Edison's Imaginary Kinetograph:
The cultural construction of liveness in moving image discourse

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Late nineteenth century cinema culture indulged in the exhibitionism and direct address of a new motion picture medium in a way that paradoxically valued the liveness of a photographic medium. Historians of early cinema have gone to lengths to describe the characteristics and representational qualities of this style of attraction, but none have effectively explained why it took the shape it did. Early cinema attractions didn’t pop up out of nowhere; the particular form of direct address emerged out of a conflicted and contradictory new media discourse. Chronicled in the press, the promotional rhetoricians of new technology bumped heads with the wary critics.

In this study I will investigate the evolution of a “discourse of moving images” that emerged between 1889-1891. I define the early discourse of moving images as a particular eruption of thought concerning the media that eventually became defined as cinema and television. Before there were words to describe motion pictures and tevisual transmission, journalists and inventors used all sorts of language to describe these novelties of new technology. Telephonoscopes, Telelectroscopes and Phonokinetographs populate the late nineteenth century technological imagination. The way that these imaginary media were defined and discussed reflects upon this distinct cultural moment. This conversation about new media presents us with a conflict between two opposing
positions, one promoting new technology and the other critical of the potential negative impact on society.

Two of Edison’s inventions in particular fascinated the late nineteenth century technological imagination: the Kinetograph and the Far Sight machine. Both were imaginary media objects, discussed in the press but never materializing into usable technology. While the Far Sight machine, first conceptualized in 1889, emblematized the possibilities of communicating visually at a distance, Edison’s Kinetograph stole the spotlight two years later as recorded motion pictures proved more practical technological possibility. Their identities became fused in 1891 in the form of a hypothetical machine that could reproduce and transmit moving images, recorded and in real time. This fusion resulted in the attribution of liveness to recorded imagery, a confusion of media identity that placed the practical value of liveness, interaction, and communication in a medium only technically capable of recording and storing events. This fusion, as I will show, contributed to the form and style of early motion pictures.

The discourse of moving images constitutes an area of study within the pre-history of the cinema, in which the identity of motion pictures were constructed within the cultural venues of print and journalism. The early discussion about the identity of the moving image set the stage for the cinema to come, in both form and style. Moreover, the evolution of media identity chronicled in the rise and fall of Edison’s Far Sight machine explains the value early cinema placed on the paradoxical liveness of a recorded medium. Consumers and inventors alike valued the liveness of the Far Sight machine over the recorded theatrics of the shadow pictures. Attributing real time image transmission with the photographic medium made it seem like the viewer witnessed a live event at a distance. The illusion of
liveness became a central trope fueling engagement with the cinema into the twentieth century.

Scholarship in the early history of film emphasizes the exhibition, reception, and formal aesthetics of the new medium. But few have analyzed the emergence of media identity in the late nineteenth century press. This body of literature reveals the formation of media identity in the cultural and technological imagination. Of any media historian writing about early cinema today, the work of Paul Moore presents a method for examining the pre-history of the cinema represented in print. As he showed in his investigation of the early reception of the Vitascope in the press, an examination of newspaper and print sources can reclaim contemporary perspectives on the new technologies.

The “cinema of attractions” dominates the study of early cinema. As a method of analysis, it serves two distinct purposes; it designates the historical period before the emergence of classical narrative form sometime around 1909 while also identifying the generic, formal qualities in the films themselves. Film historians Tom Gunning and Andre Gaudreault characterize the “cinema of attractions” as the cultural practice of direct

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address and exhibitionism. They describe the first decade of film practices “less as a way of
telling stories than as a way of presenting a series of views to an audience.” Gunning
continues by saying that “the cinema of attractions directly solicits spectator attention,
inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle.... Its energy
moves outward an acknowledged spectator rather than inward towards the character-
based situations.” They argue that early cinema used methods of direct address and
presentational views to convey a sense of liveness in an otherwise canned medium. The
cinema of attractions places so much emphasis on the “what” and the “how” that it ignores
questions about the “why.” Asking questions about the cultural historical context of the
early cinema can explain why direct address and exhibitionism were so central to its
aesthetic.

