

Margitházi Beja

## “Last night I was in the Kingdom of Shadows...” The Role of Body and Senses in Various “First Contact” Narratives

### Absztrakt

If we look at the first descriptions about the early audience’s collective or individual responses to moving images at the turn of the century, we see a picture with many layers. Whether they are refuted myths (like the “train effect”), late interpretations (like “astonishment”, “stupefying effect” by Tom Gunning), or subjective, first-person reports (like Maxim Gorky’s), these “first contact” narratives not only catch the rare, emblematic moments of first encounter, but preserve and reflect the contemporary attitude about how the new medium should be. True or not, authentic or not, these nostalgic, mythological or anecdotic descriptions tell us about the desires, fears and guesses surrounding the emergence of the moving image, and offer a rich ground for further investigation. My paper intends to examine some of these early movie-going impressions with a special focus on the role of senses and previous visual experiences shaping perception and body reaction. I will try to explore the mechanisms and patterns working behind these first contact stories, by drawing attention to the importance of the fact that the moving image declares itself a visual and haptic medium in a moment when cinematic experience collapses perceptual distance and brings images almost unbearably close to the viewers.

### Szerző

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She was the co-editor of *Visual communication* anthology (with Ágnes Blaskó, Typotex, 2010). Her studies, critical essays and translations since 1995 have appeared in different anthologies, and such periodicals and magazines as *Színház*, *Ellenfény*, *Zsöllye*, *Korunk*, *Idea*, *Balkon*, *Filmtett*, *Filmvilág*, *Filmkultúra* and *Metropolis*.

## “Last night I was in the Kingdom of Shadows...” The Role of Body and Senses in Various “First Contact” Narratives

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### First Contact Narratives

The term “first contact” is used originally by anthropology (and lately science fiction) to describe the first meeting of two cultures previously unaware of each other. Media theory reserves the term for the rare and special moments of meeting a new media for the first time, and there is a long lineage of such “first contact” narratives in media history, because “new media, as it turns out to be, is a very old tale” (Liu 2008: 3). Anthropologically there always exists an asymmetry between the technologically more complex society that is able to travel to a new geographic region to discover and make contact with a generally more isolated, technologically less developed society. That is why “first contact” events are usually seen and documented by the discoverers, the sentiment characteristic to the natives is scare and wonder, while the missionaries with their accessories are thought to be supernatural (Wetherell 1998: 112). <sup>[1]</sup>

A similarity can be perceived between discovering a new culture and meeting a new media. Marshall McLuhan thinks that for example in the 17<sup>th</sup> century our ancestors still shared a type of *native's attitude* to the forms of new media. In *The Medium is the Message* (1964) he assumes the following:

“with electric media Western man himself experiences exactly the same inundation as the remote native. We are no more prepared to encounter radio and TV in our literate milieu than the native of Ghana is able to cope with the literacy that takes him out of his collective tribal world and beaches him in individual isolation. We are as numb in our new electric world as the native involved in our literate and mechanical culture.”

(McLuhan 1994: 20)

According to media theorist Alan Liu, no new media experience is fully imaginable without the help of these so called *narratives of new media encounter*,<sup>[2]</sup> such as the Caliban moment of media enchantment or the media colonization described in McLuhan's essay. Narratives of new media encounter in the form of first contact with the Word, Book, Law, Image, Music, and (more recently) Code, whether told from the perspective of the native of old media or the ambassador of new media, are a staple of epochs undergoing media change. Liu finds that the term “encounter” is more suitable here, indicating a thick, unpredictable zone of contact, more borderland than border line, where

“(mis)understandings of new media are negotiated along twisting, partial, and contradictory vectors. (...) At once descriptive and interpretive, speculative and wary, proselytizing and critical, and visionary and regulatory, narratives of new media encounter are the elementary form of media theory – the place from which all meta-discourse about media starts.” (Liu 2008: 5)

## Train effect



*Arrival of the Train to the Station,*  
1895

The emergence of cinema, as the new media of the turn of 19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> century, also has its first contact stories or “narratives of new media encounter”. We almost cannot find any written film historical textbook<sup>[3]</sup> that would fail to mention the most popular, well known first-encounter-

story about one of the first Parisian screenings of the Lumière brothers at the Grand Café in 1895. Although mainstream film historiography has not found any objective evidence or references to contemporary sources, a lot of film historians retell, without checking its validity, the reaction of the first audience to Lumière's *Arrival of the Train to the Station*, namely that the spectators mistook the filmic image with reality and recoiled in their seats, or screamed, or fainted, or got up and ran away from the hall in panic when the forthcoming train appeared on the screen. (Loiperdinger 2004: 91) These descriptions recall some aspects of the anthropological "first contact"-situations: they postulate a naïve, primitive, credulous audience, that cannot deal with the entirely new, threatening sensation, and reacts like the savages in its first encounter with the advanced technology of Western colonialists, shivering and fleeing in terror before the power of the magic machine.

