

Louis Lumière's *La partie d'écarté* (1896)¹

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Abstract

Louis Lumière's *La partie d'écarté* (1896) was one of the films included on very many of the first Lumière programs that screened around the world in the late 1890s. It is a quite ordinary, even banal, short film, which shows three men playing cards and being served beer by a servant. This piece looks at some of the different approaches to this 'home movie' which have been adopted in the writing available in English about it. In the process, it attempts to make a case for the film's importance to our eventual understanding of cinema.

1. Presentation

More than twenty years ago I began to be interested in the earliest Lumière films. Initially this interest had to do with the way in which space can be articulated in the cinema, because a great deal of what those films display has to do with transformations of space. At the same time I found myself, unavoidably it seemed, asking what the Lumière audiences had seen when they first looked at the screen.

It has been accepted now, perhaps too easily, that the projection of moving photographs was an event that transformed culture; and, from what I have been able to ascertain, it does seem that the Lumière brothers demonstrated the projection of moving photographs in public before anyone else (Pinel 1992, 68-71; 84-98). Their firstness, however, did not and does not seem now of any great moment. The truly important firstness is the first experience of the first spectators. The first screening is an event repeated endlessly—an event which may well continue to be repeated forever, and an event each one of us has experienced.

One problem with isolating events of this nature is the possibility that their isolation will confer on them an importance out of any reasonable proportion. For me such a tendency was confirmed in the rediscovery of some writing by Maxim Gorky on the occasion of his first experience with the cinema. Gorky attributed arcane, mostly baleful, powers to what he saw; and the paranoid conviction of his writing—so like so much of the writing on the media today—convinced me that indeed the first experience of the cinema must be an event of stupendous cultural significance.

Gorky was always the instigator of this paper. His response to the Lumière film, *La Partie d'écarté*, directed my interest and dictated my choice of topic and title:

Another new picture on the screen. Three respectable men are playing whist. One of them is a clean-shaven gentleman, with the visage of a high government official, laughing with what must be a deep, bass laugh. Opposite him a nervous, wiry partner restlessly picks the cards from the table, cupidity in his gray face. The third person is pouring beer that the waiter had brought to the

table; the waiter, stopping behind the nervous player, looks at his cards with tense curiosity. The players deal the cards and ... the shadows break into soundless laughter. All of them laugh, even the waiter with his hands on his hips, quite disrespectful in the presence of these respectable bourgeois. And this soundless laughter, the laughter of gray muscles in gray faces, quivering with excitement, is so fantastic. From it there blows upon you something that is cold, something too unlike a living thing.

Laughing like shadows, they disappear like shadows.... (1985, 228)

But what Gorky did not do was to prepare me for what I ought to have remembered for myself, the other side of the stupendous cultural event: its banality. *Partie d'écarté* is, indeed, so stupefyingly banal that Gorky must truncate and misrepresent it in order to make it interesting.

I had thought, until I looked again at those Lumière films, and especially at *Partie d'écarté*, that here was an *Event*—mysteriously repeated, involving everyone. Perhaps that is the case, but if it is so, almost nothing in the texts presented at the *Event* testify to the *Event's* significance (the Lumière films contain no fanfares, no flourishes). Instead those films, and the dozens or hundreds like them that I have seen, speak of what is beneath the everyday: the less-than-ordinary. I had forgotten their profoundly uninteresting quality, their numb simplicity—as I had ignored, or repressed, the attraction that this quality has for me.

Because it is not what early films do to space, nor their mere earliness, nor yet the part they play in an event of stupendous cultural significance that makes me want to write about them. I want to write about them because they are banal, because banality is their most outstanding attribute, because they stupefy students, academics and, as we have seen, some Russian writers as well, because they resist so strongly attempts to elevate them to works of art—and, of course, because dullness is of stupendous significance to me.

2. Representation

Since Gorky, many interesting things have been written on this uninteresting film—often by writers as stupefied as Gorky by what they saw.

Georges Sadoul who, like Gorky, thought the card game was over almost as soon as it had begun,² identified the participants as M. Antoine Lumière, who is seated at the left of the screen (*père de famille*), M. Winkler, seated in the centre (a brewer and “father of Mmes Louis and Auguste Lumière”), M. [Félicien] Trewey, to the right (“the shadowgrapher and prestidigitator”, friend of M. Antoine), and Féraud, the waiter (whom Louis Lumière himself identified as “our valet de chambre ... full of fun”). Sadoul also specified the film's genre as “[a] family portrait”, pointing out that the subjects of the Lumière films “were for the most part those which would have been chosen naturally by an amateur photographer before 1900” (1964, 51, my translations; and see Louis Lumière, quoted in Sadoul, 105, for the inferred seating plan).

