Crosscutting Revisited: The Impact of Historical Research into Early Cinema on A Key Element of Classical Narrative Cinema[1]

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Abstract: According to traditional film histories, crosscutting is the cornerstone of the classical aesthetic in cinema. Numerous scholarly studies have been carried out on this crucial aspect of classical narrative film language. It is maintained that crosscutting's "multiple lines of action" must take place in "widely separated locales" (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, 1985: 48)[2]. The use of such ambiguous expressions as "widely separated locales" and "multiple lines of action" creates serious problems when applied to the development of alternating editing techniques in early cinema. Without new theoretical tools, it becomes very difficult to elaborate a theory to explain the development of these editing techniques, even if some traditional historians had tried to do so in the past. In addition, it is practically impossible to establish a classification schema for the various forms of alternating editing techniques, since the current typology takes into account only a small percentage of these forms, namely pseudo-alternation, parallel editing and crosscutting.

In this paper, I want, first of all, to illustrate how traditional historians gave exaggerated importance to the issue of crosscutting to the detriment of rigorous historical research, leaving certain essential questions around the definition of this alternation's configuration unraised. This historical digression will be done around the film *Attack on a China Mission*, made at the turn of the century by the British filmmaker James Williamson, which is often referred to as the first film to use crosscutting. Generally speaking, what will be under discussion here are the traditional historian's orientation and the degree of his or her interest in events in the past. Afterwards, building on precisions on space and the multiple lines of action, I will attempt to clear up the confusion the actual definition of crosscutting has given rise to around this film. My ultimate goal will be to highlight the theoretical connection, despite their differences, between the paradigms "early cinema" and "institutional cinema" by demonstrating precisely how the study of crosscutting in early cinema not only made it possible to reveal the ambiguity of this key element, which had for a long time been theorised in relation to classical narrative cinema, but also will enable us to elaborate a typology which takes into account a broader range of the various forms of alternating editing techniques found in one or the other of these two paradigms.

Keywords: crosscutting, early cinema, Classical Narrative Cinema, historical research

Ambiguities in the Conception of Crosscutting: The Case of *Attack on a China Mission*

Attack on a China Mission has acquired a special place in traditional film histories. Historians seized on this animated view very early on: to their minds, it played a crucial role in the emergence of crosscutting and the discursive forms associated with it. Georges Sadoul, for example, remarked that 'By alternating between the battle and the arrival of reinforcements, Williamson used a procedure which is inconceivable in the theatre. He discovered one of the cinema's greatest techniques: the alternation between two actions taking place simultaneously in separate locations' (Sadoul, 1946: 180-181). In writing these lines in the late 1940s, Sadoul conferred

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crosscutting's paternity on Williamson. Strangely enough, Sadoul does not indicate if he had seen the film he describes as 'incomparably more advanced than any American or French film of the period' (Sadoul, 1946: 180). It is quite unlikely, however, that Sadoul had seen the film, because no archival copy was available before March 1950 (Sopocy, 1998: 41). This doesn't appear to have prevented him from viewing this film as foreshadowing the great masterpieces by Griffith (Sadoul, 1949: 42) and as the first appearance of this assembly technique traditionally associated with "classical cinema"—all on the basis, it would appear, of a mere catalogue description that the British historians Roger Manvell and Rachael Low had brought to his attention (Low and Manvell, 1948: 70).