The so-called "train effect" (Yuri Tsivian) incarnates cinema's total victory over the human senses: the overwhelming sensation of the moving image can mobilize the bodies of the spectators. It suggests that moving, black and white images on a relatively small size screen, <sup>[4]</sup> lacking any synchronic sound, can represent a visual impression with a power that affects mass audience as effectively as reality, and is able to produce strong physical reactions. The story presenting this train effect exists in lots of versions, sometimes mentioned as a *tale*, a *legend*, an anecdote from the folklore of cinema (as Steven Bottomore states) or a "believe or not" story (as Cecil Hepworth called it). It was investigated by lots of film historians (Yuri Tsivian, Nicolas Hiley, Martin Loiperdinger, Stephen Bottomore) and was vividly interpreted by different theorists (Christian Metz, Tom Gunning, Mary Ann Doane). Besides the assumption that the panic legend probably could be the best possible publicity for the pictures (Bottomore 1999: 181), the psychological and historical facts collected by scholars offer a detailed refinement of the anecdote. Concerning the problem of perception, it seems that the concept of homogeneous mass audience has to be demolished. Rather, we have to separate the experienced, trained spectators who were familiar with urban visual experience (magic lantern shows, amusement parks, advertisements and speed of city life), and the viewers with "untrained cognitive habits" (Tsivian) – for example people coming from a rural, non-industrial background – this type of naïve spectator himself appears as *Uncle Josh* or *The Countryman* in some Edison, Biograph and Pathé films mocking the "Peasant Comes to Town"-situation at the turn of the century. Children, patients of insane asylums, or non-Western, native, pre-industrial people are also considered as "untrained" viewers, and are reported to react similarly in an emotional, instinctive and spontaneous way to the completely new visual technology of cinema (Bottomore 1999: 196–201), showing signs of shock and panic.

In this way we can assume that the train effect cannot be declared a general mass panic reaction, characteristic only to the first Parisian show; it seems to be that one can talk about individual reactions of panic, appearing at different locations, in different times. <sup>[5]</sup> The fact that the train effect later was interpreted as the founding myth of the medium, testifying the power of film over audience (Loiperdinger 2004: 92), emphasizes again the similarity between anthropological "first

contact stories” and “narratives of new media encounter”. As Christian Metz already pointed out, to believe that people of the past or from more primitive societies may have run in fear at train films at the same time proves how much more sophisticated we are today. (Bottomore 1999: 184) Even the often cited, rational account of Maxim Gorky (“Last night I was in the Kingdom of Shadows...”) about his first Lumière projection seen as grey, soundless, bleak, depressive representation of real life, contains a passage about the locomotive as a physical threat. Thus, on the one hand, Gorky himself can be called a propagator of the panic legend, on the other, his rational, intellectualized version of viewer reaction stands in contrast with the mythological early cinema audience which appears, behaves and reacts as naïve, instinctive natives, with an untouched sensual and perceptual system, with uncontrolled reactions, without any intellectual elaboration, but immediate, reflexive and protective body-reactions.

## Haptic Medium

The panic legend seems to suggest that the new medium – “silent” film – first of all is a visual medium: its power lies in its visual ability to represent space, objects, people and movement properly. Seeing is enough to believe; the audience is overwhelmed by visual impressions. In my opinion the panic legend, becoming the founding myth of cinema, has another message as well, concerning a *visual-haptic medium* which is able to activate not only the sense of sight or vision, but also the other senses, particularly the sense of touch.

