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Itinerant Cinema and the Moving Image of Modernism's Borders

The film historian Jacques Rittaud-Hutinet argues that early cinema's itinerant projectionists, without their quite knowing it at the time, were responsible for "a new sensibility […] a new art and, above all, a new way of seeing."[1] More than the medium's much-heralded inventors, these men were, for Rittaud-Hutinet and others, the real pioneers. They captured the world on film, and then they captured the world's attention by screening those films. As they traveled the world in the 1890s, these pioneers improvised many of cinema's most foundational practices—what David Rodowick calls its "automatisms"—and these practices have since survived cinema's so-called death.[2] While histories of cinema have addressed the contributions of these itinerant projectionists, modernist studies has largely neglected them. Yet amid the dusty reels and sensational origin stories of early cinema, these projectionists, technicians, promoters, filmmakers, and showmen produced the broader and enduring cinematic imagination—with all its figurative jump cuts, dissolves, and montages—that informed, and still informs, modernism. These men were responsible, in a very concrete sense, for the circulation of modernist objects, ideas, and practices across borders.

With the various disciplinary expansions of the new modernism—spatial, temporal, and generic—modernism's "borders" have remained in flux and under-theorized. Borders are invoked rhetorically to describe periodization or genre, but for modernism's geographical expansion the "border" is of course

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[1] Jacques Rittaud-Hutinet, *Le cinéma des origins: Les frères Lumière et leurs opérateurs* (Seysell: Editions de Champ Vallon, 1985), 69. My translation.

[2] D. N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Cinema* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 40.

much more powerful and literal, or at least conventional. For "transnational" modernist studies, the border scores the very site of difference, differentiation, and discipline among nation states; it undergirds and structures the principle of the transnational much more so than do the mutually distant metropolitan centers that often serve as the bases for comparative study. During the modernist period the world's geopolitical lines were contested, drawn and redrawn, and unprecedentedly enforced. Yet modernist studies, long centered in the metropolis, rarely ventures to or considers these borders themselves. In what follows I want to suggest that reckoning with the character, the function, and the elusiveness of the geopolitical border from a cinematic perspective can provide better methodological traction for modernism's various transnational turns.

In her essay "Modernism's Moving Bodies," Michelle Clayton makes the comparatively rare move of engaging with the border itself. She analyzes three artists' movements across specific borders, and her inductive procedure models and advocates for a methodological shift, for what she calls "comparative modernisms [that have] less to do with modernist cosmopolitanism than with comparative particularisms: particularisms performed by moving bodies." [3] Abiding by the particular, Clayton proposes making "new and livelier maps of modernism" that resist the static generalizations of a systems-level perspective.[4] Her method finds affinities with other recent work that departs from a focus on (even plural) centers and instead devotes its attention to a more diverse set of sites—as well as to the movements and exchanges between them.

Clayton's essay is focused on modernist dance and yet she begins and ends with two cinematic accounts of the border. First, she recalls how in 1915 some films barred from import to the United States were projected across the Canadian border and rerecorded from stateside screens. In this historical moment, the light of the moving image could elude disciplinary control in ways that the equipment, the projectionist, and the film stock could not. And to close her essay, Clayton turns to Charlie Chaplin, pictured in limbo between the U.S. and Mexico at the end of *The Pilgrim* (1923). In reading this moment from the film, she locates a

[3] Michelle Clayton, "Modernism's Moving Bodies," *Modernist Cultures* 9.1 (2014): 27-45 (31).

[4] Clayton, "Modernism's Moving Bodies," 32.

"tentative flickering image of how modernist bodies straddled the transnational."[5] Between these two cinematic readings, Clayton more broadly articulates the challenges and opportunities of modernist border work, with real bodies, spaces, and machines producing a complex, composite image of the transnational. She proposes that the border, that site of transit and transition, provides a flickering Archimedean ground from which we might screen, compile, and assess particular comparative claims. Clayton's cinematic framing encourages us to conceive of the border as variably recorded and screened, something heterogeneous and transactional, a kind of activity rather than a static place. This complex characterization seems in tune with recent modernist thinking, and it also importantly echoes theorizations from other disciplines. The political scientist Chris Rumford, for example, theorizes the border as a set of practices and advocates a critical positionality close to Clayton's closing image. Rather than "'looking both ways' *across* a border," Rumford suggests, "we need to look *from* the border."[6]

In this essay, I join Clayton and Rumford in looking to, across, and from the border to witness how it is experienced and represented in modernism. I argue that the language of the cinematic imagination is useful in discerning the border's optics, its regulatory work, its unpredictability, and its experienced texture. In what follows I re-play several modernist border crossings as they were filmed, screened, and selectively recounted by an under-sung Lumière projectionist, Félix Mesguich. One of the most widely traveled of the early filmmakers, Mesguich, unlike many of his peers, was also personally invested in cinema's mythmaking. Across his films from the 1890s and 1900s, as well as in his 1933 memoir, *Tours de manivelle: Souvenirs d'un chasseur d'images*, Mesguich offers a montage of different tellings that give flickering form to the modernist border.