Some twenty years later, in 1967, Jean Mitry followed in the path set down by Sadoul and insisted on the spatial relation between the two events which, of necessity, had to take place in unconnected and not merely separate spaces, as Sadoul had argued[3]: 'For his part James Williamson, with *Attack on a China Mission* (1900), introduced the first elements of crosscutting and was the first to make dramatic use of depth of field. Rather than juxtaposing an establishing shot and closer shots, like Smith, he juxtaposed for the first time scenes taking place in different places but which converged in the end' (Mitry, 1967: 228). Like Sadoul, Mitry does not indicate if he had seen the film, but unlike him, he may have. However, the only copy known to historians of the day, at the National Film Archive in London, was just a fragment. A comparison of this version with the description of the film in the *Charles Urban Trading* catalogue of November 1903 reveals that this was clearly an incomplete copy. Nicolas Dulac and André Gaudreault[4] have brilliantly demonstrated that this 72-foot nitrate positive is in fact an earlier version of the film, released and commercially distributed by James Williamson.[5] This confirms Noël Burch's hypothesis: 'For the time being explanation of this mystery must remain hypotheses; the most plausible is that in 1903 [when the *Charles Urban Trading* catalogue was published] Williamson re-issued the film with the addition of a new shot, and . . . new editing' (Burch, 1990: 107). The version described in the catalogue appears in fact to be a second version, with several shots added. Mitry thus did not see this version and, like Sadoul, based his comments on a catalogue description. Fifteen years later, however, he took a new view of the matter—although still without having seen this second version, which was only "discovered" in 1986, four years after his follow-up article was published—and no longer described the film as an early example of crosscutting. According to this new position, the alternation between the British sailors and the Chinese revolutionaries, known as Boxers, brought into play neither a separate location nor another line of action (Mitry, 1982: 63-64).

Here is the description of *Attack on a China Mission* found in the *Charles Urban Trading* catalogue of November 1903, on which Sadoul and

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[3] Otherwise the alternation would simply be a visual back-and-forth movement within a single space, in which a single signifier is fragmented (numerous shots which are all only partial "profiles"). See Metz (1974), 164.

[4] André Gaudreault, 'Approche historiographique des versions multiples du film *Attack on a China Mission*', paper delivered at the Gradisca International Film Studies Spring School, Gradisca d'Isonzo, Italy, March 2005 in collaboration with Nicolas Dulac.

[5] Michael Chanan had discussed this earlier, without however giving details. See Chanan (1996), 241-242.

Mitry relied. Note that the film as described contains at least four tableaux (or shots)[6]:

> 'The scene opens with the outer gate of the premises; a Chinaman with flourishing sword approaches and tries the gate. Finding it fastened, he calls the others who come rushing up; one leaps over the gate, and the combined attack results in forcing it open; nine Boxers in Chinese costumes of varied character now swarm in, stopping occasionally to fire in the direction of the house.
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> The second scene shows the front of the house—the missionary walking in front with a young lady; wife and child are seated a little further off. At the first alarm, the missionary drops his book and sends the young lady into the house to fetch rifle and pistols; he then rushes to his wife and child, and sees them safely into the house; takes cover behind some bushes, discharging his revolver at the Boxers advancing in different directions, kills one, then picks up rifle and discharges it at another; his ammunition exhausted, he comes to close quarters with another Boxer armed with a sword, and after an exciting fight, is overcome, and left presumably killed. Meanwhile, others of the attacking party have closed round the young lady and followed her, retreating into the house.
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> Missionary's wife now appears waving handkerchief on the balcony; the scene changes and shows party of bluejackets advancing from the distance, leaping over a fence, coming through the gate, kneeling and firing in fours, and running forward to the rescue, under command of a mounted officer.
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> The fourth scene is a continuation of the second. The Boxers are dragging the young lady out of the house, which they have set on fire, at the moment the bluejackets appear; a struggle takes place with the Boxers; mounted officer rides up and carries off the young lady out of the melée. The missionary's wife now rushes out of the house pointing to the balcony, where she was left her child; a bluejacket has secured it, but his passage down the stairs being blocked, three sailors mount on each other's shoulders and land the child safely in the mother's arms. The struggle with the Boxers continues, but they are finally overcome and taken prisoners. This sensational subject is full of interest and excitement form start to finish, and is everywhere received with great applause.' (Charles Urban Trading catalogue, November 1903: 113-114)

