



25 SEPTEMBER 2017

MULTIMEDIA 1900: EXPERIENCE AND ENTERTAINMENT IN EVERYDAY LIFE

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We know a great deal about media gadgetry in retrospect, but much less about how it was perceived and experienced by their early users. Historians of Britain and London at the end of the 19th century have traditionally paid little attention to ‘new media’ experiences, even though media historians would claim that this was the moment when the new media of communication and entertainment were already exercising their fascination. Suppose we try to imagine a ‘day in the life’ of some Londoners in 1900 – a kind of *Mrs Dalloway* imagination experiment – what would we find?

Before plunging into this Victorian multimedia world, we obviously need to pause and consider: what counts as a ‘medium’? This is a term or a concept that has undergone many shifts and – I’m tempted to say – extensions, even in my lifetime. Originally, during the Renaissance era, it meant ‘a middle course’ or ‘an intervening substance’ – something that *came between*. One of the later uses given by the Oxford Dictionary is: ‘an intermediate agency, means, instrument or channel’. There was also, of course, an offshoot use for those thought to be able to communicate with the dead, *mediums* – acting as ‘intermediaries, or ‘channels’.

But the idea of a medium, or of media, began to heat up during the early 1960s, thanks to the writings of a maverick Canadian scholar of modern English literature, Marshall McLuhan. I can still remember vividly discovering one of the McLuhan’s books, it was *The Mechanical Bride*, in the library stack as an undergraduate in Belfast, and being riveted by McLuhan’s witty deconstruction of advertising and popular culture – his book’s subtitle was ‘the folklore of industrial man’. This was a very different approach to popular culture from that of our own Richard Hoggart, who had published his *Uses of Literacy* in 1957, six years after McLuhan. Whereas Hoggart was earnest and rather judgemental about the popular culture of comics and cheap literature, McLuhan seemed to relish the imagery and language of advertising with a kind of amused scepticism. But it was from a fusion of these approaches that the subject of ‘media studies’ emerged later in the 60s – and I have an affection for its founding fathers, since my first paid teaching job, as a young philosophy graduate, was teaching McLuhan’s ideas about media and how they shape us. Around the same time, I attended some of Hoggart’s seminars at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham; and was lucky enough to work with, in a very junior role, two of the other great figures in British media and cultural studies, Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams.

I mention this background to give you some idea of what has shaped my approach to media studies. Although it was fashionable to decry McLuhan for some decades, I think some of his key insights into the power of media were essentially right. Even if his terminology was often deliberately extreme – like ‘the medium is the message’ or ‘massage’ – it reminds us of a fundamental quality of ‘new media’, which in many ways do *massage* us by their novelty, even if their content, as McLuhan would say, is really that of an older medium. This idea was taken up forty years later by two American scholars, Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, in 1999, in their book *Remediation, Understanding New Media*, which argued that new digital media essentially ‘refashion’ what older media did. Their opening example was the computer screen ‘desktop’ that we’re all familiar with – modelled on a literal desktop, and traditional ways of storing and finding ‘files’.



I'm going to mention just one other key figure, much less well known in this country: Friedrich Kittler. Kittler knew the arguments that had shaped McLuhan's view of media; but he was also influenced by the pessimism about technology of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Kittler's best-known book is called *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (in English from 1999), but his essay 'The City is a Medium' is more relevant to my theme today.

So, how can we explore what I've called the 'multimedia world of 1900'? I'm going to confine myself to London, which is hardly any limitation. For London was very much at the heart of the late 19th century media revolution. This was due to its size and its economic power, but also to its industrial and scientific history. By 1900, London was at the centre of new technologies of all kinds, and had a population that was fascinated by these new technologies. This was also where a series of new display media had been pioneered ever since the end of the 18th century – the Eidophusikon, the Panorama, the Diorama, and the Royal Polytechnic Institution, not to mention such environmental media sites as Crystal Palace, Wylde's Great Globe, and the Earl's Court exhibition site.