In episodes at or near international borders, Mesguich shows that while modernity's geopolitical boundaries may be the emerging sites of regulation and discipline, in practice they are indistinct and unpredictable. With Mesguich, the borders only become discernible in the belated discursive effects they produce,

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[5] Clayton, "Modernism's Moving Bodies," 43.

[6] Chris Rumford, *Cosmopolitan Borders* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 19.

that is, when they generate narrative, invite figurative language, or yield anxious self-awareness. Treating each of Mesguich's border crossings as its own "particularism" in Clayton's sense, I develop three distinct "images" of the border: the border as figural displacement, as narrative disturbance, and as an archival absence. Like distinct frames on a filmstrip, these different border images maintain their autonomous character while also—in the spirit of montage—revealing something beyond the sum of their parts. They each frame the border as a site of personal and methodological reckoning, and they each generate new forms of discourse for Mesguich and, by extension, for the modernist critic. My hope is that the mechanics of these individual cases will provide a vocabulary for examining other crossings and join Clayton's work in modeling an inductive procedure to produce more nuanced border concepts for negotiating "new and livelier maps of modernism."

On their own terms and in combination, Mesguich's films and his memoir cast the border as both powerful and fleeting, something akin to the unseen interval between a film's frames. Through Mesguich's work, the border emerges as the productive site of cutting and editing that invites movement and meaning across distinct images. It is the implied parataxis that links particular images and makes possible their motion and comparison. Mesguich's early films and later writings, in their untimely combination, therefore produce a composite documentary that straddles the borders of transnational modernism. My reading with Mesguich, as an often-unwitting critical interlocutor, ultimately transforms Clayton's tentative, still image of the border into a decidedly moving one. This moving image is both specific and dynamic, a figure of embodied, technological, and discursive relations that becomes discernible through its cumulative effects.

The Men with the Movie Cameras

In the late 1890s the cinématographe and its operators traveled to all six inhabitable continents. In *Documentary*, Eric Barnouw details how the operators' visits inaugurated a set of related site-specific histories: "In scores of countries, the visit of a Lumière operator marked the beginning of film history."[7] Cinema spread surprisingly quickly, and this early circulation of ideas, images, and

[7] Eric Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 19.

technologies adds important depth and breadth to a later understanding of world cinema as a collection of national film industries. Within two years of the cinématographe's Parisian debut, the Lumière brothers had deployed itinerant projectionists to most of modernism's "centers" as well to many more "peripheral" cities. Rittaud-Hutinet catalogs the trajectories of these men and their movie cameras: in June 1896, for example, the cinématographe made its debuts in Belgrade, Bombay, and New York; that August, it made its first appearances in Mexico City, São Paulo, and Shanghai.[8]

The brothers Lumière, from their base in Lyon, swiftly circulated what Louis notoriously called their "invention without a future."[9] While others may claim rights to the invention of cinema, no one matched the entrepreneurial Lumière brothers in marketing it as a commercial, social, and global practice. The distinctive ingenuity of their portable cinématographe—in contrast to Thomas Edison's kinetoscope, for example—was that it functioned as both a camera and a projector, allowing operators to film, develop, and screen the world as they moved through it. The cinématographe was about the size of a suitcase and an operator "could be sent to a foreign capital, give showings, shoot new films by day, develop them in a hotel room, and show them the same night."[10] As these men circled the world they collected, curated, and distributed a catalog of actualités, with the goal of "placing the world within one's reach."[11] One of the attractions of these shows was the juxtaposition of the global with the local, as audiences saw themselves and the world side-by-side in the same program.[12] To

[8] Rittaud-Hutinet, *Les cinéma des origines*, 53-54. In another of Rittaud-Hutinet's works, he provides a more complete appendix of the premieres. See *Auguste et Louis Lumière: Les 1000 premiers films* (Paris: Philippe Sers Editeur, 1990).

[9] Many scholars believe this phrase to be apocryphal, but it remains powerful shorthand within early cinema's mythology; it finds its latest, prominent invocation as the title of James Naremore's 2014 collection of essays.

[10] Barnouw, *Documentary*, 6.

[11] Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," in Wendy Strauven, ed., *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), 381-388 (381).

[12] Jean-Claude Seguin notes that the filming-and-screening of local scenes was not practiced initially, as many historians believe, but became more common as the projectionists traveled; see Seguin, *Alexandre Promio ou les énigmes de la lumière* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999), 66-67.

see a Lumière show was to be interpellated into the unfolding screen of the global imagination.

The early viewing experience was usually billed with the inventors' or the device's names, but it was facilitated and performed by mostly anonymous showmen. Film historian Tom Gunning turns to projectionist Albert E. Smith to dramatize how these early programs would begin. Smith, like Mesguich, wrote himself into cinema's history with a memoir. In his prose recreation of a projectionist's work, Smith's showman speaks: "Ladies and gentlemen you are now gazing upon a photograph . . . In just a moment, a cataclysmic moment . . . without equal in the history of our times, you will see this train take life."[13] The moment that Smith and Gunning reanimate is something like cinema's apocryphal primal scene. In the projectionist's words, the difference between the familiar still image and the novel moving one is the turn of the crank, and what is at stake—then and now—is the *taking* of life; the image assumes life at the same moment it vanquishes it. Cinema's reputation for danger and deathliness was as crucial for the "birth" of cinema as it is now for the much-discussed "death." And this element of danger would also find form in and around Félix Mesguich's "border" films.