According to this description, the film alternates between two places using the canonical A-B-A-B model of crosscutting. These two places are the wall, which separates the mission from the outside world, and the mission's inner garden, from which we can see the façade of a house. Despite the undeniable contiguity of these two settings, can we say that they are two different places, as the traditional definition of crosscutting requires? It is difficult to answer this question with only this description in hand. In addition, does the introduction of the three groups of actors in the film, the Boxers, the missionary and his family and the British sailors, form a single story event? Mitry's hesitation on this point is more than understandable. A nitrate copy of the later version of the film, the one described in the Charles Urban Trading catalogue, appears to have long been stored away in the vaults of the

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[6] Transcribed in Sopocy (1998), 41 and in Low and Manvell (1948), 70.

Imperial War Museum in London without, it seems, ever having been consulted by any film historian. It ended up in the National Film Archive in 1986 when the Imperial War Museum decided to divest itself of films which were not actualities or newsreels.[7] Despite the fact that the National Film Archive made this copy available to researchers, the ambiguity is still perceptible in the work of theorists years later. In 1990, Noël Burch wrote: 'And Williamson . . . deployed a crosscutting editing system close to shot-reverse-shot in the 1903 version of *Attack on a China Mission*' (Burch, 1990: 92). The form of assembly Williamson used had now become a hybrid, mid-way between crosscutting and shot-counter shot, or what Christian Metz called "pseudo alternation", a 'mere visual alternation within a unitary space' (Metz, 1974: 164). Burch, who probably saw the film (he does not mention having done so), nevertheless considers Williamson's film to be one of the first examples of the alternating syntagm (a term Metz used to describe crosscutting (Metz, 1974: 128)): 'I regard the doubtful case of Williamson's *Attack on a China Mission* . . . as precocious and isolated, whatever the date of the lost version' (Burch, 1990: 158).

Now that we have access to a copy of this film, can we use contemporary theory to settle the question raised more than fifty years ago? Can we claim, like Mitry, that the cutting between the British sailors and the Chinese revolutionaries involves neither distant locations nor two lines of action? Before answering this multi-faceted question, we should make one thing clear. While a brief ellipsis creates an unequivocal temporal link between shots two and three[8] and another connects shots three and four, it appears undeniable that a temporal overlapping occurs between shots one and two.[9] How else can we explain the calm with which the missionary walks in his garden while, a few seconds earlier, shots were fired in his direction? Either the garden stretches for a very long distance (which is quite unlikely, because the Boxers would not have fired pointlessly if out of range) or a temporal overlapping repeats in the second shot the action which occurred a few seconds earlier in the first. If we accept this latter hypothesis, that of a temporal overlapping, the garden wall and the garden itself are contiguous. Does this mean that the two locations are different or "widely separated"?[10] In fact the real question we should be trying to answer in order to refine contemporary theories of crosscutting and thereby to give a more precise idea of certain aspects of its emergence is the following: How can we determine if two locations are different and widely separated? An equally fundamental question arises with respect to the various story events which make up a crosscutting sequence: how is a story event defined and, above all, does this concept, developed with respect to classical narrative cinema, refer to a similar reality when it is applied to early cinema? The answer to each of these questions, to which other questions will be added as we proceed, will serve principally to clear up the ambiguity to which the current

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[7] André Gaudreault, *op. cit.*

[8] The British sailors are already at the gate, ready to act, when the mother begins waving her handkerchief.

[9] As soon as the earliest filmmakers began to link shots, the question of temporal continuity was crudely posed. Temporal overlapping is rare in classical narrative cinema because it usually provokes uneasiness in the viewer by repeating an action from one shot to the next. On this topic see Gaudreault (1980), 109-139.