We have some records of what these entertainments offered, mostly in the form of engravings, with some early photographs, and what several generations of researchers have managed to recover about the audiences they attracted. And this is what particularly interests me – the audience experience. Too much of the short history of film and media studies has focused on the hardware, and on the 'texts', and not enough has tried to penetrate what attracted and held audience attention. If only we had a 'media diary' from 1900! A record of what some Londoner saw and what they thought of it... unfortunately, so far, we don't, so we have to use a variety of sources to try to piece together what audiences did and what they thought of the experience. So let me lead you briskly through some of the stages of an accumulating media presence in 19c London.

The very first public mention of 'moving pictures' as a form of entertainment actually came in the late 18th century, in 1781, when a very successful painter and scenic artist, Philippe de Loutherbourg, announced his *Eidophusikon*, to be shown in rooms on Lisle Street, just north of Leicester Square. We know what this looked like, thanks to a drawing by Edward Burney held by the British Museum, and there have been several attempts to recreate this unusual apparatus. What was it? A form of mechanical theatre, with a proscenium frame, figures and landscapes projected by Magic Lantern, and an accompaniment by harpsichord (as we see in the drawing) with, apparently, sound effects. The painter Thomas Gainsborough was apparently entranced, and wished he could apply the same enhancement to his paintings. De Loutherbourg's repertoire included a range of genres scenes, including various sunrise and sunset effects in Britain and the Mediterranean, a shipwreck, and the drama most often noted: 'Satan Arraying his Troops on the Banks of a Fiery Lake, with the Raising of the Palace of Pandemonium' during a performance of Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

The Eidophusikon ran for three seasons over a couple of years, but was ultimately not an economic proposition – probably because the audience capacity was small, and the cost of preparing new scenes considerable. And who was it aimed at? Probably only the affluent, since admission was relatively expensive: 3 shillings for 'first seats' and two for second. But it appears to have been highly successful in demonstrating a public appetite for audio-visual spectacle – and one that chimed well with the rising enthusiasm for the picturesque. De Loutherbourg is best known today for his great painting of Coalbrookdale, the cradle of the industrial revolution, made in 1801.

By comparison, the Panorama proved to be a lasting addition to the 'shows of London'. This phrase was the title of Richard Altick's great book, dating from 1978, which traced the evolution of London's distinctive range of public entertainments and displays - from the display of relics in pre-Reformation churches, through the collections of eighteenth-century virtuosi, to Madame Tussauds and the first science museums and public art galleries. For Altick, the Panorama that opened on the corner of Leicester Square in 1793, was one of the key developments that would set the pace, and scale, of visual display throughout the coming century. Essentially, this was the earliest form of immersive experience, which visitors entered by ascending a staircase to a viewing platform, which looked out at a vast circular painting. Through the control of lighting, and the use of foreground objects, to lead the eye into the scene depicted, panoramas really gave viewers the sense of 'being there'. And soon their repertoire moved on from cityscapes and landscapes to showing exotic scenes of foreign lands, and famous historical battles, complete with guides who would narrate what you were seeing.



Soon, Panorama buildings started to appear across Europe and the Americas; and by the 1840s, the static Panorama was supplemented by Moving Panoramas, which could ‘narrate’ a journey. Although these were especially popular in the United States, one of the most famous was shown in London in the mid-century: Albert Smith’s famous *Ascent of Mont Blanc* was a performance, first given at the Egyptian Hall on 15 March 1852, which ran for seven seasons, and became one of the London shows that visitors were advised to catch. Smith used a moving panorama – unrolling horizontally for the journey to Mont Blanc, then vertically for the ascent. He gave at least 2,000 performances and it’s been estimated that around 800,000 people saw it. So here, we begin to get some sense of a spectacle that ran long enough to gather a following, by ‘word of mouth’ as well as press notices, and was relatively affordable. Not cheap, any more than the Panorama was, at 3s, but certainly popular among those with leisure and curiosity, and a taste for novelty, as well as travel. It’s worth noting that this mid-century success of Panoramas coincided with the beginning of leisure travel and tourism, greatly helped by the rapid growth of railways – and entrepreneurial figures such as Thomas Cook.