Among the early projectionists, the Algerian-born Mesguich is exemplary for the combination of his travels, the images he produced, and his self-conscious participation in writing cinema history. Jean Alexandre Louis Promio (Mesguich's mentor) and Francis Doublier also have received attention for their contributions, but they did not reflect on their experiences with the same detail that Mesguich does in his memoir.[14] In 1895, Mesguich applied to work in the Lumière factories and, once trained, he traveled the world making films. He filmed state coronations and funerals and the first modern Olympic Games; he

[13] Albert E. Smith cited in Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator," in Linda Williams, ed., *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 114-133 (120).

[14] Rittaud-Hutinet calls these men the "big three" (*Les cinéma des origines*, 141). In English-language scholarship, the many contributors to early cinema are documented in Stephen Herbert's and Luke McKernan's *Who's Who of Victorian Cinema*. The project was published as a book in 1996, but the authors continue to add entries to the online version: http://www.victorian-cinema.net/.

was the first to mount a camera on a train and to a Wright brothers plane. When a client in 1909 suggested that Mesguich had run out of places to film, he set out on a trip around the world with 30,000 meters of film stock.[15]

In his 1933 *Tours de manivelle* (*Turns of the Crank*), Mesguich nostalgically retells the notable events of his career, beginning with his first visit to the Lumière factory. When Mesguich describes the three remarkable border crossings his prose shifts dramatically. Franco Moretti, in his study of the European novel, claims that the border is where our stories enter "a space of danger, surprises, suspense." [16] Moretti shows how the language of representation, at the "site of *adventure*," shifts in fictional characters' crossings. Mesguich's experience adheres to this literary pattern, although in the memoir, in describing the surprises and suspense, Mesguich routinely and curiously neglects mention of the border itself. Instead, as Mesguich crosses borders in North America, Russia, and North Africa, the discourse departs from the geographical scene to record broader personal, political, or representational anxieties.[17] In effect, as Mesguich keeps turning the crank, the cinématographe records the traces of what will largely remain a felt and flickering absence, even in his much later memoir.

The Border as Figural Displacement

The cinématographe made waves in the United States even before it arrived. Thomas Edison's earlier invention, the kinetoscope, had only provided for a private viewing—something like a peep show—while the Lumière brothers would offer the more spectacular public projection. Word of the

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[15] Félix Mesguich, *Tours de manivelle: Souvenirs d'un chasseur d'images* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1933), 156.

[16] Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel: 1800-1900* (London: Verso, 1998), 35. In this work, Moretti proposes a phenomenology of the border rather than an ontology, acknowledging in this way the border's historical emergence and its ongoing contingency.

[17] The terms national, international, and transnational are imprecise in describing the contemporary geopolitical relationships of the period. In this essay I join Mesguich in distinguishing among these territories, using loosely the language of national difference. I must note, of course, that Algeria was a French colony and that Tsarist Russia had a different concept of sovereignty than the one now largely naturalized for nations.

cinématographe's feats in Paris traveled fast, and before the Lumière invention made its North American debut, Edison Studios had countered with a competing projection model, the vitascope.[18] Still, the Lumières' arrival offered a new, exotic catalog of films that commanded public interest. In the early years of cinema, the companies relied on mutually incompatible formats, in part to ensure proprietary control of their catalogs. The cinématographe's debut in New York City in June 1896 promised the first glimpse of European scenes captured on film.

With many promoters, venues, and companies vying to capitalize on the new entertainment, this French import came under particular scrutiny. Mesguich recalls that the Lumière brothers had neither patented the device nor were they paying taxes on its earnings; he and the other operators brought cinématographes into the States as their personal property.[19] As the pictures became big business, and with the Biograph, Bioscope, and Kinetograph all competing for a share, the Lumière company's administrative neglect became the more conspicuous.[20] There is another story here about intellectual property rights which, like the regulation of international travel, would only come to be standardized—more or less—after World War I.[21] Mesguich's experiences in the States and his crossings of the Canadian border were infused by the moment's enthusiasm for the new pictures as well as by the associated anxieties, and these anxieties would find form in Mesguich's film of Niagara Falls.

Late in 1896 and early 1897, Mesguich toured the U.S. with several other Lumière projectionists.[22] When he returned to New York after a stint in Chicago,

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[18] Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (New York: Scribner's, 1990), 137.

[19] Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema*, 139, 508.

[20] Rittaud-Hutinet, *Les cinéma des origines*, 167. Rittaud-Hutinet recounts Mesguich's surprise when seeing a patriotic and protectionist sign on Broadway, "American Biograph: America for American."