Studying the emergence of the concept of moving images through historical
discourse requires defamiliarizing the notion of cinema and television. The cinema did not
issue forth in mature form on the day of the first projection. The incubation period for
television took even longer, influencing the expressions of liveness and presence associated
with the cinema of attractions. Its significance can be found in the continuities traced from
earlier paradigms, such as the practical functionality attributed to telegraphy and
telephony that established the value of presence for seeing at a distance.

I will begin by elaborating on the nineteenth century paradigm for media use,
examined by historian of science Bernard Carlson. His approach to analyzing the frames of
meaning used in the presentation and dissemination of new technology explains how the

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discourse of moving images evolved to accommodate multiple functions that emphasized the user, as opposed to a presentist view that looks back to the beginnings of a cinematic practice with a host of pre-conceived notions.

In the second part I will examine the promotion of Edison’s “Far Sight” machine in 1889. His suggestion of an invention for seeing at a distance, a visual adjunct to the telephone, provoked a critical response that rejected its potential surveillance capacity. Stories circulated in the press depicting the Far Sight machine as a new technology that would give elite users the power to spy on unsuspecting citizens.

Finally, I will look at the reception of Edison’s Kinetograph in 1891 to show how promotion of the new technology built upon and rearticulated earlier criticisms of the Far Sight machine. The cultural construction of the moving image evolved to become capable of both reproduction and transmission. I conclude by reflecting on the influence of moving image discourse on the cinema of attractions.

Historian of technology Bernard Carlson writes that: “inventors invent both artifacts and frames of meaning”\(^5\) This method points to the social construction of technology in which the discourse provides the “frame” for intended use, perceived applications, and potential impact. “Frames of meaning” contextualize inventions as discursive objects in a state of flux, as opposed to concrete devices linked to stable cultural practices. For the late nineteenth-century audience, these technologies supported an ease of life, serving practical purposes. Understanding the practical use value of technology from within the nineteenth

century frame helps explain how Edison thought that the recording and transmission functions of moving image technology could be blended. These were not frivolous entertainments; they were utilitarian devices intended for a multitude of uses.

In the spring of 1889, Edison wooed the public with a new invention that would “increase the range of vision by hundreds of miles...” While he associated the invention of the Kinetograph with the recording capabilities of the Phonograph, he envisioned the Far Sight machine as a visual adjunct to the telephone. The idea of seeing over the telephone was not a new concept in 1889. Closely following Bell’s exhibition of the talking telegraph, inventors had considered the possibility of “seeing by electricity” as early as 1878. Edison’s Far Sight machine was a new spin on an old concept. Edison proved his adept as an engineer, not an electrician, in the design for a vacuum-sealed conduit to refract the mirror images of the telephonic speakers “so that, for instance, a man in New York could see the features of his friends in Boston with as much ease as he could see a performance on the stage.” Edison’s vague language encouraged readers to imagine the many situations by which such a device would be useful in their everyday lives. In an interview later that fall, Edison emphasized the aspects of communication and utility: “‘I am’ he said ‘at work at an invention which will enable the man in Wall Street not only to telephone to a friends on Central Park, say, but to actually see that friend while speaking to him. That would be a practical and useful invention, and I see no reason why it may not soon become reality.’”

6 “Untitled” (Edison’s Far Sight Machine) Journal (Boston), 13 May 1889.
7 “Mr. Edison and the Electric Millennium,” Levant Herald, 1 Sept 1889.
Edison had been encouraged to patent as many combinations as he could come up with, which accounts for his many schemes of tele-photo-phono-scope devices. In his 1888 Kinetoscope patent application he described a device that “does for the eye what the phonograph does for the ear.” Historians usually emphasize this initial description. But the public constructed a different image of the Kinetograph in 1891. For a 19th century audience, the Kinetograph had many applications. Presenting the Kinetograph in 1891, Edison emphasized the new invention as an electrical device calling it a “happy combination of photography and electricity.” The technological supplements to the senses combined with different applications of electrical and mechanical contraptions in Edison’s imagination to fill useful functions in everyday life.