Following Sadoul, both Alan Williams and Richard Abel have unhesitatingly

placed *Partie d'écarté* in the category of non-fiction film. Williams, in an influential piece that incidentally agreed with Sadoul in classing the film among the Lumière 'family portraits', argued that Louis Lumière deliberately exploited such 'documentary' aspects of the cinema as a publicity and marketing strategy to the end that Lumière's audience came to recognise that "in the midst of theatre, there was 'real life'—or, rather, there was *photography*" (1983, 154).

Richard Abel calls the film an *actualité*:

The Lumière actualités covered a range of subjects from 'current events' to French ceremonies ... from travelogue footage of foreign countries (including the colonies) to shots of French daily life ... around the Lumière's own bourgeois home, such as *Repas de bébé* [*Feeding the Baby*] (1895). The genre's success was due in part to the prior popularity of such topical subjects.... (1994, 91)

One wonders whether the burning topicality of bourgeois card parties can fully account for the popularity of *Partie d'écarté* even in 1895-96 (to the extent, for example, of its having been on the first Lumière program screened in Perth, Australia). Still Abel's term, *actualité*, is a useful one. Today a 'family portrait' is a subcategory of what we call 'home movies' or 'home videos' and certain of the Lumière films about 'actuality' do look exactly like home movies.

But there is another category of film, perhaps related distantly to the *actualité*, which might do for *Partie d'écarté*. This is the commercial or publicity film. Abel asserts that the Lumière company's entire venture into peripatetic production-exhibition was undertaken "primarily as a means of publicizing the company and its products—for instance, Lumière's very first film, *La Sortie des usines* [*Workers Leaving a Factory*] (1895), was clearly a publicity film" (1994, 11).³ *Partie d'écarté*, however, does not seem intended as direct publicity for the Lumière organisation. Instead, the 'client' appears to be M. Winkler's brewery. In the film the archetypal advertising gestures of displaying a product (summoning the waiter, pouring the beer) are at least as important as the card playing going on, and they are performed by Winkler himself in the very centre of the screen, where spectators might be expected to be looking.

Publicité does not carry the same kinds of connotations that *actualité* does, although both provoke images that insist on an originary something that is real (the product, the event). Another strand of analysis has tended to treat *Partie d'écarté* purely as a product of imagination—a work of fiction, thus—or some kind of dream.

For instance, Marshall Deutelbaum has demonstrated (at length) that the Lumière films, far from being unmodified 'slices of life', are diachronically or syntactically structured. His analysis of *Partie d'écarté* shows that

... the film is experientially structured around the repeated gesture of the man at the left [Papa Lumière] as he places a coin on the table [which] emphasizes the artistry of the film's achievement. A new game begins as the film ends, but the

new game serves to establish the completeness of the earlier one and, by extension, the completeness of what has been offered to view. (1983, 309-310)

The film, then, has a demonstrable narrative or dramatic structure. It is a work of forethought. One might have supposed that was the case, if only because of the obvious care taken with the composition of the frame. What relation does this film bear to Cézanne's *The Card Players* (1890-92), in which one man, standing at the left, watches three others, who are not drinking, hunched over their hands? In *Republic of Images*, Alan Williams describes a characteristic stylistic trait of Lumière films, insistently present also in the Cézanne painting, which he calls "the Lumière diagonal" (1992, 28). In *Partie d'écarté*, which Williams mentions as an exception to the diagonal rule, a diagonal seems to me to be inscribed by the movement of a character: the entrance and exit of the waiter.