[21] In *The Copywrights* and his edited collection *Modernism and Copyright*, Paul Saint-Amour compellingly shows the relationships between intellectual property law and artistic production during this period.

[22] In recalling these events almost forty years later, Mesguich is "somewhat cavalier with the facts" and especially with the dates (Herbert and McKernan, *Who's Who of Victorian Cinema*). Jean-Claude Seguin takes Mesguich to task about his dates, which are off not

Mesguich was informed by a colleague, a Monsieur Lafont, that they needed to leave the country; Lafont feared the confiscation of the equipment, prosecution, and deportation. So Mesguich joined Lafont in his panic, and in his memoir Mesguich describes first Lafont's escape and then his own. The border here looms not so much as the site of danger or surprise, but rather as a relief from potential trouble. Lafont gathered the Lumière assets and enlisted Mesguich to help him paddle a canoe into the Hudson River after nightfall. According to Mesguich, Lafont slipped aboard an ocean liner already sailing for France to avoid any kind of American checkpoint; his "border crossing" transpired on the open ocean. When Mesguich paddled back to shore he found that his colleague had been right: the offices had been raided and the remaining equipment confiscated.[23] Mesguich hastily returned to his lodgings, where he had his own machine, and headed not back to France but to Canada. There, he would contribute to the popularization of cinema in Toronto, Montreal, and Ottawa, less competitive and still unregulated markets for these moving pictures.[24]

Despite taking pride in other territorial conquests, Mesguich uncharacteristically omits the details of his own escape and any sustained account of his time in Canada; he summarizes these events in just a few sentences. As Mesguich then heads back into the U.S.—en route to France—with his now-contraband camera, he occludes any mention of the border and instead devotes significant attention

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only by a matter of days but weeks and even months. Seguin turns to Mesguich's military and work records in France to prove that the projectionist could not have been in the U.S. until late 1896 despite his claiming in *Tours de manivelle* that he was there in the summer. By disputing Mesguich's accuracy, Seguin can more clearly showcase the contributions of Alexandre Promio, the subject of his own study. Despite this slighting, Seguin cites Mesguich often, and credits Mesguich's writing for capturing the feeling of an early screening (Seguin, *Alexandre Promio*, 62-63).

[23] Musser in his more meticulous historical account also notes that Mesguich is prone to overstatement and inaccuracy. It does seem that the Lumière company was under scrutiny, but Musser posits that the government may not have been "the only and perhaps not even the principal reason for their withdrawal from the American market. By that date, the cinématographe was becoming technologically outmoded" (*The Emergence of Cinema*, 177). The company pulled out of Britain around the same date, leading Musser to believe that it may have been part of a deliberate strategy. Whether these factors were apparent to Mesguich or whether he was indulging in the better story is unclear.

[24] Peter Morris, *Embattled Shadows: A History of Canadian Cinema, 1895-1939* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 1992), 8.

to the film he makes thereabouts, *Niagara, les chutes*, which has become a famous film in the Lumière catalog. Faced with the opportunity to film Niagara Falls, Mesguich sublimates the personal and political event of border crossing into an aesthetic object. In the memoir, the pace of his prose slows here and he patiently details the technical experimentation needed to capture the water's movement on such a grand scale. The discursive shift corresponds with Moretti's claim regarding the novel: style always changes, and "*figurality rises*," near the border.[25] Mesguich's recrossing of this border produces the memoir's first instances of ekphrasis and his first sustained engagement with the figural.

In *Niagara*, on the extant grainy stock, the falling water joins the pocked frames' vertical cascade (even in its now-digital rendition). The rushing river from the right of the image offers an incongruent perpendicular to the film stock's flow. Within the shot, people step on to an observation deck from the right, as if carried in by the water they have come to watch. Unlike other early actualités that marvel in the transitions between stillness and motion (*L'Arroseur arrosé*, *Arrivé d'un train à la Ciotat*, *Démolition d'un mur*), the movement of the water here is almost eerily steady. In the written description, Mesguich has trouble capturing the scale of the falls or keeping pace with the water's movement: "On this torrent—a whole river—that rushes towards an alluring vertigo in an abyss whose bottom one cannot see through the spray, the eye searches for a point on which to hook its glance."[26] He decides that this is in vain—to fix the eye—and that "it's this alone, the impression of a formidable rush of furious water, that remains of the whole spectacle." The sight is overwhelming, and Mesguich appeals to a choppy, figural, and adjective-laden prose to reproduce the remembered feeling of perceptual excess. The eye and his language have nothing to hold on to, and so after a break, in a single-sentence paragraph, he allows his camera to do the work. He modestly explains this deferral to his reader: "The lens is more resourceful, less nervous."

Mesguich rhetorically lets the camera face what he has trouble describing in writing, the "descent into the maelstrom!"[27] The near-border scene brings

[25] Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel*, 43.

[26] Félix Mesguich, *Tours de manivelle*, 16. My translation.

[27] Mesguich, *Tours de manivelle*, 16.

