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## THE EDITORS

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**JEFFREY GEIGER** teaches at the University of Essex, where he was founding director of the Centre for Film Studies. His work on documentary film and American studies has appeared in a number of books and journals, among them *Third Text*, *Cinema Journal*, and *PMLA*.

**R. L. RUTSKY** teaches in the Cinema Department at San Francisco State University and is the author of *High Technè: Art and Technology from the Machine Aesthetic to the Posthuman* (1999) and co-editor of *Strategies for Theory: From Marx to Madonna* (2003).

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# Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat

(1895–1897)



KARIN LITTAU

## Silent Films and Screaming Audiences

### Context

Film history does and does not start with the Lumière brothers' invention of the *Cinématographe*. Auguste and Louis Lumière did not give birth to pictures in motion, since optical effects of movement in the form of shadow plays and magic-lantern shows were already well loved entertainments before the nineteenth century. Nor did they invent the movies, because the public could already, even if only on an individual basis, watch films by peering through Thomas Alva Edison's coin-operated peep box, the Kinetoscope. Rather, the Lumières were the first to project a strip of film on a screen large enough to be seen by an entire audience, and therefore instituted film viewing as a collective experience. The screening on December 28, 1895, at the Salon Indien of the Grand Café in Paris, will remain forever recorded in our history books, because from then onward audiences were willing to pay regularly for this new form of entertainment.<sup>1</sup>

On that day, the way in which the world was seen both changed and did not change. There had never been a technology that could so accurately produce an illusion of reality. Although these moving pictures were in black and white, what they simulated was not only life as it could be seen beyond the walls of the Grand Café, but also the sensation of movement as it could be felt in the hubbub of the nineteenth-century metropolis. On the other hand, those who lined up that day on the Boulevard des Capucines were already seeing the world protocinematically. This is because they were accustomed to big-city living, which had become as fast and intoxicating as the speed

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<sup>1</sup>The first-ever film screening to an audience—namely, invited scientists at the Société d'Encouragement pour l'Industrie Nationale—took place on March 22, 1895.

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of the onrushing impressions about to burst onto the screen. The cinema, with its restless succession of living pictures, was the very embodiment of a modern existence in flux. The Lumières' invention of a technological apparatus that combined camera, printer, and projector, and their most famous film, *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat*, must therefore be understood in the larger context of modernity, which had brought unprecedented changes to everyday life.

### *The Cinema Was on Its Way Long before 1895*

Everything associated with the modern age—industrialization, mobility, and consumerism—and everything this entailed, from overpopulated urban centers, machinery working around the clock, the deafening noise of trains, to shopping as a new form of addiction, were all factors in shaping a sensibility that had become, according to Friedrich Nietzsche in 1888, “immensely more irritable” (47). During the early years of the railways, nervous energies overcame the traveler as the train swallowed up the miles at an inhuman pace, just as the anxious air traveler in our own age seems to expect with every unusual vibration that disaster is waiting (Schivelbusch 160–61). The fear of technology out of control, of accidents and collisions, were just as tangibly felt at street level. Writing about the burgeoning nineteenth-century metropolis, the cultural theorist Walter Benjamin found that “moving through traffic involves the individual in a series of shocks and collisions” to the extent that “at dangerous crossings, nervous impulses flow through him in rapid succession” (132). Even pushing through the jostling crowds, the urban stroller felt at some risk, be this a potential pickpocket's hand too close for comfort, ramming the elbow of a stranger, or, as Émile Zola's novel *The Ladies' Paradise* (1883) describes it, being swept away by a current of shoppers, which the new department stores pulled in as if “sucking in the population from the four corners of Paris” (241; ch. 9). When Nietzsche gives his diagnosis of modernity, it is befitting therefore that he also gives a flavor of the new pace of life by emulating its tempo and rhythm in the fragmentary nature of his style:

the abundance of disparate impressions greater than ever: cosmopolitanism in foods, literatures, newspapers, forms, tastes, even landscapes. The tempo of this influx *prestissimo*; the