a different monstrator along the same picture show. While the visual space that the contemporary film spectator penetrates remains the same three-dimensional *mise-en-scene*, his presence in it would be differentiated by the distinct fields of view enabled by the two technologies of projection.

Unlike previous 3D cinematic waves of passive spectatorship, the post-cinematic paradigm brings forward interactivity shifting to the status of almost a trained reflex. Witnessing 3D films has gone from experiencing new technology to digital 3D films as reactivating their attractional dimension in relation to moving image on a pre-cinematic model. The current merge between perceptual immersion and presentational at the foundation of digital 3D attractions reformulates their early twenty first-century status, combining the appeal of technologically constructed three-dimensional space and the (nowadays technologically) mediated audience response to it. With 3D films migrating from previous unsatisfactory experiments with the limits of cinematic space into an intermedial exploration of attractions, once again in film history sensation exceeds narration.

### **The monomyth as narrative solution**

With some scholars or film critics predicting the implosion of the digital wave of 3D filmmaking (Thompson, Ebert), the question of whether 3D filmmaking can become viable 3D cinema has yet succeeded in providing substantial answers. Scott

Higgins discusses the stop-motion animation *Coraline* (2009) as a solution from the standpoint of the depth-oriented aesthetic it employs. Thomas Elsaesser identifies an aspiration of digital 3D to become “an invisible rather than visible special effect” (221). But if we are to remain in analytical framework linking digital technology resurrecting 3D technology as attraction in film similar in its functioning within kine-attractography, we must return to the post-cinematic cultural experience of the spectator. As stated before, in an era of simultaneous temporalities navigated, most often in an interactive manner, through an array of smart devices, 3D films are immersed into a broader reformulation of 3D image surpassing the reference to the criterion of realism. In other words, the architecture of fictional 3D worlds has left the period of rendering technologically flawed interpretations of reality once realities accessed through 3D technology have become a mainstay of twenty first-century everyday and artistic experiences.

But as Lev Manovich observes, throughout film history the visual grammar developed without the resulting cinematic image to escape “the bluntness, the sterility, the banality of early nineteenth-century photographs” (2). By identifying in digital cinema traces of the pre-cinematic practices of hand-painting and hand-animating film, Manovich goes as far as seeing the medium as a “sub-genre of painting” to the extent of “destroying cinema’s identity as a media art” (3). In the context of discussing the status of 3D attractions, do 3D films contradict the nature of cinema as narrative medium and, therefore, be indefinitely incapable of finding a narrative solution to coexist with?

According to Gaudreault’s incipient paradigms dominating the cinematograph, in “the paradigm of capturing and restoring” of views during kine-attractography (Gaudreault 2011, 56), the producer’s *intention* is non-narrative (apart from the profilmic, the intrinsic narrative quality of what the camera captured). Nowadays, an action such as accessing the address of a location by means of Google Maps involves minimal intervention, both from the person filming and the consumer of the app. There is no narrative implied or constructed, as it is an act of orientation in space. There are no interventions on the *mise-en-scene* and no interruptions, but a deliberate act of putting a device into work, just as cinematographers were beginning to test the possibilities of recording devices. Once again, one common aim and consequent effect is that of presentational presence of the user/spectator.

In the genealogy of kine-attractography, “the paradigm of monstration” and “the paradigm of narration” follow, punctuating the gradual intervention of the person filming in the subject being filmed. Extracting 3D filmmaking as reinstalling attractions in their spatial and presentational dimensions cannot annul this growing narrative dimension the medium has acquired with its institutionalization. Therefore, criticism of otherwise audience successful 3D films has addressed the way in which technology is not only visible but damages in a no-solution manner the diegetic absorption.



Confrontational by nature, attraction in the form of 3D technology in film has rarely been employed in auteur films (*Dial M for Murder*, 1954), instead enlivening exploitation films (*Blonde Emmanuelle*, 1978) or Hollywood blockbusters (*Jaws*, 1983). In an interesting turn, the digital wave of 3D debuted in the form of animations (*Polar Express*, 2004; *Chicken Little*, 2005), but the grandiose return of 3D in a digital incarnation will be remembered as the premiere of *Avatar* (2009). While the choice for testing digital 3D with the help of animation emulated the aesthetics of video gaming, James Cameron's blockbuster favored narrative structure of this cultural series that strived to mediate the non-narrative dominant feature of attractions with the narrativity of institutional cinema.

Since the success of the first *Star Wars* film (1977), a narrative structure originating in comparative mythology has become the ground zero for Hollywood blockbusters. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* Joseph Campbell describes the monomyth as a hero's journey identified as common through a comparative analysis of myths, legends, allegorical tales belonging to various cultural spaces. For Campbell, it defines the supreme narrative archetype which implies a hero leaving the mundane space and entering a space governed by supernatural forces. Some of these forces oppose him in his path to a victory that will enable his return, not without gaining a new perspective on existence and the awareness of having contributed to the well-being of his community. Animations such as *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010), *Shrek Forever After* (2010), *Toy Story 3* (2010) or *Megamind* (2010) aligned their narratives to a greater or lesser degree to the principles of the monomyth immediately after the success of *Avatar*. The step towards expanding 3D non-animated films has been supported by an array of monomythical figures such as Spider Man, Iron Man or the Avengers' squad, while in an interesting similar approach, the first Chinese film fully produced in 3D was *Don Quixote* (2010).