Lumière’s *Arrival of the Train* attains its moment of culmination when the train occupies the closest position to the camera. In this moment the locomotive reaches its biggest size on the screen, in the front of the audience. Moreover, the cinematic effect makes the approaching and seemingly rapidly growing locomotive as if it were accelerating, while in reality the locomotive arriving at the station is slowing down. For spectators who do not yet know the distortion of proportions on the screen, this can result in an irritating perceptual experience. (Loiperdinger 2004: 104)



*Feeding the Baby, 1895*

Towards-camera movement on the screen produces this impact of the invading image, which technically is a frontal close-up shot of the train. The first Lumière films were mainly composed in long shot view, with some exceptions, like *Feeding the Baby*'s (1895) medium shot. In this way *Arrival of the Train* confronted early cinema audience for the first time with a close-up shot, meaning here the extreme closeness of a dangerous object. The public had the opportunity to experience an almost frontal view of a moving locomotive from an arm's length distance, threatening with dangerously breaking in the spectators' personal space. And as approaching

means enlarging – enlarging, in turn, means approaching. The haptic dimension of the close-up is emphasized by size: the train effect was reported to be stronger in the front row, at the seats nearest to the screen. The effect also depends on the size of the screen. (Biograph system for example could project onto a particularly large screen, which was almost 2 or 3 times bigger than Lumière’s screen, see Bottomore 1999: 186, 187, 191) This intimate distance simply increases the possibility of direct body contact, the illusion that the approaching object can immediately reach and touch the viewer’s body. Stephen Bottomore examining dozens of reports and descriptions about first contact experiences finds that strong physical reactions have appeared mostly with films showing approaching vehicles. (1999: 186, 188) <sup>[6]</sup> No surprise that some years later a similar shot was recorded to produce the same panic reaction. *The Great Train Robbery’s* (1903) medium close-up of a cowboy shooting a gun directly into the camera, thus toward the auditorium, made the first audience of the film run out of the theatre screaming. (Bushman–Anderson 2001: 478)

However panic reaction appears to be associated for some time with close-ups, <sup>[7]</sup> a decade later, at the beginning of the 10s, the appearance of the first inserted close(r) shots gives rise to another kind of vehement reaction, this time not panic, but mainly dissatisfaction and disgust. These reactions are well documented by dozens of newspaper articles, and although they do not become settled in form of a myth, yet can be examined as another type of first contact narrative. In this case the topic is not a first encounter with a new medium, but a new chapter in the history of new medium: the beginning of Classical Hollywood Storytelling era, namely the shaping of continuity system.

In the first part of the 10s a lot of complains were published in the magazine entitled *The Moving Picture World* about the scandalous new close-ups. In 1909, for example, a critic described a film as “a story performed by giants and giantesses”, but later complained of the “total lack of uniformity”, meaning that the picture contained medium, long *and* extra-long shots (and as we can deduce today, no real close-ups at all):

“... If these figures had been photographed at equal distances from the camera, then they would have appeared of equal sizes on the screen, instead of varying between the dimensions of a Brobdignagian monstrosity and Lilliputian pygmies. It is curious to reflect that in an hour entertainment of a moving picture theatre, the visitor sees an infinite variation in the apparent sizes of things as shown by the moving picture. This is absurd. On the vaudeville or talking stage, figures of human beings do not expand or contract irrationally or eccentrically; they remain the same size. Not so on the moving picture stage, where, as we have said, one film shows us giants and another manikins.” <sup>[8]</sup>

Other reviews find that extreme closeness is the most problematic with this new style:

“There are many moving pictures made nowadays, even by reputable makers, in which the figures are too near the camera: that is to say, they assume unnecessarily large and, therefore, grotesque proportions.” [9]

According to a recollection of Ivor Montagu, [10] when face *close-ups first* appeared on the screen, the public stomped and cried: “Show us their feet!” Another author in *The Moving Picture World* found the “cutting” of the actors’ bodies unacceptable:

“... Until now it is a common sight to witness a photoplay the greater part of which is acted so close to the camera that the actors are seen only from the waist upwards. *Facial expression* – that seems to be the dominating influence that brings about this inartistic result (...) in order to get facial expression (...) an actor must be as close to the camera as possible (...) The only way to do this, is to cut off the feet. What good are feet? No good at all. (...) A good training for directors is to visit art galleries. There one will see very few compositions with the feet cut off. The only paintings with the feet cut off are character studies and portraits (...).” [11]

Although this was not the first time when cinema audience has met close views on screen, it is not accidental that reactions to face close-ups were more vehement than to object close-ups. The subgenre of *facial expression films* existed since 1897, [12] but became really popular in the period of the cinema of attraction (1902--1907). The funny grimaces presented in medium close-up view occasionally may have had a framing situation indicated in the title (like reading a letter, shaving, eating, etc.), but were more close to some vaudevillian humour than to intimate, emotional characterization. The simultaneous popularity of single-shot facials and unpopularity of inserted face close-ups in multi-shot films can be explained by integration and scale problems: while the humorous face alone was not perceived as part of a body, multi-shot films showed the different views of the body filmed from different distances.