The Far Sight machine and the Kinetograph fused together in the technological imagination. By 1891, the public associated electrical reproduction and transmission with moving image technologies. Despite the purely mechanical character that Edison designated in his patents, the public had come associate electrical power with seeing at a distance. Given Edison’s vague language, people just assumed that his motion picture inventions would be powered by electricity. One rather confused journalist reported, “It appears to be a device for reproducing photographs for moving objects on a screen at a distance from the scene portrayed at the time the event is transpiring or at a later date.”

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11 “Edison’s Visit to Chicago,” Western Electrician (Chicago), 23 May 1891, 295.
A look at the patent record shows that Edison never intended his Far Sight machine to be an electrical device (Fig. 1). A true adjunct to the telephone, he identified the figure as “a method for telegraphing photographically... A brilliantly illuminated object situated at one end may be perceived at the other end many miles distant and may be photographed... the curvature of the earth is corrected at intervals by quartz prisms.” Other technical arrangements for seeing by electricity featured mosaics of selenium cells and electrical synchronization. Edison’s design shows his expertise in mechanical engineering, not electrical science. Interviews quote Edison as claiming that it would not be possible to connect New York to Paris by the Far Sight machine because of the “rotundity of the earth.”

Given descriptions that emphasized the practical function and user experience of the Far Sight machine, press statements jumped to the conclusion of the device’s electrical nature. In the absence of technical descriptions, rumors ran rampant. For example, *Western Electrician* filled in the gaps of a vague description of the Kinetograph offered by Edison in 1891: “It appears to be a device for reproducing photographs for moving objects on a screen at a distance from the scene portrayed at the time the event is transpiring or at a later date.” Edison’s caveat for telegraphic photography reveals that he had a different image in mind for the Far Sight machine than the one pictured in the cultural imagination. Edison had imagined a telescope like conduit in which mirrors would refract the image of a

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person. Articles explaining the transmission of images by points of light reveal the outside influences of electrical science and the technological imagination. Edison never spoke of points of light, yet that’s what the public had come to expect from a machine for seeing at a distance. Edison never intended for the far sight machine to transmit images, or picture units per se, but rather real time presence, just as he telephone transmitted voice, not audio.

Based on this image of the Far Sight machine as an electrical novelty, flurry of rumors circulated speculating on the uses of the Far Sight machine for surveillance, the invasion of privacy, the lethargy of invalids, and the encouragement of evasions of the social responsibilities. The spread of rumors and speculation fed exaggerated stories in which new, unexpected applications were found for the Far Sight machine. Journalists warned that such a device could be used to spy on women in the bedroom or to eavesdrop on the philandering husband. Edison’s initial description of a home theater device had transformed into an all-seeing electric eye.

The initial press release of the Far Sight machine appeared in the Boston Journal on May 13, 1889, presenting an interview with Edison along with the warning: “dangerous: too revolutionary.” This first article set the tone for the critical discourse that evolved in the press that Summer, overwhelmingly negative and critical of the potential applications of such a device for surveillance. The Journal constructed a sarcastic, tongue-in-cheek tone, drawing on a host of literary and popular cultural references: Shakespeare, Tennyson, Barnum. While it satirized Edison’s overblown rhetoric, it also drew on established social stigmas to associate the disruptive potential of the new machine with transgression.

“Professor Goaheadison’s Latest,” a two-part joke and punch-line in the British illustrated magazine *Fun*, satirized Edison’s electric rhetoric by suggesting the next generation on the heels of the Far Sight machine: the Far Touch machine.\(^{17}\) By this device, you not only watch the fight—it brings the fight to you. But a technology of this sort came with a warning label, for fear of the proximity of the final knockout (fig. 2). *Fun* hyperbolized the already-exaggerated claims, revealing what might have been perceived as merely a new electrical invention as a potential hazard.