Without the scope to reduce digital 3D film production to CGI enhanced versions of the hero's journey, the distinct nature of the monomyth has proven to successfully support the twenty-first century return of the superhero in cinemas. One reason might be its organic nature, as a universally practiced storytelling framework throughout centuries. Even if the spectators' decoding implies narrative absorption, its principles are innate, thus redistributing attention on its conventions that require extraordinary, in the most basic sense of the term, artifice. While not the only narrative structure applied to 3D films, the monomyth seems to best suit the display of attractions in a mechanism of audience astonishment through demonstrative protrusion or multi-layered depth of frame. Non-narrative digital 3D attractions brake the boundaries of the frame it while allowing differentiated narrative experiences in 3D or IMAX viewings, so they both assume a confrontational relation to conventional cinematic space and revive pre-cinema practices of mediated presence, all while supporting the oldest story of all.



Undoubtedly, film auteurs such as Wim Wenders, Werner Herzog or Jean Luc Godard have contributed to expanding the potential of 3D filmmaking, albeit in non-narrative formulas, to becoming 3D cinema, that is to make use of the technology in a non-conflicting manner in regard to standardized film language. Post-cinema is bound by its nature to resolve the attractional equation since, as in an assumption similar to that of Gaudreault's on kine-attractography as a point of arrival besides one of departure, Shane Denson and Julia Leyda lay the ground of its exploration seeing it "not a caesura but a transformation that alternately abjures, emulates, prolongs, mourns, or pays homage to cinema" (2).

### Works Cited

1. CAMPBELL, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Bollingen Series XVII, Third edition (with revisions). Novato, California: New World Library, 2008.
2. COMOLLI, Jean-Louis. *Cinema against Spectacle. Technique and Ideology Revisited*. Translated and Edited by Daniel Fairfax. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015.
3. DENSON, Shane, Julia Leyda (eds.). *Post-Cinema. Theorizing 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Film*. Falmer: REFRAAME Books, 2016.
4. EISENSTEIN, Sergei. "The Montage of Attractions." 1923. Translated by Daniel Gerould. *The Drama Review* 18:1 (1974): 77-84.
5. ---. "The Montage of Film Attractions." 1924. In Sergei Eisenstein, *Selected Works*. Volume I. *Writings: 1922-34*. Edited and translated by Richard Taylor. London - New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010. 39-58.
6. ELSAESSER, Thomas. "The "Return" of 3-D: On Some of the Logics and Genealogies of the Image in the Twenty-First Century." *Critical Inquiry* 39:2 (2013): 217-246.
7. GAUDREAUULT, André, Tom Gunning. "Early Cinema as a Challenge to Film History." 1989. *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*. Ed. Wanda Strauven. Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2006. 365-380.
8. GAUDREAUULT, André. *Film and Attraction: From Kinetography to Cinema*. Translated by Timothy Barnard. Foreword by Rick Altman. Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2011.
9. ---. *From Plato to Lumière. Narration and Monstration in Literature and Cinema*. Translated by Timothy Barnard. Preface by Paul Ricoeur. Preface to the English-language edition by Tom Gunning. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009.
10. GRIFFITHS, Alison. *Shivers Down Your Spine: Cinema, Museums, and the Immersive View*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.
11. GUNNING, Tom. "The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde." 1986. *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*. Ed. Wanda Strauven. Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2006. 381-388.
12. HIGGINS, Scott. "3D in Depth. Coraline, Hugo, and a Sustainable Aesthetic." *Film History: An International Journal* 24:2 (2012): 196-209.
13. ---. *Harnessing the Technicolor Rainbow. Color Design in the 1930s*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007.

14. LOWE, N.J. *The Classical Plot and the Invention of Western Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
15. MANOVICH, Lev. "What is Digital Cinema?" *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21<sup>st</sup> – Century Film*. Eds. Shane Denson, Julia Leyda. Falmer: REFRAME Books, 2016. 1-29.
16. O'BRIEN, Charles. *Cinema's Conversion to Sound: Technology and Film Style in France and the U.S.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005.
17. PAUL, William. "The Aesthetics of Emergence." *Film History*, 5:3 (1993): 321-355.
18. RYAN, Roderick T.. *A History of Motion Picture Color Technology*. London and New York: Focal Press, 1977.
19. SALT, Barry. *Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis*. London: Starword, 1992.
20. SANDIFER, Philip. "Out of the Screen and Into the Theater: 3D Film as Demo." *Cinema Journal*, 50:3 (2011): 62-78.
21. SCHATZ, Thomas. *The Genius of the System. Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era*. Minneapolis / London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
22. THOMPSON, Kristin. "Has 3-D already failed?" <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2009/08/28/has-3-d-already-failed/>.