But rather than follow Cook on his widening network of tours, let me note another of London’s 19c shows which anticipated the following century’s cinema. This was the Diorama, created in Paris by Louis Daguerre and Charles Bouton in 1822, and brought to London in the following year. This was again a building, in which the audience was seated in front of a translucent screen, which could be illuminated from different angles, to produce different scenes. So, for instance, scenes in daylight changed to moonlight, a train travelling on a track would crash, or an earthquake would be shown in ‘before and after’ pictures. What was significant about the Diorama was that it combined a theatrical space with access to distant scenes, and a temporal dimension – the audience experiences time speeded up, or even reversed, through lighting cues.

Dioramas and Panoramas remained popular until the mid-19th century. The Colosseum in Regent’s Park was built in 1827 to exhibit Thomas Hornor’s ‘Panoramic view of London’, claimed as the largest painting ever created. It was inspired by the Pantheon in Rome, and various additions were made to it over the decades, including a Swiss Chalet. In the evenings, another panorama provided a vision of the city at night. A nocturnal panorama of Paris was shown from 1848, and a panorama of a Swiss lake in 1850. A lavishly decorated theatre was added in 1848, which showed a ten-scene cyclorama of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake. However, fashions changed and the Colosseum was demolished in 1874.

There were other buildings in Victorian London that offered intriguing and varied sights. The Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly, already mentioned, would remain a major venue from 1812 until its demolition in 1905, housing a magic theatre show directed by Maskelyne and Cooke for over thirty years. The Royal Polytechnic Institution ran from 1838 to 1885, when it became the Regent St Polytechnic, and is now the University of Westminster. The Great Exhibition of 1851 was housed in a revolutionary structure of iron and glass, created by Joseph Paxton in Hyde Park. When the exhibition finished, the structure was moved to Crystal Palace, giving that district its new name. And following the Great Exhibition, an exhibit that had been proposed as part of it was erected in the centre of Leicester Square. This was James Wyld’s Great Globe, 60 feet in diameter, containing a staircase and platforms from which the public could view the surface of the earth ‘inside out’ as it were, with mountains and rivers all modelled to scale in plaster of Paris. Wyld was a leading surveyor and map-maker, and his achievement in the Great Globe was described by Punch as ‘a geographical globule which the mind can take in at one swallow’.

The other London landmark that should be included in this quick survey is Earls Court and Olympia, still with us, and continuing to change in form and function over time, as they did from their opening in 1886. Having started as an agricultural exhibition hall, Olympia found its vocation hosting spectacular circus shows, including Phineas Barnum’s, and Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show. Then it embarked on a series of ‘national’ exhibitions that showcased America, Ireland, Italy and India. It was during the last of these, in 1895, that young Robert Paul installed a row of his Kinetoscopes, and discovered that there was an audience for these peepshow viewers, and considerable profit to be made from them.

The Kinetoscope was Thomas Edison’s *second* game-changing invention, after the Phonograph. He had launched the Phonograph in 1877, as the first practical sound-recording device to reach the market (there had been others, but none successfully commercialised). Its impact was extraordinary, with reports appearing around the world, often far ahead of any practical demonstration. It seemed as if the *idea* of the phonograph was as important as its scratchy, barely audible reality – that we could now summon ‘lost sounds’ from beyond the



grave. What caught the Victorian imagination was the prospect of technology triumphing over mortality; and by 1889 Phonograph Parlo(u)rs were established on both sides of the Atlantic, including some in London (although these still need to be researched). Edison had not envisaged music recording as a main use of his new device: he thought it would serve to record speech, especially in commercial settings, or could be used in conjunction with the newly developed telephone, to take messages. But it soon became clear that users had many other ideas, and in fact one of the earliest surviving Phonograph recordings in the world is of Handel choral music, made in June 1888 at the Crystal Palace.

But one of the most poignant early recordings illustrates the peculiar link in the Victorian sensibility between recording and mortality. It is a recording made by Edison's enterprising agent in Britain, Colonel Gouraud, of Robert Browning, at a dinner party in 1889, shortly before the poet's death. On the first anniversary of Browning's death, this was solemnly played to members of the Browning Society, making a new kind of memorial.