The stories that circulated villainized those who would use the device for surveillance. The Far Sight machine would make it possible to spy on women as they undressed, or to catch a man in his lies about surreptitious evening outings.\(^ {18}\) It would shine a “fierce white light” on clandestine activities.\(^ {19}\) These stories played on an ambiguity of presence and absence, constructing an imbalanced power relationship made possible by the new technology. The critical discourse situated the Far Sight machine as a technology of power and surveillance, in relation to the existing social customs of seeing and being seen at the opera.\(^ {20}\)

The newspapers dramatized Far Sight using one particular cultural stereotype. “The only one likely to be well satisfied with Edison’s new invention must be the man who goes out between the acts.”\(^ {21}\) The Far Sight Machine facilitated his clandestine behavior. This character reflected on the use of the machine in two ways. On the one hand, it could be

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\(^{19}\) “Untitled” (Mr. Edison’s Far Sight Machine). *Journal* (Boston), 13 May 1889.


used to indulge in socially deviant behavior, such as watching people, without heir
knowledge. In this way the far sight machine suggested an invasion of privacy. On the other
hand, it was characterized as a strength by allowing increased access and ease of viewing. It
would make it possible for a person not to have to leave the house. This second aspect
became the shining example for the later rhetoric that emphasized motion picture
technology for its abilities to transcend space and time.

By associating the new technology with the transgression a familiar social custom,
the discourse accented the potential for disruption. Late nineteenth century etiquette
manuals describe the social faux pas of leaving the theater during intermission.22 It was
custom to remain in the seats in order to participate in the act of seeing and being seen in
polite society. For a man to leave his seat, particularly to leave his female companion
unaccompanied in her seat, was portrayed as an evasion of his duties.

One late nineteenth century etiquette manual asserted that “A gentleman should on
no account leave the lady's side from the beginning to the close of the performance. The
custom of going out alone between the acts to visit the refreshment room cannot be too
strongly reprehended. It is little less than an insult to the lady.”23 Another manual noted
that the custom was going out of fashion, and it was slowly becoming an acceptable for a
man to leave his lady's side.24“"The man” was associated with deviant characteristics, since
it could be assumed that he had left his seat to cavort with his mates over a drink and a
cigar.

22 See also: “Between the Acts” Illustrated American, 4 Oct 1890: 3.
23 Eliza Bisbee Duffey, The Ladies' and Gentlemen's Etiquette: A Complete Manual of the Manners and
Index. (Porter and Coates, 1877), 105.
Associating the transgressions of the man who goes out between the acts with the Far Sight machine draws parallels between the man’s character and the character of the new technology. The criticisms that circulated in the press constructed the Far Sight machine as a technology of power with the potential for an overwhelmingly negative impact on social customs. But by the end of 1891, as we will see, the force of the promotional rhetoric had largely displaced the criticisms. Journalists began telling stories about home viewing and moving images that foregrounded the aspects of access and convenience as opposed to surveillance and the invasion of privacy.

The less than enthusiastic reports of 1890 placed Edison’s proposed Kinetograph in a critical light. The few papers that did cover the news criticized its frivolousness, wary of its ability, like the Phonograph, to fix fugitive sounds and images. As the Talking Phonograph became a more common fixture, Americans were becoming more attuned to the possibility of listening to the voices of speakers who were no longer living. As if to distract from the connotations of the living dead, journalists began to fuse the recordability of motion pictures with the liveness of transmission: the Far Sight machine’s electrical transmission of moving images and the Kinetograph’s reproduction of recorded images.