Deutelbaum, concentrating so closely on dramatic structure, has somehow missed this movement. In three paragraphs and 552 words Féraud, the waiter, is mentioned only three times. His first (diagonal) entrance is not even documented ("The man in the center, who rapped on the table for a waiter at the same time as the man on the right placed his coin on the table, now sends the waiter off with an order"; 1983, 309), and what he does most noticeably is characterised in one word (misspelled in Deutelbaum's text): 'kibitzing'.⁴

Some years after the publication of Deutelbaum's piece, in one of those sorts of bipolarities enflamed by current techniques of film analysis, Richard deCordova rather ostentatiously endeavoured to replace its account of the film with one in which the card players are merely a prop:

In *Partie d'écarté* three men are sitting at a table in the centre of the frame playing cards. A waiter suddenly enters screen right. One of the men motions to him, and he exits screen right. Seconds later he comes back in with drinks, and, after setting them on the table, he watches the men's game, hysterically pointing to their cards and laughing as if in a fit. How does one account for the waiter's seemingly unmotivated hysteria? Were it not for the excess of his movement the composition of the shot would focus the spectator's attention on to the game of cards itself. It is precisely his movement that disrupts this composition, and it is his movement from presence to absence and back that is the subject of the film.

... There is definitely a complicity established between the spectator and the waiter. Diegetically, his hysteria is completely unmotivated through any aspect of the card game itself, but it is through this hysteria that the spectator is addressed. (1990, 79-80)

deCordova sees no reason for the waiter's (diagonal) entrance ("suddenly a waiter enters"), ignores that period during which our attention *is* focussed on the card game itself, and insists that what the analyst does not see directly is totally absent from the scene ("diegetically, his hysteria is *completely* unmotivated through *any aspect* of the card game

itself").⁵ And he concludes,

The waiter is perhaps hysterical because he 'finds himself' in a contradictory position in relation to the centred space of the perspectival system. It can be argued that the spectator in 1895 was in exactly the same position. (1990, 80)

deCordova's paranoia on behalf of waiters and of spectators amplifies Gorky's nearly a century before. The death that blew from the screen in Nizhny Novgorod is today internalised by the film's spectators along with the image ('the enunciation').

3. Animation

But the waiter is not an hysteric. The waiter *is moved*, is moving (that is, the waiter is not waiting; on the contrary, the others in the film are waiting, and so are we in the audience). The waiter constitutes—or reconstitutes—the film by his oblique movement. We look at *Partie d'écarté* and see (or remember)—not so much a game of cards but a waiter, because the waiter is in motion.

Or, rather, we see the waiter "kibitzing", as Deutelbaum puts it. But, *contra* Deutelbaum, we do not see a game of cards with a waiter kibitzing but a waiter kibitzing a game of cards: the game seems an excuse for the waiter, not the other way around.

The waiter was a Lumière servant—not even a waiter, but a *valet de chambre* (that is, in punning French, a knave or jack of the room, part of an imaginary card game). In the film and *in the course of its presentation*, the servant becomes the master of the image by commanding the gaze—and he does this in part by *his* diagonal look. "Hysteria" implies a lack of control, but this impetuous knave is an emblem of control. He controls our seeing, and he controls our ignorance as well: for he knows what is in the cards and understands how the game is played. He signs his knowledge and his appreciation of Papa Lumière's strategy and Trewey's stupidity, but he will not pass that knowledge on to us. He sees what we cannot, what is blocked to us. What we *do* see is that the pattern of the game (that structure Deutelbaum identified as controlling the film) is apprehended by the servant, who assimilates it, accomodates himself to it, is motivated, is moved and moves, by it, even after the hand itself is finished. The strategy of the game plays itself out in the movement of the valet/waiter—but not as Deutelbaum has outlined it, indeed not as strategy at all, but as repeated 'insignificant' movement, as rhythm, a dance, as supplementary event. All M. Louis' sober structure is purloined and travestied into Féraud's frantic bopping and weaving.

Sadoul looks and sees *un Charlot manqué*:

He makes faces, slaps his thighs, raises his arms to heaven, craning over the players, who are placidly seated and take up almost the entire screen with their massive, comfortably attired silhouettes. Even so, this valet would have made less of an impression at the Grand Café than the puffs of smoke from the cigars and the froth of the beer poured in the glasses. (1964, 51; my translation)

Perhaps this is an accurate account of what the bourgeois patrons of the Grand Café (and their counterparts in Perth) saw—or failed to see—but it remains the case that few professional comedians have so openly kidnapped bourgeois order as this servant has. Chaplin himself only succeeded critically in the measure that he reproduced bourgeois order in the structure of his films; and even today for a comedian to intervene in and to mock actuality (as distinct from commenting on the current scene) is not the usual thing.