Mesguich into the frame of his own memoir, as a self-aware artist and producer of images. He writes about his technical maneuvers, his re-positioning of himself to record different aspects of the falls as well as their magnitude. He situates the camera on a rock above the precipice, to catch the "semi-circle of a rainbow, suspended in the vapor;" here the filmmaker can only imply the rainbow's color in writing some thirty-five years later. He keeps turning the crank, calmed by the camera's even work, until he foolishly looks down below him, "Dizziness defeats me and a fear I cannot conquer obliges me to step away."

After this scene, Mesguich travels onward without incident. His doubling-back across the border is now remembered because of this film made nearby and not because of Mesguich's person or his papers. The camera captures the water's motion and it implicitly bears witness to its own movement through the world. Mesguich's section ends with the vivid images that his camera and his writing seek but cannot quite capture: the maelstrom, the dizzy abyss, and the rainbow in the vapor. In Mesguich's memoir, the memory of the border produces this kind of uncharacteristic diction and phrasing. His voice is thrown to the figural, to the descriptive, and he eventually defers to the mechanical and to the film itself. In Mesguich's experience and in his recollection, this border is an interruption that prompts him to reflect on the medial limits of the immediate work. For Mesguich, and implicitly for the modernist critic, this first border offers a site of personal and methodological reckoning.

The Border as Narrative Disturbance

Mesguich returned to France and was dispatched to Russia, where his colleague Francis Doublier had already encountered both success and controversy. Doublier had arrived in May 1896, presenting a program of Lumière standards before filming the coronation of Tsar Nikolas II. When filming the tsar's subsequent presentation to the public—a celebration at which the Russian crowds were promised sweets, sausages, and commemorative goblets—Doublier produced one of the world's first catastrophe films. As Doublier recorded the celebrating crowds, a platform fell and as many as 5000 people were killed.[28]

[28] Jay Leyda, *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 19-20. Leyda includes a sustained account from a personal interview with Doublier.

The government swiftly confiscated the film, and the event went unremarked in the local press. The authorities realized film's power as a controversial witness, and they would intervene again—on a much smaller scale—when Mesguich came to Russia.

Almost two years after Doublier's trip, Mesguich traveled to St Petersburg, with successful engagements en route in Odessa, Kiev, and Moscow, as well as a private showing at the tsar's palace in Livadia. In this section of *Tours de manivelle*, Mesguich shifts his attention from the craft of filming to the now largely forgotten art of manual projection. This episode recalls the projectionists' often improvisatory performances of the films, in which they were able to speed and slow the event in response to the crowds' reactions. The projectionists of this era were not unseen technicians but showmen, and they were often accompanied by live music and other performance forms. While Mesguich seems to have maintained a fairly modest presence compared with some of his colleagues, he was attuned to the dynamics of the live event and he highlights this other component in Russia. Anticipating the border crossing that follows, Mesguich in the memoir draws the reader's attention to his own underappreciated role in making and showing these pictures. Negotiating the episode in retrospect he emphasizes the related, untimely qualities of filmmaking, writing, and memory.

In St Petersburg, Mesguich found himself in the company of another major performer, La Belle Otero. Otero was a Spanish dancer who had become a star at the Folies-Bergère in Paris. She had gained notoriety for high-profile affairs, and in Russia she was widely believed to be the Grand Duke's mistress. Mesguich's and Otero's shows were both part of a lively summer season, and she pitched to him the idea of dancing in one of his films.[29] Departing from the largely pedestrian scenes of Lumière actualités, Mesguich would capture this bona fide celebrity on camera, and his film of Otero's "valse brillante" arguably made her

[29] G.-Michel Coissac, *Histoire du Cinématographe: De ses origines jusqu'à nos jours* (Paris: Cinéopse, 1925), 426. In an earlier account, Mesguich frames their collaboration as Otero's idea; in *Tours de manivelle*, the collaboration is set up by his manager.

"the first star in the history of cinema."[30] For the debut screening of her dances, Mesguich drew his largest crowds yet at St Petersburg's Aquarium Theater, an audience that included princes and ambassadors.

Mesguich recalls in the memoir that the film of Otero's first dance was warmly welcomed, and that the crowd grew louder and louder during the second. In dramatizing this scene in the theater, Mesguich's consistent use of the present tense becomes crucial for feigning the immediacy of something happening *now*. As he turns the crank, he is thrilled by the roar and thinks to himself, "What a success!"[31] The reel finished, he turns off the projector's light and the "room is in an uproar […] and fists pound on the booth with redoubled violence."[32] He opens the door and "police officers brutally seize [him] with such fury that [he's] stunned." He concludes the paragraph with a rhetorical inversion: "We had wanted to surprise the public but I realize all the surprise was for me."