[10] Jean Mitry, in his article 'Les Mésaventures d'un pompier'", insists at length on this criterion for defining crosscutting with reference to another film, *Life of an American Fireman* (Porter, 1903). See Mitry (1982), 68.

definition of crosscutting gives rise and to describe a genealogy of alternation in the cinema, thereby highlighting the theoretical dynamic between the paradigm "early cinema" and that of "institutional cinema". I should emphasise, and this is very important, that the historical mystery surrounding the two versions of this film (one dating from 1900 and the other from 1903) is not of much interest here and that my ultimate objective is neither to award James Williamson with the title "the father of crosscutting" nor to determine who its inventor was. My intention, rather, was to illustrate, from this historical digression using *Attack on a China Mission* as an example, how traditional historians gave exaggerated importance to the issue of alternation to the detriment of rigorous historical research, leaving certain essential questions around the definition of this alternation's configuration unraised. It is quite clear that the elaboration of crosscutting was and still is a crucial issue in historical discourse within cinema studies.

Distance and Story Events: Two Mistaken Conceptions around Crosscutting Today

The distance separating two events—which is often the source of a film's dramatic tension—can be seen as falling into one of four fundamental kinds of spatial relations (Gaudreault and Jost, 1990: 90-98)[11]: identical space, contiguous space, near disjunction and distant disjunction. More concretely, we need to use these various spatial linkages between two shots to establish a limit beyond which two spaces would be seen as distinct. Nevertheless, it will be necessary, when sketching our new typology which will take into account other forms of "alternating editing", to explore more deeply and refine the theory of classical narrative space in order to identify all the exceptional cases which can be found in this 'amorphous mass of innovation and experiments' (Gaudreault, 2004: 12) that was early cinema. It is simple enough to identify the extreme cases within these spatial linkages, such as two shots within an identical space or two shots of distant disjunction, in which the viewer is transported into a distant space completely different from the one shown in the previous shot. The absence of subtitles, intertitles and stylistic conventions in early cinema to give the transition between two shots not connected by the same action or character[12] any specific spatial value makes it difficult, however, to distinguish between spatial contiguity and near disjunction[13]. From the outset, though, we might conclude that the first of these two ambiguous spatial relations, spatial contiguity, does not present the threshold we are seeking because, like identical space, it shows the same overall diegetic space: a room, a landscape. More precisely, the information contained in the two shots leads the viewer to infer visual continuity between the two segments. The classic example of this second kind of relation is a conversation filmed in shot-counter shot. The space shown in shot 2 is situated in the immediately off-screen space shown in shot 1 and there remains nothing in shot 2 of the spatial segment seen in shot 1. We must therefore take a closer look at near disjunction, which naturally links two non-

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[11] See also Burch (1973), 3-16, which discusses the same kinds of spatio-temporal relations between shots.

[12] This is exactly what we find in the case of two consecutive shots within a crosscutting sequence, because when the same action or the same character links shots A and B in the same sequence the two story events can be seen to have converged and the sequence of crosscutting as having ceased to exist.

[13] On this topic the role the external assistant known as the lecturer can have for the viewer's understanding should be considered. See in particular Châteauvert (1996), 103-116 and Sopocy (1979), 108-126.

contiguous spaces—but spaces located in proximity to each other just the same. François Jost and André Gaudreault identify three kinds of near disjunction. The first concerns a communication process which creates a line between two non-contiguous spatial segments. Two distantly disjunctive shots linked by the movements of a character are seen to be nearly disjunctive because this character "diminishes" in a way our sense of the distance separating the two spatial segments by creating a link between them. The second case of near disjunction occurs when the camera takes us from one adjacent space to another when these spaces are separated by a wall (but without the use of an intermediary character). In this case, the distance is once again "diminished" and a connection is created between the two disjunctive spaces, thereby creating a contiguous relation between them. Finally, near disjunction between two spaces occurs every time the viewer is led to believe that the two spatial segments shown are not touching physically but that there is a possibility of non-amplified visual or sound communication between them (amplified in the case of binoculars or the telephone, for example). This visual or sound communication does not need to occur for the spaces to be seen as nearly disjunctive. In *Attack on a China Mission*, for example, it is inferred from the fact that the Chinese Boxers (and after them the British sailors) shoot at the missionary and his family from the garden wall. This is how the garden wall and the garden itself are seen, in the diegesis, as relatively unconnected, yet near. In this way, according to the theory of narrative space in the cinema developed by Jost and Gaudreault, the two spaces in which the action of *Attack on a China Mission* takes place are "widely separated" and disjointed, as the contemporary definition of crosscutting requires them to be.