The results thus obtained may be sent to any desired point and the photographs thrown on a screen by an ingeniously contrived piece of mechanism. Thus the exact appearance of the speaker, with all his gestures and play of features, are exactly reproduced, while the phonograph simultaneously delivers the speech. The interval between the successive photographs is so infinitesimal that the screen picture is apparently a living one, moving, gesticulating, and apparently uttering the words, which, in fact are spoken by the phonograph.

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25 In February 1890, the press circulated a story about the phonographic recording of a recently deceased theater actor who had been confined to a psychiatric institution.

The *Herald* emphasized the many capabilities of the Kinetograph to reproduce and transmit live and recorded moving images: operas, boxing matches, and horse races. Journalists continuously emphasized the lifelike quality of the moving images, reproduced with such verisimilitude that the viewer would be hard pressed to distinguish between the reproduction and the real thing. Such rhetoric served to mask the artificiality of technological reproduction as well as the distinctions between live and recorded imagery. The rhetoric produced a technology with a practical as opposed to entertainment value.

But the *Herald* painted an uncharacteristically positive picture compared to other news outlets. The London *Pall Mall Gazette* bemoaned Edison’s phonograph as having “added a new horror to existence,” and wary of the uses of such a device for recording and repeating all the errors of everyday language. But American criticism of phonographic recording had a much more whimsical, bemused tone. Journalists mused as to the potential for hijinks. For example, the story about Edison sending a phonograph recording to give a speech in his stead made the national news:

Edison was unable to make it to the Electric Light Convention in Kansas City, so he sent a phonograph, and the little machine delivered an address for him, which greatly pleased the members of the association. Pretty soon the business will be done so fine that people, instead of attending evening parties, will just charge their phonograph, and send it by a servant. What a fearful clatter of gossip there would be if all the machines would go off at once! And yet it often happens that a great many mouths get to work at once, even as it now is.

This story raised questions as to the social utility and implications of recording in a joking manner. But not all responses were so jovial. One story about a recently deceased lunatic’s

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28 “Untitled” (Edison at the Electric Light Convention), *Perrysberg Journal*, 15 Feb 1890
ravings recorded on phonograph was enough to raise the hair on the back of one’s neck.²⁹ All in all, the stories about the “irreverence” of the phonograph and Kinetograph began circulating in early 1890 related to fears of the potential impact of recording technology on physical presence, which should come as no profound surprise. The phonograph ushered in an era in which the possibility of emotive presence after death was but a push button away. The “irreverence” of the phonograph referred to the disrespect for the lived, ephemeral moment.

When the *Sun* announced Edison’s Kinetograph in 1891, the journalist led with the irreverent claims made against the power of new technology. “Three or four years ago... irreverent newspapers told Edison that he talked too much. That made Mr. Edison angry... People laughed for a while but Edison kept still and they forgot the Wizard’s ‘wild scheme.’”³⁰ The *Sun* reporter positioned the critique of the technology as a criticism of the inventor himself, making Edison’s promotion of the Kinetograph into a success story. The reporter’s rhetoric rearticulated the critical discourse as a simple panning of an idea perceived to be ahead of its time. The meaning shifted from “dangerous: too revolutionary” to a connotation less hazardous and more playful. The Kinetograph adopted the aura of innovation against the negative consequences of a potentially disruptive technology.

The *Sun* journalist drew from an interview Edison gave earlier that month: “My intention is to have such a happy combination of electricity and photography that a man can sit in his own parlour and see reproduced on a screen the forms of the players in an opera produced on a distant stage, and, as he she sees their movements he will hear the

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²⁹ Associated Press article published in *News and Citizen* (Morrisville, VT), 13 Feb 1890. See also *Wahpeton Times* (Wahpeton ND), 13 Feb 1890.
sound of their voices as they talk or sing or laugh.”31 Edison’s “happy combination of electricity and photography” obscured the actual identity of the device. The vague language describing the use of the moving image technology blended the social and personal functions of seeing at a distance with the reproduction of recorded imagery.