This was not the first time Mesguich had been dragged from the booth. At his first major engagement in New York, he had met a similarly raucous reception. This is the first exhibition Mesguich describes in the memoir, and he indulges in its dramatization. "With a flick of the switch," he begins, "I plunge thousands of spectators into darkness."[33] He then moves through the line-up of actualités, with each receiving "a storm of applause." By the end, the crowd is whistling—he explains to his French readership that this is an American expression of appreciation—and chanting "'Frères Lumière!'" In New York, as in St Petersburg, there is a pounding on the door. He opens it—he here includes an ellipsis for suspense—and is pulled out and "carried in triumph onto the stage."[34] As the orchestra plays "The Marseillaise," the manager holds on to Mesguich's hand lest the shy operator flee. Later that night, this manager takes him out for supper and champagne, and gives Mesguich his own watch as a "souvenir […]

[30] Rittaud-Hutinet, *Le cinéma des origines*, 176. Mesguich calls the dance the "valse brisante," perhaps confusing it with the Chopin piece, while Rittaud-Hutinet and most others call it the "valse brillante."

[31] Mesguich, *Tours de manivelle*, 24.

[32] Mesguich, *Tours de manivelle*, 24-25.

[33] Mesguich, *Tours de manivelle*, 10.

[34] Mesguich, *Tours de manivelle*, 10.

for a memorable evening." Despite his reserve, projecting these pictures had made Mesguich his own kind of star.

In Russia, there would be no champagne or watches. Mesguich was dragged from the projection booth and into police custody. According to the story, the film of Otero also captured a Russian officer dancing and so Mesguich was interrogated for insulting the military and the state. Otero's high-profile relationship with the Grand Duke likely contributed to the fracas as well. Fortunately, the French Ambassador was in attendance and negotiated for the projectionist to be deported rather than charged. So Mesguich was sent out of Russia without money or luggage—but he held on to his camera and the film. In Russia, neither the camera nor the cameraman was as much of a problem as was the act of projecting a controversial film to the gathered masses. The written episode formally ends with Mesguich bound indefinitely for the border, flanked by Russian policemen.

Considering the episode's narrative interest and its link to celebrity, Mesguich's account of his flight is oddly brief and rhetorically understated. Perhaps his narration is retrospectively sobered by his cut to the next scene, which serves as something of a coda. Mesguich flashes forward many years to when he happened to meet Otero again in Paris. With the passage of time they laughed about that old scandal, but she grew sad when she informed him of something he had never known: while he rode out of Russia, clutching his camera, the officer from the film shot himself in a hotel lobby. In Mesguich's narrative, news of the suicide covers over the border crossing, and again the border itself is missing from *Tours de manivelle*.

In jumping to this reunion scene with Otero, Mesguich uncharacteristically shifts his present-tense narration to the future (to their meeting) and then to the relative past (to relate the suicide). In so doing, Mesguich grammatically marks their reunion, in relation to the memoir's narrative time, as a memory yet to come. The narrative anomaly draws attention to the memoir's otherwise taken-for-granted temporal conceits, momentarily reminding the reader of the later scene of writing and the always-untimely work of memory. As a writer Mesguich begins, at this point, to edit the sequence of images he has captured. This narrative disturbance arrives with the crossing of another border—or with

Mesguich's indefinite approach to it. As Mesguich heads out of Russia, his straightforward, nostalgic narration is ruptured by memories out of order and out of place, and he rearranges the moments to offer a different gloss on the episode, with details unknown to him at that time. On a moving train, he looks ahead of and behind himself before resuming the simpler present tense, across a section break and the border.[35]

The Border as an Archival Absence

When Mesguich returned from Russia, he was surprised to find that the Lumière brothers were moving on from film. Barnouw notes that this might have all been part of a plan; Louis Lumière, especially, was much more "at home in research and manufacture" than film production.[36] And their research did continue to correspond with and move ahead of cinema's own developments, including experiments with color photography and 3D film.[37] Despite the brothers' formal exit from filmmaking, the Lumière catalog, their machine, and their circle of collaborators remained central within the industry, both in France and abroad. Mesguich would continue working as something of a freelancer, while also managing the Select Cinema Saint-Denis and producing the weekly newsreel *Eclipse-Journal*.[38] He made advertising films and was involved in the production of the increasingly popular fiction films, including Sarah Bernhardt's *Hamlet.*[39]

In 1905 Mesguich set out for a project in North Africa, commissioned by the Compagnie Générale Transatlantique in association with the British Warwick Trading Company.[40] The idea was to film live versions of those exotic scenes

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[35] This would not be the last of Mesguich's trips to Russia, and he would be the only foreign cameraman present for the public massacres of Bloody Sunday in 1905 (Leyda, *Kino*, 26). This time he would flee immediately of his own volition.

[36] Barnouw, *Documentary*, 17.

[37] Ian Christie, *The Last Machine: Early Cinema and the Birth of the Modern World* (London: British Film Institute, 1994), 23. Christie indicates that the Lumière brothers did return to film production many years later, in 1937.

[38] Richard Abel, *The Ciné Goes to Town: French Cinema 1896-1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 15, 37.

[39] Robert Hamilton Ball, *Shakespeare on Silent Film: A Strange Eventful History* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1968), 24-26.