Undoubtedly, the ambiguity surrounding the definition of the story event is directly linked to that surrounding the narrative space. It is undeniable, for example, that a last-minute rescue is a form of crosscutting, because the hero, in order to create the most suspense possible, must be in a completely different space than that in which the victim is located (obviously, the distance between them will diminish as time progresses).[14] Since they are located a good distance from each other, the two story events do not interact with each other directly and are thus more easily identifiable: story event A shows the hero, running in the direction of the victim, while story event B shows the victim trying to struggle free. The chase, the other canonical example of crosscutting endlessly cited by theorists,[15] better illustrates this seemingly two-fold ambiguity. When the pursued comes into the view of the pursuer,[16] not only is the pursued necessarily near the pursuer, but they interact directly upon each other. Is this, therefore, a single story event, which we could describe as *x is pursuing y*, or is it two story events we could describe as *x is pursuing* and *y is being pursued?* John M. Carroll and Dominique Château, each postulating the existence of two signifying levels,

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[14] Last-minute rescue films are legion in early cinema, especially after Griffith's arrival on the scene. One of the earliest examples dates from 1906 with the film *The 100 to One Shot* produced by the American company Vitagraph.

[15] See for example two books I have already cited, Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson (1985), 48 and Gunning (1991), 95, in addition to Salt (1992), 322 and Aumont and al. (1997), 35. See also the following French-language book: Gardies and Bessalel (1992), 21.

[16] In this way, to borrow the terminology of Jost and Gaudreault on narrative space, we must distinguish between "distant pursuit" (a criminal being pursued at a distance by police with tracking dogs) from "near pursuit" (someone being pursued by another person who has them in their sight).

that of the events and that of the properly cinematic element that reveals those events, have each developed their own film grammar capable of enumerating all the possible story constructions acceptable to viewers.[17] According to Château's model,[18] *x is pursuing y* is expressed by a sole narrative structure linking the two actors, *x* and *y* (where *x* is the subject of the action and *y* the object) with a predicate (*pursuit*) *x, y*. In the case of a chase constructed using crosscutting, the formula to express the sequence becomes (*pursuit*) *x, y:* A B A B, in which the right-hand of the equation, A B A B, represents the sequence's formal syntagmatic structure. According to this model, we could say that the narrative of *Attack on a China Mission* is expressed by means of two narrative structures linking three groups of actors (the Boxers, the missionary and his family and the British sailors) and two predicates ([*attack*] and [*rescue*]): story event A ([*attack*] Boxers/missionary and his family) and the story event B ([*rescue*] British sailors/missionary and his family). The film starts off with story event A: in the first shot. The Boxers penetrate the wall and fire in the direction of the missionary and his family. This story event continues in the second shot as the attack continues in the garden of the mission. In the third shot, the British sailors penetrate the garden in turn and fire in the direction of the Boxers, thereby introducing story event B.

In the fourth and final shot, story event B continues with the rescue of the missionary and his family. The British sailors have finally eliminated the threat. According to Château's model, the film's formal syntagmatic structure is thus A A B B, which in no way corresponds to the canonical form A B A B of crosscutting. Carroll's model,[19] despite similar aims, differs slightly in its approach. The sequence *x is pursuing y* now contains two story events (Carroll himself prefers the expression "action sequence"): story event A, *x is pursuing*, and story event B, *y is being pursued*. To show this sequence in a case of crosscutting, he then applies a transformational rule he calls the "parallel action rule" to the two "action sequences". The following formula results: A & B = (A1 + B1) + (A2 + B2) + *ad infinitum*. According to Carroll's model, the narrative of *Attack on a China Mission* contains no fewer than four story events: story event A (the Boxers attack); story event B (the missionary and his family are attacked); story event C (the British sailors come to the rescue); and story event D (the missionary and his family are rescued). Using the story events as defined by his model, we can apply Carroll's parallel action rule to see the presentational order they would have if they were shown using crosscutting, that is according to the following formal syntagmatic structure: A B A B C D C D. When we determine the real order of these story events in the film *Attack on a China Mission*, which takes the formal syntagmatic structure A AB C CD,[20] we quickly see that the two