Journalists promoting the Kinetograph drew upon its electrical character but downplayed the act of social visibility. The user was described as being able to see the distant scene, but unable to be seen in the situation of viewing. The social construction of the Far Sight machine’s all-seeing eye was rearticulated in the panoptic gaze of the Kinetograph. Unlike the phonographic language from the previous year, the 1891 publicity played upon the liveness and electric presence of the Kinetograph, which constructed motion pictures as the next generation of Far Sight. The force of progressive rhetoric overshadowed the critical discourse, even thought the public continued to ridicule the implications of social change insinuated in the potential use of moving image technology.

The response offered by the Chicago Journal is reminiscent of the backlash against Far Sight, reflecting the same disapproving tone. “What Edison Claims” implicitly drew on the negative reactions elicited in oral culture, reflecting the rumors that had become attached to the idea of being able to see at a distance:

It may do for the few, for the invalid who can not leave home, for the musical critic who does not want his attention distracted from the singing, and for those who have “nothing to wear.” People go to the theater largely for the sake of seeing the audience, and for the magnetic effect which follows the collection of a large number of people together with the same object. The glare and glitter and gayety of the thing attract as well as the music or the acting. As for the performers themselves, how would they get among before a vacant unlit house speaking or singing toward the darkness and hearing no applause. It is to be feared such performance would be

31 “Edison’s Conjury” New York Sun, 13 May 1891.
lifeless. The only one likely to be well satisfied with Edison’s new invention must be the man who goes out between the acts.\textsuperscript{32}

With the mention of invalids and “the man who goes out between the acts,” journalists drew implicitly on the criticism of the Far Sight machine that had been evolving for the past two years. Adopting a similar strategy as the Far Sight critics, the journalist imagined how a real world scenario of the live theatrical performance would be transformed. They envisioned actors performing to empty houses, theatrical plays drained of the life without the reactions of a live audience. The reference to lifeless shadows implies the projections of a canned, recorded medium reminiscent of the irreverence of the Phonograph.

The promotional rhetoric responded by emphasizing the lifelike qualities of the moving images. Film historian Charles Musser identifies the role of the tableaux vivant tradition in early cinema culture, a connection which highlights the Kinetograph’s mimetic capacity: “Not surprisingly, living pictures not only provided a paradigm for the reception of projected motion pictures, they sometimes quite literally provided the cinema with subject matter.”\textsuperscript{33} The rhetoric that evolved built upon the perceived strengths of liveness and presence of the Far Sight machine while downplaying the aspects the recorded nature of the images.

The possibility of live communication opened up by the Far Sight machine suggested something different than the recorded reproduction or the live transmission of recorded material. The Far Sight machine brought the aspect of real time point to point communication into the discussion of moving image media. This was the real draw and the real selling point for moving images. Inventors and journalists struggled to find commercial

\textsuperscript{33} Charles Musser, "A cinema of contemplation, a cinema of discernment: Spectatorship, intertextuality and attractions in the 1890s." The cinema of attractions reloaded (2006): 166.
applicability for a Machine that could only reproduce recorded images. The shadow pictures and magic lantern theater was an established practice, but what did it have to do with consumer demand and profitability? A new electric device, as far as Edison as concerned, needed a real commercial application. The liveness associated with the far sight machine became the draw for Kinetograph.

By the end of 1891, the force of the Kinetograph’s promotional rhetoric erased all criticism from the discussion, instead rearticulating the liveness that had been associated with the Far Sight machine as a desired capacity of the recorded moving image. In this way, the positive aspects of liveness and astonishment over new technology became a central trope in early cinema. Nobody seemed to recognize, not even Edison, the Kinetograph’s essentially photographic identity. The technological possibility for the electrical transmission of moving images was still forty years away.