[40] Mesguich, *Tours de manivelle*, 94.

and cultural practices "already made popular by the expos, illustrated magazines, and travel literature."[41] At the beginning of the trip, Mesguich filmed the landscapes and daily life in the region of his birth. In *Tours de manivelles*, he embroiders these scenes with impressionistic remarks about Algiers, Oran, Tlemcen, and Biskra. He devotes about a page to each location, trying to find variation in what becomes a monotonous desert fantasy.

In Algeria, Mesguich's prose drifts into an inherited Orientalist mode. The story and the style are shaped by the place, as Moretti suggests, or at least by the writer's projections onto that place. In Figuig, Mesguich finds poetry in the movement of the caravans, their silhouettes "fantastic Chinese shadows on the horizon."[42] When he arrives in Biskra the adopted style reaches a fever pitch, perhaps to distract from what the writer knows will come. Mesguich decadently adorns his recollection, providing uncharacteristic description: "The sand is a prayer rug . . . [and] the sun's red globe slips behind the undulating amber dunes. The Sahara is before me, attractive and mysterious. My mind wanders towards the seduction of the infinite and the unknown."[43] While these lines could be read as indulgent invention, they also closely correspond to the longer tradition of French writing on North Africa. While locating the quintessentially exotic in Gustav Flaubert's writing for example, Alain de Botton cites this same constellation, of horizon, undulation, and infinity: "on the burning horizon the undulating landscape stretching out to infinity."[44] Mesguich closes the section with still more familiar moves, shifting to the spiritual and deferring to an at-once foreign and more local phrase: "Divine atmosphere of Biskra! In the morning light, when I leave this oasis it will leave regret, desire, and hope in my heart. Insha'Allah!" Writing several decades later, Mesguich knows the next day will chiefly yield regret, but in-scene he clings to hope and desire.

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[41] David Henry Slavin, *Colonial Cinema and Imperial France, 1919-1939: White Blind Spots, Male Fantasies, Settler Myths* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 101.

[42] Mesguich, *Tours de manivelle*, 97.

[43] Mesguich, *Tours de manivelle*, 99.

[44] Flaubert quoted in Alain de Botton, *The Art of Travel* (New York: Vintage, 2002), 74.

The next day Mesguich and his companions witness and document a local celebration. Mesguich marvels at the tattoos, the make-up, the costumes, and the jewelry. There is music and dancing; there is gazelle hunting. But Mesguich desires one thing in particular: "It is the fantasia that I want most."[45] A fantasia is a traditional horsemanship ceremony performed in the Maghreb, in which groups of riders charge at one another while firing muskets. A group of locals agrees to perform the spectacle and they demand seven francs each. Mesguich obliges and preparations begin. Mesguich is thrilled at the process, hoping to produce another of his unprecedented films. But when the "wild melee" of the riders and the "infernal din of musket fire" subside, two men remain on the ground. One horse had fallen, and then another; both riders were killed.

As with the episode in Russia, Mesguich's earlier, languid writing now becomes terse and sober. One fragment is isolated as a paragraph: "A tragic end to a day that began happily."[46] Another paragraph consists solely of "'Mektoub,' the Arabs say sententiously." Literally meaning "it is written," "Mektoub" more broadly connotes "it is destined" or "it was fate." In this solemn aftermath, Mesguich is confronted by an official who demands two thousand francs for each of the deceased's widows. Mesguich briefly prevaricates and decides that the matter would be more easily handled from France; "As a result, we decide to leave at dawn."[47] As with the Russia episode, Mesguich jumps ahead to describe the resolution—his company arranged the payment of five thousand francs to each widow—while eliding the passage home. Even in his own recollection the novelty of filming the fantasia is forgotten. Mesguich's travel account instead becomes the record of his complicity in—and his efforts to take some responsibility for—some of cinema's first on-set casualties.

The Composite After-Image of the Border

After the tragedy in Algeria, Mesguich would go on to travel and make further films. Despite the trouble surrounding his transnational pictures, his own mobility was never called into question. While the films or the camera received scrutiny, Mesguich—bearing identification documents, company papers, and

[45] Mesguich, *Tours de manivelle*, 100.

[46] Mesguich, *Tours de manivelle*, 100.

[47] Mesguich, *Tours de manivelle*, 101.

letters of introduction—is always assured homeward passage; his tours preceded the "passport regime" or the "passport system" that more profoundly affected later modernists.[48] In his history of the passport's emergence, John Torpey reveals this quiet feature of paper internationalism: while *cartes d'identités* seem to offer access to outward travel, they more profoundly are guarantees for returning home. Mesguich's nationality promises him safe return across unmentioned borders in what Torpey calls the "embrace" of sovereignty.[49] On the cusp of a subsequent trip, Mesguich would describe his accumulated confidence: "Nothing would stand in my way, neither distance nor borders."[50] It is one of the few explicit mentions of borders (*frontières*) in the memoir.