The Phonograph was far from Edison's most profitable invention, but it gave him a new kind of worldwide fame, as 'the wizard of Menlo Park'. And the principle of inscribing sound onto a cylinder gave him the idea of 'doing for the eye what the phonograph had done for the ear' – in other words recording motion photographically. Like recording sound, this had long been the ambition of many inventors, and during the 1880s there were innumerable patents registered, although few delivered on their promise. Indeed Edison seems to lose interest in both the phonograph and his new moving image goal. But largely through the work of William Dickson in the early 1890s, he managed to demonstrate an early version of the Kinetoscope in mid-1893. A year later, it was ready to launch as a new kind of entertainment.

The Kinetoscope Parlours that appeared in US cities, and soon in Europe and elsewhere, were essentially a form of amusement arcade, making use of the relatively new technology of coin-operation. You paid your nickel, and were treated to about 40-50 seconds of life-like performance; and if you wanted to see it again, you paid again. Like the Phonograph fifteen years earlier, the Kinetoscope set off a chain reaction worldwide. Spectators lined up to pay to watch what were mostly vaudeville acts – exotic dancers, a strong man, Little Annie Oakley, with boxing matches a special attraction. And in two key places, Paris and London, younger inventors were challenged to replicate or improve on what Dickson and Edison had created. In France, it was the sons of a Lyon photographic merchant, Antoine Lumière, Louis and Auguste, who took the giant leap of creating a device that was camera, projector and printer combined – the Cinématographe, which toured the world for the next five years and gave us the generic name by which moving pictures would be known everywhere (except America).

In Britain, which is often ignored in the founding narrative of cinema, it was a young electrical engineer, Robert Paul, who became the largest manufacturer of Kinetoscopes, since the design was not patented abroad; and concluded from his experience at Olympia, that projecting the images to be viewed simultaneously by larger audiences was the obvious way forward. And so Paul constructed his first projector, which he called a Theatrograph, early in 1896, and first demonstrated it on the same day as the Lumière Cinématographe had its premiere in London in February. Within six weeks, the Cinématographe was installed at London's most flamboyant music hall, the Empire in Leicester Square, and Paul was running a nightly show in competition about 300 yards away in the Alhambra, on the east side of Leicester Square. Interestingly, and perhaps significantly, both of these palaces of late Victorian entertainment were within 500 yards of both the original Eidophusikon and the Panorama sites.

Historians of cinema used to imply that moving pictures on a screen marked the beginning of a new era, a new form of entertainment, which somehow transcended all that had gone before. However, this approach has been widely challenged in recent decades, by people like me in many countries.¹ What I've tried to put before you here is a 'long history' of screen entertainment, stretching back at least as far as the Eidophusikon, and even further to the Magic Lantern from the 17th and earlier 18th century. In simple terms, what we know as 'cinema' was the fusion of the Magic Lantern as a projection device with the film transport systems that Edison pioneered, and Lumière, Paul and others developed. The Eidophusikon, the Panorama and especially the Diorama – as well as the Royal Polytechnic's famous 'dissolving view' lantern shows – had all created *theatrical* spaces for moving images to find their first audiences.



I want to end with two of the rather few documented cases of early audience response to moving image presentations in a theatrical setting, actually two of London's music halls. The first is Robert Paul's famous screening of the film he made of the Derby in June 1896, which was won by the Prince of Wales' horse Persimmon. Paul realised that getting this on the screen fast after the race would be an attraction, so the night after the race he included it in the Alhambra programme. The orchestra played 'God bless the Prince of Wales', the audience was ecstatic, and the film had to be repeated three times. A popular paper, *The Sportsman*, carried this account of the event:

"For a few seconds we are all expectation, now the crowd is yelling 'Persimmon! Persimmon' that we do not hear, but we see the finish of the race, the favourite and the winner nearly locked together, though the lead of the Prince of Wales' horse is clear. Earwig [third?] seemed a long way behind and the rest nowhere. The camera cannot lie, whatever the case may have been with George Washington. The audience went into ecstasies, and clapped its hands, some cheering the while so fervently as to drown the strains of the orchestra playing 'God Bless the Prince of Wales'".

This gives us a vivid, unmediated sense of the appeal of this new way of presenting topical events. But it also reminds us that it's a music hall audience, responding in the way such audiences did to singers, comedians and dancers. Also that music was important from the beginning. And that there's always a wider context – in this case the popular Prince of Wales, Bertie, the public face of monarchy, before the staging of Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in the following year, soon to be captured on film.

