



A SUDDEN FLICKER OF LIGHT

A Revisionist
History
of Movies

David Thomson

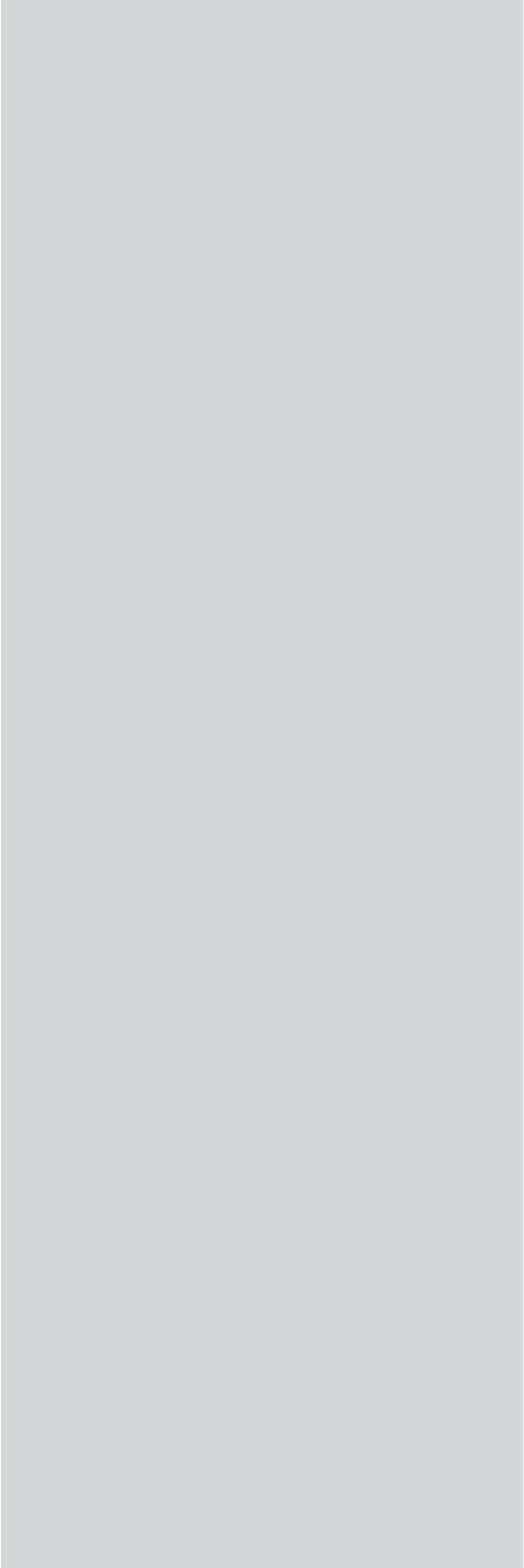
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A SUDDEN FLICKER OF LIGHT

**A Revisionist
History of
the Movies**

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For Mathew

“Tell me everything you saw.”

—Lisa, Grace Kelly, in *Rear Window* (1954)

“But the thing made an image, lasting only a moment, like a sudden flicker of light.”

—Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881)

“Film is a phenomenon whose resemblance to death has been ignored for too long.”

—Norman Mailer (1971)

Fade Away

In the nineteenth century our grasp on life was stimulated but compromised by the invention of the lifelike—the photograph, and then it moved. That latter flickering felt like Emil Zátopek running, running, or that opening shot of Jacques Demy's *La Baie des Anges* (1963) with Jeanne Moreau walking on the promenade at Nice. Such wonders crowd us out. A face from 1896, shaded by a parasol, will be dead by now. The boy in the TV series *Adolescence* never exactly existed, except as an actor. Yet those images remain—for a short while. But the culture is left in mounting dismay over what is real, or what matters. For we can now fabricate the imagery—we have bypassed light and nature—so that we no longer trust it or our response. Are we smart enough to handle such things? Or is our smartness just a rumor from out of the past?