We must add that the reviews cited above are representative of the conservative public opinion; there were also critics, who (between 1911–15) undoubtedly celebrated closer views, [13] because these made possible a more natural, modern acting style (called *facial expression*) in contrast with the old school of melodramatic, pantomime acting (See Thompson 1985: 190–191 and Bowser 1990: 94). If we investigate these first contact reactions to inserted face close-ups, we can see that the complaints mainly repeat three problems: 1. The variation of the body-size; 2. Grotesque closeness; 3. Cutting of body parts.

1. The protest against the variation of the body-size seems to have its roots in an exaggerated comparison of moving images to theatre show. It seems that for the educated, regular theatre-goer audience it was more difficult to tolerate size- and scale changes even in 1913. [14] A Russian theatre critic, for example, writes the following:

“The directors are clearly people with no idea of artistic taste: the slightest hint of emotion in a scene and for some reason they immediately shoot figures and faces enlarged almost to twice life-size. Imagine what it is like to see a huge nose, a vast mouth, monstrous whites of eye, unnaturally protruding lips, all leering down at you. And when all of these bits of a face belonging to a visitor from outer space begin to move and to express profound emotion – well, the sadder the scene is meant to be, the more grotesque and totally ridiculous is the effect.” [15]

In the opinion of the educated audience the variable framing of multi-shot films mixed different views and different arts (long shot view of the theatre stage, close-up view of the painted portrait, written text inserts of literature), and by that ruined the unity of the art-work. Thus, close-ups were not incomprehensible or threatening, but they were simply violating traditional aesthetic rules. Their refusal by this part of the audience was a conscious, intellectual response to new compositional aspects of the new medium. The topic has a long afterlife: the integration of human faces into what used to be a reproduced stage performance sets off a long-lasting debate among early film theorists whether the close-up remains some kind of fragment or produces unity on an even higher level.

2. The second and third complaint are reminiscent of some aspects of the panic legend. The protest against grotesque closeness seems to echo the threatening effect of the approaching train. Here the early commentators deplore extreme closeness of faces, interpreted as a kind of invasion of the viewer’s personal space. Proxemically a personal-space invasion can create positive sensations of *intimacy* as well as negative sensations of *threat*, depending on the estimation of the invading object. (Persson 2004: 110) This “object” in early film sometimes was a vehicle moving towards the camera, [16] but it could be a human figure too, like in James Williamson’s *The Big Swallow* (1900). Thus the image of actors staged in a closer view could activate a tactile dimension of the cinematic image, and could produce a haptic irritation, expressed in the refusal of close-ups as grotesque images.



*How It Feels To Be Run Over, 1900*

3. Speaking of the third complaint of the reviewers, the cutting of body parts, we have another well-known example of first contact narrative. Béla Balázs’s *Theory of the Film* quotes the case of a well-educated girl visiting Moscow from Siberia, who thought that the first film she had seen in her life (a comedy) was horrible, because: “Human beings were torn to pieces, and the heads thrown one way and the bodies to other and hands somewhere else again.” (Balázs 1952: 35) Her lack of cinematic experience reveals the violence within the process of the body’s disintegration

into screen images. Other descriptions, referring to face close-ups often express disgust and horror using phrases like ‘severed’ or ‘chopped off’ heads, ‘giant, cut off’ heads. This could be explained by the issue of beheading, which has a long cultural history from mythological Medusa and biblical decapitation of St. John the Baptist over the French Revolution’s guillotine up to actual capital punishments in Asian and Arabian countries. Decapitation was always a sensitive topic, simply because – as Birk Weiberg formulates – “there is no stricter distinction between humans than the one of those with and those without head.” (Weiberg 2004: 1) From a theoretical point of view the difference regarding the way these early texts hesitate between face-images and head-objects is striking: the term head seems to dominate whenever the close-up appears to be a foreign body within the entity of the film (Weiberg 2004: 5), and face is used when someone refers to this new possibility of expression in film.