But let us contrast this with another account we have of the reception of a very different film, also from Robert Paul. By 1898, Paul had established a substantial business around film, producing equipment and a constant stream of new films for his customers. He was producing a series of films that showed traffic and sights on the River Thames, for which he had hired a steamer as a camera platform. On 21 June 1898, the battleship *HMS Albion* was being launched at Blackwall on the Thames. Large crowds had gathered to see the Duchess of York perform the ceremony, and no less than four film companies were present. After three attempts, the Duchess managed to break the champagne bottle, but as the ship slid towards the water its backwash swept away a rickety wooden scaffolding crowded with spectators, plunging hundreds into the river. At least 36 were drowned, although Paul was able to rescue 25 from the water. When he was attacked in the photographic press for having continued filming while the disaster was unfolding, he insisted that his electric camera had filmed, while he busied himself with rescue work. And a press report of a screening of his film in a Holborn music hall, which had attracted particular scorn, seemed to bear out his belief that film was not inevitably trivialising or disrespectful:

"The whole audience rose with bared heads as the drama of death passed before them. At the close, with the orchestra playing "Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep", there was scarcely a dry eye among the silent audience."

Just two years after the first moving images had been seen on screen by London audiences, a new mode of spectatorship seemed to be taking shape. Film, or 'animated photography' as it was still called, had certainly added to the multimedia experience of Londoners that had been developing for over two hundred years. And it had started to reach a wider, less affluent public in the venues where film first found the audiences which would make it the dominant mass entertainment of the next century.

But this is still 'big picture' film history, rather than what is now increasingly called 'media archaeology'. So what do we need to correct the picture? One factor is to realise how many developments in media are always working together. The years around 1900 saw a revolution in an old medium, the printed newspaper, as Northcliffe's *Daily Mail*, and soon his *Daily Mirror*, led the way towards a cheap, and often illustrated culture of newspapers. It's no accident that the two accounts of audience reception of early film that I quoted come from newspapers you would never have heard of, because there were so many appearing, and disappearing. George Eastman's affordable Brownie camera was democratising photography, making more people active as makers and consumers of their own images. And new forms of urban transport, particularly the electrification of London Tube lines around 1900, were making transport faster and of course more affordable. Typewriters, telephones,



motor-cars, gramophones, electric lighting, X-rays.... these and many, many other 'new media' were revolutionising everyday life around 1900.

This is where I think Kittler's claim that 'the city is a medium' is helpful. He quotes one of the pioneers of thinking about cities, Lewis Mumford: 'Through its concentration of physical and cultural power, the city heightened the tempo of human intercourse and translated its products into forms that could be stored and reproduced'. Mumford's final words in this passage quoted are especially worth pondering: 'compared with the complex human order of the city, our present ingenious electronic mechanisms for storing and transmitting information are crude and limited'. That was published in 1961, just before Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media*, and I think it's still a valuable reminder to McLuhan's descendants that we need to take a broader view of what 'media' mean, and avoid being obsessed by the gadgets and devices. We need to try to understand how new and revived media were working together to create a new tempo and texture in, especially, urban life around 1900. The strange thing is, however, that we find little of this new experience in the best-known fiction of the early 20th century. Look in the Grossmith's *Diary of a Nobody*, which appeared in book form in 1892, or at Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, about a day in the life of an upper-class London woman, published in 1925, and you get little sense of a media revolution under way.

Why that's so is a theme that I'll return to in later lectures: the English cultural suspicion of modern media... Meanwhile, do please join me on 26 February for an inquiry in how stereoscopy got written out of photographic history.

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¹ For instance: Ian Christie, *The Last Machine: early film and the birth of the modern world* (BBC/British Film Institute, 1994); also *Audiences* (Amsterdam University Press, 2012); Charles Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon. Edwin S Porter and the Edison Manufacturing company* (University of California Press, 1991); Laurent Mannoni, *The Great Art of Light and Shadow. Archaeology of the Cinema* (Exeter, 2000); Martin Loiperdinger, *Early Cinema Today: Programming and Performance* (John Libbey, 2012)