But, as Louis Lumière himself has attested, this servant was also a character, “a pure-blooded southerner, full of gaiety and spirit, who amused us with his repartee and his pranks” (quoted in Sadoul 1964, 105; my translation). And in this film the servant-character transforms, or at least troubles, the law of genre, by mixing up actualité and fiction. Probably—on one level at least—*Partie d'écarté* was intended to show just that: “a friendly party in the garden of Lumière”, as apparently some advertisements for it in English had it. If that was the case, the film surely was intended to belong to that group of bourgeois photographs which is so perfectly realised in *Feeding the Baby*. But then the servant diagonally enters the photograph (or, to be more accurate, he is summoned into it by M. Winkler), and instead of behaving as a servant, he behaves as a character and a clown.

Again, as deCordova stresses, it is his motion, that marker of his difference, which initially signs him as a fictional entity. In *Feeding the Baby*, the baby offers her uncle Louis, who is operating the camera, (offers us) a biscuit, preserving the actuality of the situation, inscribing where she is as a photograph just as looking directly at the camera so inscribes a photograph even today. But Féraud is not in a photograph, he is on stage: in the midst of ‘real life’ there is theatre. He moves so that he will be seen, and his motions represent a character: the kibitzing waiter, *le valet voyant*. Because he is a fiction, his gestures do not obviously acknowledge the recording camera. Unlike the little girl, the waiter does not look straight at where the look is coming from. He gazes diagonally at the scene at which the look is looking—at least until the very last moments of the film, when his fleeting glance at M. Louis closes the proceedings at least as much as Papa Lumière’s new bet.

And in so doing, he completes the circle of his fiction to overlap with the actualité of the game of cards. For his fictionality is realised at the point when what he is thinking becomes important to us, when we need his thoughts to explain his actions—that is, when we must supply what the actualité cannot, when we must motivate, or animate, him.

The card game without the waiter is what Deutelbaum describes. We do not need to know *why* Papa played this card and Trewey that one, or why Winkler ordered the beer and poured it just so. We do not need to observe the structure Deutelbaum describes or even know the rules of *écarté*, a game of discarding. We but open our eyes to already see the actualité.

But Féraud’s exaggerated actions require explanation, an explanation that might be found in *what he sees*—which we can never know. Whatever it is that he sees *motivates* him.

One way of understanding Féraud’s motivation, and certainly the way that is

easiest to understand, is that his actions proceed from his interior, from the impulses of his soul. By behaving as he does, he forces us to supply what is (actually not) going on inside his head, forces us to reason thus: "this waiter is rocking back and forth because he appreciates the clever play of that card player and is mocking the other one's defeat". But this is to make him into a character in a fiction, which is precisely what we do not do with the card players themselves.

Thus two, supposedly mutually incompatible, spaces come to occupy the screen: the (planned) actualité of the card game and the (improvised) fiction of the waiter. Féraud enters the frame in order to start a story, just as the mischievous boy does in *Watering the Gardener* (1895)—but of course, that film is pure fiction, nothing-but-fiction, as *Feeding the Baby* is pure actualité, a real bringing up baby. *Partie d'écarté* is miscegenated, a mongrel. The inescapable analogon of the moving photograph undermines, or calls into question, all fiction, just as the inescapable representation in the image calls into question all actuality—cinema is paradox.

4. Mechanisation

A certain orthodoxy would jump now to the level needed to resolve that paradox, grouping the two tendencies of *Partie d'écarté* into a single dialectic of early film whose purpose it is to create "a cinematic diegesis ... a process marking the movement from exteriority to interiority, from being behind the camera to being both there and on the other side of it" (Hayward 1993, 74). Animation is projection. Even the Lumières' screen only reflects the imagination of its spectators.

But it seems to me that this resolution stops short of the cinema, for it confuses the cinema entirely with animation, which it is only in part. It ends up inside our heads, not on the screen.

What motivates the waiter's movement on the screen? In a literal sense, of course it is the cinema itself: that collaboration of apparatus and spectator originating in the former's mechanical stammering and depending from the latter's impaired vision. I cannot see the individual still frames of film or the lines of the video as the machine intermittently displays them on the screen, so I connect them with motion that does not happen. I do animate: I motivate. My inability to see the actualité animates the waiter.