If anything does encumber Mesguich, in his reflections if not at the time, it is the cinématographe itself, a kind of phantom witness of the borders he crosses. In *Unthinking Eurocentrism* Ella Shohat and Robert Stam stress that early film projectionists inadvertently captured and circulated more than they set out to. As they traveled, they "did not simply document other territories; they also documented the cultural baggage they carried with them."[51] Mesguich documents his own "baggage," but more peculiarly what he carries is both his cultural baggage *and* that which documents it. It is the cinématographe's *documentary* presence—at the falls, in the theater, and in the desert—that is not entirely anticipated or understood by its operator, its subjects, or its audiences. The machine and its documentation prompt each of Mesguich's border crossings, and his retrospective writing tries to explain the events that the new technology both captures and sets in motion. In each of the three cases, in his dramatized memory, Mesguich is not sure what will happen or what has just happened; he keeps turning the crank. Only later does a composite image come into focus, edited in retrospective screenings and spliced into the narrative logic of memoir. Mesguich's peculiar baggage therefore helps to expose his doubled,

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[48] Bridget T. Chalk, *Modernism and Mobility: The Passport and Cosmopolitan Experience* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). Chalk's work provides a comprehensive account of the effect of this emerging regime on modernism.

[49] John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 11.

[50] Mesguich, *Tours de manivelle*, 103.

[51] Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Routledge, 1994), 104.

documentary position, his displacement at the border, his standing both inside and outside of the history he produces.

In *Tours de manivelle*, the lead-up to and reason behind each of the border crossings receive extensive attention, but the description and the narration end abruptly before the embodied transaction. The crossings are oddly absent, and the borders are replaced by the stories they produce and the traces they leave. These borders—real and fictional—do many things in Mesguich's work: they shape style, they split the writing subject, and they add narrative interest. In these writerly moments, Mesguich is passingly transformed from a nostalgic raconteur into an active character, a more self-conscious historian, and a more deliberate stylist. Like the unseen lines between film frames, these geopolitical intervals make his personal transitions and transformations possible; they provide the parataxis for Mesguich's historiography, allowing for discrete events to become narrative. Reading across these episodes, a flickering image of the modernist border begins to emerge; it appears to be a moving one.

As Michelle Clayton demonstrates in her account, the *modernist* border is inevitably historical and artistic as well as geopolitical; it is also disciplinary. If a border is an activity, it calls into question the positions of its participants, whether travelers, guards, or bystanders. By extension, modernism's borders also ask questions of the writers, readers, and critics who invoke or cross them. Borders, never quite one with themselves, are critical confrontations that situate us in the intervals, between frames of reference, between our own times of reading and writing. By closing with the image of Charlie Chaplin at the border, Clayton in fact joins the tramp in pausing "between two spaces and belonging to neither."[52] Yet even in its isolation, this image always implies another position—that of the camera—on one side or the other, or further down the line. To locate or to inhabit the border is to see and be seen from another perspective, in transition, projection, or displacement; and the potential reverse shots produce such images to infinity. As this archive of transnational modernism grows, Clayton's tentative border image can remain only provisionally singular and stable. Mesguich's composite documentary—and work similar to it—reframes the border image as a (missing) site of transformation, as always in flux and in

[52] Clayton, "Modernism's Moving Bodies," 43.

uncertain relation to its own character, shape, and effects. The modernist border becomes the site dynamically engaged with what lies on either side of it; it is a position to straddle and inhabit, to linger within, to move across and beyond. And its very elusiveness to observation and to discipline might be its modernist virtue, a reminder of its productive and unpredictable character.

The borders between sovereign territories have and will perform acts of state power, but—especially for the modernist project—they just as powerfully invite interrogation and creative transgression. To encounter our own limits and blind spots is to work in committed methodological conversation with the field's own objects and artists. It is to engage in the "activity" that Chris Rumford and other political scientists call a border.[53] Such a procedure helps those of us working in modernist studies to unsettle our "territorial thinking" and to proceed "*from dichotomous concepts rather than ordering the world in dichotomies.*"[54] This inductive procedure is what Walter Mignolo calls "border thinking," and border thinking may be worth pursuing even and especially when we find ourselves remote from such a location.

Framing the modernist border as a moving image allows us to ask and to reside in these questions, to think and to write in these plurals. It is, as Susan Stanford Friedman advocates, to commit to contact zones rather than comfort zones and to be critically within "the thick of things."[55] As scholars such as Friedman and Clayton show, these methodological urgings are emphatically prefigured in the modernist archive itself; and they surface again in the double-exposure of Félix Mesguich's filmic memoirs. Modernism, it turns out, might still have more to teach us about the work we do on and with it. There is a great deal of suspense and surprise near the border. And treating this border, and by extension all our field's "borders," not as a fixed limit or expanding boundary but rather as an activity or as a *trans-* site—committed to things like transit, translation, and transformation—will move us away from the still too-settled and too-centered *-national* in this moving project of transnational modernism.

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[53] Rumford, *Cosmopolitan Borders*, 18.

[54] Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 67, 85.

[55] Susan Stanford Friedman, "Planetarity: Musing Modernist Studies," *Modernism/modernity* 17.3 (September 2010): 471-499 (473).