Rumors of inventions for “seeing by electricity” had been circulating for a decade. Other inventors coined far-out names: telectroscope, telephonoscope, tele-photography. Edison chose “Far Sight” to identify his invention, which he described in the caveat as telegraphic photography. Edison was most likely referencing the German “Fernseher,” seeing at a distance, in his “Far Sight” machine. Seeing by electricity had become a discursive object synonymous with failure, a distinctly late nineteenth century trope consisting more of hoaxes and hype than of practical possibilities.

But before the popularization of “motion pictures,” seeing by electricity had its own distinct existence in the technological and cultural imagination. The Sun journalist built upon this well-known discourse in his presentation of the Kinetograph. Identifying the

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prospect of seeing by electricity as a failure, the rhetoric compensates to transform it into a success:

Then Edison laughed. He sat in the big armchair in his laboratory and watched a crude model of the machine and thought of what a lot of fun he would have with the people who had told him he talked too much. For he knew that when he had found his base principle the completion of the work was a mere question of time and details. Every invention he had ever made proved that fact to him. So he watched the model and chuckled at his success.35

Edison knew all along that the Kinetograph had few practical applications. He considered the home theater entertainment as an added attraction for the elite. But what practical purposes would it serve? Edison had seen instantaneous photography used for the study of human physiology. But in the context of business, Edison struggled to explain its usefulness. For the preservation of the photographic record, the Kinetograph served one distinct function. “Instead of dry and misleading accounts, tinged with the exaggerations of the chroniclers’ minds, our archives will be enriched by the vitalized pictures of great national scenes.”36 Without the possibility of real, live interaction, the Kinetoscope was merely a novelty of screen practice.

The Kinetograph and the Kinetoscope, motion picture camera and viewer, respectively, were formally announced on the scene in an 1894 article in the popular American magazine Century. Written by Edison technician WKL Dickson, the article established the practical value of motion pictures, while it also established the hyperbolic, promotional tone of cinematic attractions. “The Invention of the Kineto-Phonograph” condenses the Kinetograph language into a neat rhetoric that integrates the earlier criticisms of the machine and constructs a positive picture of the technology. Dickson

36 WKL and Antonia Dickson, “Edison’s Invention of the Kineto-Phonograph: Account of the Invention” Century Magazine 48:2 (June 1894).
describes the Kinetograph pictures as "Nothing more vivid or more natural could be imagined than these breathing, audible forms, with their tricks of familiar gesture and speech. The inconceivable swiftness of the photographic successions, and the exquisite synchronism of the phonographic attachment, have removed the last trace of automatic action, and the illusion is complete."37 By emphasizing the reproduction, as opposed to the recorded nature of the moving images, Kinetoscope rhetoric retained the sense of liveness expected from the realtime simultaneity of transmission. The language shifts from practical uses value to the illusions and impression of movement created in the viewer’s eye. The history of the invention shifts from Far Sight to optical toys, reaching back to the ancient camera obscura rather than the recent telephone.

“The Invention of the Kineto-Phonograph” also rearticulates the practical value of the device while identifying the ideal user experience: “leisurely gratification of those who are debarred from attendance, or who desire to recall them. The invalid, the isolated country recluse, and the harassed business man can indulge in needed recreation, without undue expenditure, without fear of weather, and without the sacrifice of health or important engagements.”38 This expression of the user experience shows his attempt to accommodate for the transformation of mass culture and the shift toward consumer demand.39 Edison hadn’t held much promise for the projection device in and of itself until the unlikely success of the phonographs and the arcades suggested a niche market for the Kinetograph. But this transformation heralded more than an entertainment function. It also signaled a shift from the presence of real time transmission of the telegraph, telephone and

37 Dickson, “Edison’s Invention of the Kineto-Phonograph.”
38 Dickson, “Edison’s Invention of the Kineto-Phonograph.”
39 Carlson, “Artifacts and Frames of Meaning.”
Far Sight machine to the illusions of presence inherent in the recording technologies of the phonograph and Kinetograph.