But we must be careful here. We must not forget the stuttering, dancing machine. *The waiter* is not my projection, *his motivation* is. And this motivation, of course, does extend to what I imagine may be going on in the character's head. But the motion of the card players, their animation, is also my projection. And the card players have—as I have said—no psychology and no souls: they sit like apples and move like leaves in a breeze. Indeed, they are the waiters in this film.

But I also said that the card players represent the actualité of the film, an actualité none of us can actually see. I animate the card players in *Partie d'écarté* and in so doing animate actualité, make present what has only been represented. My motivating gaze requires that there is something to look at, an actualité, as well as something to see. First the machine has to strut its stuff, and then I can do that thing I do with my eyes and my

mind.

Animation may be projection, but the cinema is not only animation. One half the cinema sits heaped by the table holding all the cards. Inert, mute, with eyes averted it waits to play out the endless game, waits for my animating glance, waits for me to pretend I have discovered its secret, waits for me to play: waits and waits and waits for my discard.

It is this waiting that *fascinates*—fixes my grin and frustrates me into Féraud's contortions. Sure, I want to put a soul into the picture, to give it structure, to make it mean something. I want anything but its stubborn materiality, its dull, everyday thing-ness—its banality. But if I open my eyes I will only see *Partie d'écarté*, which is to say, the mere cinema: the machine.

And yet the machine is life (not animation, but life) in its indiscriminateness as well as its materiality.⁶ It makes a place and a time for everything before it. Movement in the machine is never ending, comprehensive. The dancing machine makes no judgements; bopping without stopping, it is looped into eternal difference. The machine, then, always keeps some cards in its hand, while I must eventually discard everything. The machine keeps on playing, while I must be serious one day. The machine defies me by reminding me what I am not. Can you put a soul *here*? Or *here*? Can you animate *this*? What will happen *next*?

The cinema is, at least in part, about looking, not about seeing. The machine cannot see; it can only look. In every film the cinema tells us this about itself: and particularly in the Lumière films and other examples of 'primitive cinema', in home movies and videos, in 'bad movies', in certain documentaries and avant-garde works, and in the motion picture recordings used by science. And those films are not about reality (you and I are about reality), or even about actualité. They are not about excesses or about bodies: violence, sex, tears or the sacred. They are only about life, the machine.

NOTES

¹ This paper has benefited from a discussion with Professor Jean-Pierre Jeancolas. Our shared perceptions of the Lumière film encouraged me to expand what had been a footnote into a paragraph on *Partie d'écarté* as a commercial. A slightly different version of this paper was published in Australia in *Metro* 103 (1995) under the title, "Rictus, Waiting".

² It is possible that Sadoul, at least, was not mistaken. The print of *La partie d'écarté* most often seen shortens the action in that way. It is also framed more tightly than the print used in the preparation of this paper (from Volume 1 of the Kino collection *The Movies Begin*). The action in the two versions seems otherwise identical, which argues against one having been a remake of the other. The most probable explanation is that the shorter one comes from a 16mm dupe, which would have been made sometime in the twentieth century (and this is why Maxim Gorky should have seen the longer one).

³ "Clearly" seems to overstate the case a little. That film much more clearly shows what Noël Burch, following Sadoul, claims it shows "*their workers*" (1978/79, 95), which is not quite the same thing.

⁴ Some readers may not know this word, which is derived from the Yiddish. It literally means "looking on and offering advice at a card game".

⁵ By refocusing us on Féraud, deCordova misses a point he might otherwise have wanted to stress: that M. Antoine—Papa—structures the film in Deutelbaum's analysis and *that Papa wins the game*. One can go further than this. Papa wins over Trewey: fathers, then, over sons (or their clean-shaven representatives). But also the cinema wins over the stage and shadowcraft (the new order over the old), photography over illusion, good play (and the luck of the cards) over sleight of hand. All of this is overinterpretation, of course, but it is not always overinterpretation to read representations in the light of crucial absences. It is 'Trewey under the hat', doing part of an act which he had made famous, in Lumière's *The Hat Trick* (1895), perhaps another commercial, and certainly an uncanny (not marvellous) foreshadowing of the films of Georges Méliès; and it is surely the advantages of moving pictures which are displayed by their opposites in *The Photograph* (Lumière 1895 or 1896).

⁶ This is a point made most forcefully by O. Winter in 1896. Winter is displeased by this property of the cinema for aesthetic reasons, although the piece begins with the *caveat*: "The tyranny of the arts, most masterful of all, seldom outlasts a generation" (1982, 294).

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