A Couple on the Beach

In 1975, Haskell Wexler sat down for an interview with the British film magazine *Sight & Sound*. Born in Chicago in 1922, Wexler was recognized as a brilliant and daring cinematographer. He had begun as a scrupulous realist who relied on the cinematic process to convey the real thing. Let external nature burn into the emulsion. He had shot *The Savage Eye* (1959), a deliberately harsh documentary, and one could feel the same deglamorizing scrutiny in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966), for which he won his first Oscar (and the last to mark the category of black-and-white film). Didn't he deserve a prize for making Elizabeth Taylor look other than the most beautiful woman in the world?

Politically, Wexler was on the left and unusually concerned with subject matter. Born to wealth, he quarreled with his own privilege, and he was known for being difficult, or a pain in the neck. He had photographed and helped fund *The Bus*, the record of a band of Freedom Riders crossing the country. But he was a Hollywood pro, too, so he shot mainstream features like *In the Heat of the Night* and *The Thomas Crown Affair*. He did not notice that conflict; he was inspired by his own creative ambition—the drive that keeps the movies surging forward.

Those “entertainment” features helped lead him into photographing commercials as a way of filling his time, and making absurd money. (Of course, the money never seems absurd; it tries to keep a straight face.) In *Thomas Crown*, Steve McQueen and Faye Dunaway were not simply characters in a droll intrigue; they were immaculate

advertisements for wishful thinking. Wexler never quite noticed his betrayal of himself. Life is easier that way in America. It's the "nice day" that is steadily recommended.

He won his second Oscar for 1976's *Bound for Glory* (with David Carradine playing folk singer Woody Guthrie), and Wexler had served with Woody in the war. They were both in the merchant marine; Wexler had been torpedoed in the Indian Ocean and spent ten days in a lifeboat. So he had tough standards for reality along with a survivor's inventiveness—he pioneered the Steadicam on *Bound for Glory*, moving up and into the action in new ways to inhabit it more fully.

He also wrote, directed, and photographed *Medium Cool* (1969), an exceptional feature film about a news cameraman—with a story, a script, and actors, but done in the cinema verité style that was such a breakthrough in the sixties that it turned public figures into actors who might be playing themselves. You see how Wexler's work was nagging away at the issue of authenticity and at his own status.

This is background to something Wexler said in that 1975 interview. It is an observation that lights the blue touch paper for this book's unease:

I have rather complex feelings about filmmaking. Through... this mechanical power, you have a sense of immediacy, you alter the manner in which you perceptually relate to the world. I was on the beach yesterday and there was a young couple walking, hand in hand, by the shore. I looked at them and thought, I cannot look at these people today as I looked at them when I was a young man.

I see them behind a camera at seventy-two frames per second. I almost superimposed a Coke bottle or Goodyear tire as though I were shooting a commercial. We have expropriated so many of the private moments and sold them in the marketplace. And this is part of the corruption of the reproducible media.

Wexler was getting a reputation for persisting with awkward questions and challenging directors when they yearned for peace, beauty, and obedience from cameramen. He had been hired for but then replaced on two significant movies—*The Conversation* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (just ahead of the interview). *Cuckoo's Nest* ended up a triumph; it won five Oscars and made a lot of money. But it seems to

have been a hell in the making from which Wexler had to be removed. Its young producer, Michael Douglas, said it was the worst job he was ever on.

What happened in the marriage of two madhouses, a hospital for the insane and a movie production? Wexler thought director Miloš Forman was going too far to be comic. He believed the true dismay of the inmates was being softened. But the producers, Saul Zaentz and Douglas, wanted a show that worked. What else? So put the blame on Nurse Ratched. Forman felt Wexler was sharing misgivings with the actors. And in all of this, as one observer reported, “[Jack] Nicholson was crown prince of this particular kingdom, and just as his character commandeered the ward, he took over the film. He cajoled, joked, charmed; he was unfailingly polite and helpful to everyone—but he always got his way. When he would silently withdraw, even in the middle of the room, no one dared to approach him.”

Jack’s wry spirit enabled that film, and several others over the next few years. That such a film was such a hit came from his shabby mercury. After all, the plight of inmates in a provincial asylum was not obvious box office. But the film had caught a current in the air: that madness or dissent might be okay and American, a version of liberty, like tipping good helicopters into the China Sea. So Randle McMurphy (Jack’s role) could be a hero for a racked nation. Every production is a struggle for power. This was when the panache of stars still owned the movies. That is hard if a director or a producer is trying to be a genius while carrying himself as a godfather. *Cuckoo’s Nest* had beckoned once to Kirk Douglas: He had a play written from Ken Kesey’s novel; he acted in it himself in New York in 1963; he yearned to make a movie of it—and yearning was how Kirk breathed—but he couldn’t raise the money. It is a long story, of how the project passed to his son—and left ill feeling between them. It leaves me thinking that the story of how they made *Cuckoo’s Nest* is more compelling than the weird defense of threatened eccentricity that it served up.