*A Big Swallow, 1901*

\* \* \*

First encounters with cinema and later with variable framing represent the first steps in a more than two-decade long learning process of the rules of continuity system, and show two different concepts of screen and spectator. In the panic legend the screen appears as a window through which the audience has an immediate contact with reality, while complaints about close-ups refer to a vision of ‘screen as a frame’, in fact a constant frame. Panic legend as a typical first contact narrative outlines a naïve, instinctive spectator, whose body-reactions are spontaneous and uncontrolled. On the other hand, first opinions about the inserted close-ups suggest the image of a more sophisticated audience, although the reactions in both cases can be connected to the haptic dimension of cinema, the close-up’s ability to provoke the viewer with an illusion of invading its personal-space. However, face-close-ups can also produce panic reactions, but mostly in those cases when they, at the same time, are part of a first encounter experience of the new medium. So, after this start, the successful career of the close-up in the following years comes as no surprise, as the close-up became an emblematic shot of mature silent film and a central concept of early film theory, equally appreciated by Hugo Münsterberg, Jean Epstein and Béla Balázs.

## Jegyzetek

1. Wheterell (1998) writes about some missionaries from London arriving at the islands of Eastern Papua New Guinea at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century, who were called “memetua” by the natives, meaning supernatural.
2. Liu indicates that he uses “narrative” as an elastic term whose scope expands or narrows according to the discussion (Liu 2008: 5).
3. See a collection of examples in the first part of Martin Loiperdinger’s essay. (2004: 90–91)
4. Lumière’s screen was really small size: 2m in width maximum, while the projected image size at one Biograph show in France was 8m wide by 5m high (Bottomore 1999: 187)
5. Bottomore reports that in his work in New Guinea in the 1960s anthropologist Edmund Carpenter found, for example, that the people were terrified at seeing photographs of themselves and that their first sight of projected films caused “pandemonium”. (199:198)
6. Bottomore also mentions here – with fewer examples – another type of films, those depicting sea or waves. (1999: 186)
7. See Béla Balázs about the first Griffithian close-up (which description also has a “mythical” dimension): “We know that when Griffith first showed a big close-up in Hollywood cinema, and a huge ‘severed’ head smiled at the *public for the first time*, there was a panic in the cinema.” (Balázs 1952: 35)
8. Fragment from “The Factor of Uniformity”. *The Moving Picture World*, vol. 5, no. 4. July 24. 1909. 115–116. Reprinted in Pratt 1973: 95. (italics mine, M. B.)
9. Fragment from “Too Near the Camera”. *The Moving Picture World*, vol. 8, no. 12. March 25. 1911. 633--634. Reprinted in Pratt 1973: 96. (italics mine, M. B.)
10. Interview with Ivor Montagu. *Screen* 1972. 13(3): 71–113.
11. Fragment from H. F. Hoffmann, “Cutting off the Feet”. *The Moving Picture World*, vol. 12. no. 1. April 6. 1912. 53. Reprinted in Pratt 1973: 97--98. (italics mine, M. B.)
12. See *Facial Expression by Loney Haskell*, Biograph (1897). Some of the Lumière films also belong here, see for

example *Chapeaux a transformation* (1895) or *Presidents of the Republic* (Thiers, Mac-Mahon, Grévy, Carnot, Félix Faure, 1899). In the latter a quick-change artist puts on the masks of some French presidents, in medium close-up, before a neutral background.

13. These closer views were not identical with later close-ups; at this time there was only a single distinction, that between closer and longer, distant shots (Griffith's close-ups were medium shots or medium close-ups). Every shot that cuts the actor's figure was called "close-up", as the citations from the articles of *The Moving Picture World* showed above. (Thompson 1985: 190) Critics around 1909-10 probably complained about the change in the camera's distance from the actors' body, from twelve feet line to nine feet line. As a result of this, the actor's body was cut around knees or ankles, and there appears no empty space above the heads on the film image. (Thompson 1985: 190, Bowser 1990: 194)
14. Yuri Tsivian finds that this could be the possible explanation for the Russian audience's revolt against closer shots (1994: 131)
15. Stark, E. (1913) "Snogami na stole" [Feet on the Table], *Teatr i Iskusstvo* [Theater and Art], No. 39, p. 770. Cited from Tsivian 1994: 131.
16. Like remakes of Lumière's train-film, or *How it Feels to be Run Over* (1900) featuring a motorcar.

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