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[17] I should point out that this brief sketch of Château's and Carroll's models gives only a small idea of their possibilities.

[18] Dominique Château uses as his starting point the idea that there are two ways to summarise film narration: as a sequence of actions (narrative structure **s**) and as an arrangement of shots (syntagmatic structure of segment **z**), hence the two parts of her model whose form is **s:z**. See Château (1987), 95-130.

[19] For Carroll, all film narration can be described as an "event structure" made up of characters, settings and actions to which a transformational rule is applied, thereby transforming any event structure into a film scene. See Carroll (1980), 81-124.

[20] The first shot simply shows story event A (we see only the Boxers attacking the mission from the wall). The second shot shows both story event A and story event B (we see the Boxers attacking and the missionary and his family being attacked). The third shot shows

structures are not the same. Thus the various story events defined by both Château and Carroll as making up Williamson's film do not take the form of crosscutting but are, rather, consecutive.

Ultimately, despite the fact that *Attack on a China Mission* does not fit contemporary theory's rigid definition of crosscutting, this film should nonetheless occupy a special place in the history of this mode of editing's genesis. What is important, then, more than the simple fact that *Attack on a China Mission* is not an early example of crosscutting, is to determine which system the particular structure of this film employs, given that it is undeniable that it consists in some way of alternation (spatial alternation between the mission's wall and garden). How can we characterise this singular work knowing that it is not pseudo-alternation (the two spaces in which the action of the film takes place are clearly near to each other, but they are separate) and much less so parallel editing (there is no thematic relationship present in the film)? Clearly, we need a new typology capable of correcting this theoretical shortcoming, which prevents us from making certain fundamental distinctions. This need for a new typology highlights not only the theoretical dynamic between the paradigms "early cinema" and "institutional cinema", but also the dynamic between film theory and film history, long sidelined by structuralism, which sees the film text as a closed system.[21] Writing a history of alternation in the cinema is therefore only possible with a new typology, with new theoretical ideas. Conversely, the desire to write this history leads us to realize the shortcomings of contemporary theory. Once again, this demonstrates that history and theory are inseparable. But while this has been stated over and over by the new generation of historians and scholars who took part in the now-famous "Cinema 1900-1906" conference in Brighton in 1978, historical issues do not appear to have entirely taken their rightful place alongside theoretical issues.[22]

It is also essential to ask, in light of this historical digression around the film *Attack on a China Mission*, why traditional historians wanted, to the detriment it should be remembered of a rigorous historical enquiry, to determine in which film crosscutting first appeared. Perhaps we need to ask the question differently: why was it so important to write the history of crosscutting? In traditional film history books, parallel editing is, for its part, something of the poor cousin of the various alternating editing techniques and its first appearance is not fetishised unlike crosscutting. Because it breaks the narration so dear to classical narrative cinema, it was rarely used once the cinema was institutionalised[23] and seems as a result to hold little interest for these historians. We must therefore acknowledge that history, for the traditional film historians, is characterised by 'an *idealistic* conception of cinema and by a *teleological* vision of its history, a vision within which, as we know, each event is but a step towards the ideal to be reached: the cinema

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only story event C (we see only the British sailors firing on the Boxers), and finally the fourth shot shows story events C and D (we see the British sailors rescuing the missionary and his family and the latter being rescued), hence the formal syntagmatic structure A AB C CD.