Just as the “man who goes out between the acts” was associated with the negative consequences of the Far Sight machine, the astonished spectator now fills his place in the cinema of attractions.⁴⁰ Appearing in an 1896 British Illustrated magazine, “Practical Science: How the Gilded Bounder Saw the Cinematograph” (fig. 3) depicts the force that the liveness of cinema came to blow, quite literally in this case by the boxer.⁴¹ The comic strip features a clown in the role of film lecturer, presenting the attraction to an unsuspecting spectator.⁴² The screen shows a boxer preparing for a punch, but in the background the filmstrip backs up in the projector. The fist bursts out of the screen despite the technical malfunction, knocking out the observer in a twist reminiscent of the boxer’s blow in Professor Goaheadison’s Far Touch machine. The titular “gilded bounder” functions as the astonished spectator, akin to the uneducated rural bumpkin of telegraph anecdotes and cinema attractions.⁴³ “The man who goes out between the acts” has been replaced by the naïve spectator. Just as the transgressions of the man reflected on the potential surveillance aspects of Far Sight, now the naivite of the spectator reflects on the superior illusion of verisimilitude of the cinema. The trope represented in the critical reaction to the Far Sight


⁴³ On telegraphic anecdotes that play on stereotypes of rural bumpkins, see for example WJ Johnston, Telegraphic Tales and Telegraphic History [WJ Johnston, 1880]. Stereotypes of the gullible, astonished spectator most famously appear in The Countryman and the Cinematograph (1901) and Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show (Edison, 1902).
machine transforms in this cartoon into a flattery of cinematic mimesis. This shift follows a similar pattern as the reversal seen earlier: the irreverent phonograph became irreverent newspapers. The experienced viewer became the privileged ideal in the new discourse of the Cinematograph that distinguished between the virtues of recognizing the lifelikeness of the excellent illusion and the sideshow humbug.  

The early discourse of the moving image set the stage for the ultimate arrival of cinema in the mid-1890s. Looking at discussion of new media, speculation, rumor, promotion, and criticism, reveals how cultural anxieties and social values condensed and reflected in the early cinema. The study of early cinema in the late nineteenth century includes much more than just the practice of moviemaking. Expanding the view to include the cultural conversations gives context to cinematic practice.

The cinema of attractions, which characterizes the liveness of early cinema and the astonishment of the spectator, only goes so far to explain the meaning American culture placed in the value and practice of moving images. Seeing how the critique of new media reflected contemporary cultural anxieties, in the irreverence of the phonograph and the gumption of the man who goes out between the acts, shows the slow erosion of cultural values reflected in the technological developments.

The short-lived controversy surrounding the far sight machine brings context to the Kinetograph and the cinematograph of early cinema history. Through the story of the far sight machine, we can see how and why Americans came to appreciate liveness of the

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cinema. The connection made possible by the far sight machine, though scientifically impossible in 1891, became perceptually possible through the illusion of the cinema. If it was still a technological impossibility to see from Wall Street to Central Park, it became a central tenet in the promotion of the cinema to break down these constraints of space as well as time.
**Figures**

Fig. 1. “A method for telegraphing photographically.” Caveat Files: Case 115 (1889) (Thomas A Edison Papers Digital Edition PT031AAF1; TAEM 113:497).

Fig. 2. “Goaheadison’s Real Latest,” *Fun* 17 July 1889: 24.
Fig. 3: Illustration by Rene Bull. “Practical Science: How the Gilded Bounder Saw the Cinematograph.” *Pick-Me-Up* 16 (25 Apr 1896): 52-53.
Bibliography of Far Sight Machine and Kinetograph clippings (chronological):


“It Comes Too Late.” *Puck* 12 June 1889: 260.

“Professor Goaheadison’s Latest.” *Fun* 3 July 1889: 6


“Open House (To be Dated after the next Invention).” *Punch* 10 Aug 1889.


“Mr Edison at Home Unspoiled by Glory” *New York Herald* 7 Oct 1889

“Edison’s Talk” *Brooklyn Journal* 7 Oct 1889

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