[21] On this topic, see the foundational article by André Gaudreault and Tom Gunning, Gaudreault and Gunning (1989), 49-63.

[22] This topic seems to be of some concern to the scholarly community today, judging by the numerous international conferences which have addressed it over the past few years. To give just one example, the journal *Framework* is holding its first international conference at Oklahoma State University in November 2006, entitled 'The Future of Theory'.

[23] On this topic, see Chapter 15, 'The Formulation of the Classical Narrative', in Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson (1985), 174-193.

we call "classical"' (Gaudreault, 2007, 2).[24] If, on the one hand, classical cinema is an ideal, on the other hand this 'primitive' cinema must, for these historians, strive to reach maturity, to discover *the* cinematic language. Early cinema was then considered (and still is by some scholars), as the crucible in which classical narrative cinema was refined. Here, the historian's orientation and the degree of his or her interest in events in the past are completely clear: at a time when the cinema's legitimacy and specificity had not yet been demonstrated, the origins of film language, of which crosscutting is the cornerstone, had, whatever the cost, to be brought to light. It was essential, in a manner of speaking, to record the birth of film language.

Now that this has been accomplished (the cinema's status as an art being no longer an issue), our historical attention naturally still has a specific orientation (surely this will always be the case?), but this orientation is different because of the subjective conditions prevailing today. And, despite this change in orientation, the history of crosscutting is important even today. Obviously, however, it is so for different reasons. Right now, the principal benefit of this genealogy would be to enable us to understand how alternation became the major element in cinema's institutionalisation. Before it became, in Tom Gunning's words, 'a narrative armature, interlacing the narrative progress of characters separated in space' (Gunning, 1991, 205)[25], alternation could take the form of superimposition or pans and even be taken up by the act of spectatorship itself, in the form of the viewer's alternating gaze. Nevertheless, it is no longer a question, first of all, of viewing crosscutting as the *nec plus ultra* of cinematic expression, nor to see the film language as universal. Some scholars, questioning this supposed 'universality', have examined a few little-analysed bodies of work in order to demonstrate their stylistic specificity, which has largely been unremarked or seen as having little importance. This is the case, for example, with African cinema[26] and Québécois cinema,[27] two cinemas greatly influenced by oral tradition whose aesthetic is quite distinct from the aesthetic usually produced by the supposedly universal film language developed in the West. Secondly, we must no longer see crosscutting as a signifying practice specific to film language. Rather, what is needed is to take an intermedia point of view and approach alternation as a practice capable of transcending its medium. We need to look beyond the cinema and identify places where alternation occurs in cultural practices and forms of artistic expression which were contemporaneous with early cinema. We will thereby better be able to identify the various exchanges that took place between different media and "cultural series". In conclusion, it thus becomes clear that we must greatly alter our attitudes as historians to the object of study. We must be aware of our contemporary interests as historians and avoid letting these guide us too easily along insidious paths of interpretation. Film historians (and historians in general) do not recreate the past the way it was, but recreate, in a sense, the present of how, at a precise moment in time, the past is seen. It is a question

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[24] I have had the opportunity to read, before its publication sometime in 2007, André Gaudreault's book *Au seuil de l'histoire du cinéma. La cinématographie-attraction*. The page reference here is to the manuscript version and not to the forthcoming published version of the book; in this case, page 2 of Chapter 1.

[25] See also Bellour (2000), 262-277.

[26] On this topic, see Gabriel (1989), 30-52 and Diawara (1989), 191-198.

[27] On this topic see the work of Germain Lacasse on orality in Québécois cinema, in particular Lacasse (2002), 89-107 and Lacasse (2006), 1-22. This latter volume is forthcoming in 2006; the page reference given here is not that of the published version.

of doing history differently than our predecessors and of being able to see the presuppositions they held. There is no point in pretending to possess historical objectivity, because inevitably, in a not too distant future, history will be written differently than it is today.

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