We walk around most of our life—to be active and exercised, to see the world or what’s across the street, a snap and a glimpse of inwardness, offering the chance that appearance and noticing can marry as something like revelation. We might be on the beach with a friend. Tanning in the vast and lovely simplicity, knowing we hardly matter in its prodigious theater. It’s tempting to pass as easygoing, like an ad for pleasing company, but being difficult never goes away. We remember some awkward things. By the

eighties, Wexler was working still but on smaller pictures, with a reputation for being too left-wing or too concerned with subject matter. Did that difficult moment on *Cuckoo's Nest* ever go away?

What else was Wexler to do? He had acquired experience and credentials, plus a talent that had to be appeased. But success had given him a standard of living he was reluctant to put in jeopardy. To be in Hollywood and start to slide—to let your car or your spouse seem out-of-date—is a sin against the holy ghost.

This is a model for Hollywood anxiety and it reminds me that Wexler shot one film for an exceptional worrier—*The Man Who Loved Women* (1983), for the writer-director Blake Edwards. It may seem perverse to pick on Edwards in a first chapter in a history. He was a journeyman, a pro, or a hack—take your pick. But not “an artist” or an unquestioned figure in his very competitive field.

Yet he tried as hard as anyone, and was a nervous wreck because of it. Edwards had one wife while he was learning the business; after that he married Julie Andrews and stayed married to her for over forty years. She would act in his films—as his wife, a lover, a paragon, and his shrink. They were a family: He had two children from his first marriage, she had one from hers. They then adopted two more together, Vietnamese. One hopes it worked well, with a spoonful of sugar. But he noticed other women, and sometimes they seemed to rescue him from his hypochondria.

Busy with symptoms and medicines, Edwards would live to eighty-eight, so versatile as to seem unstable. This is not uncommon in pictures. He was haunted by insecurity. He directed thirty-eight pictures. He did thrillers, he tried Westerns, he excelled at slapstick farce, but he was anxious to make personal, autobiographical films. Wasn't that possible? He had huge hits and crushing letdowns. He had chronic fatigue syndrome, but he was relentlessly energetic. He was depressive yet committed to happiness or fulfilment. Sensitive but quick-tempered, he required patience and forgiveness in others. In *S.O.B.* (1981), a flop, he made one of the most desperate, hilarious confessionals about being active while suicidal in Hollywood.

Edwards had a lot of glory, what with *Operation Petticoat*, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, the Pink Panther films (with Peter Sellers), and *10*—that fond lament over women-gazing. He was rich, yet stressed about losing what he had. He managed to seem amused by it all. But

he would never win an Oscar of his own—he was given an honorary award in 2004, but the consolation statuettes seem to weigh less than those won in competition.

The Man Who Loved Women did poorly and it was nominated for nothing, though the town knew that Edwards's own shrink had been active in helping on the script. For many would-be phenoms in Hollywood the standard measures of prowess—your houses, your cars, your artwork, your kids' trust funds, and even your wives—include financial advisors, shrinks, or soothsayers.

As his director of photography, Wexler could have detected a gap between a winning fantasy and the endless frustration in lives as cool as that of Blake Edwards, or himself. The pressure can be intense on big shots living with mixed feelings about themselves being watched. Living in a dissolve of elation and paranoia. There is a giddy allure in being displayed—no matter the compromises it may entail. In all the looking and photography, you can feel close to a soul-free religion in being seen, full of showy hope and veiled disappointment, so the spoiled egos of the film kingdom slip into a far-fetched condition—that of self-pity.

When they are supposed to be having as grand a time as us. This is our history and our show. And the nerve we had once was in assuming that the whole venture could be fun—as much as the thrill at the movies. Give credit to photography: It was a way of getting a guy to smile in the light so that he and we forgot the likelihood of his disturbance. Just have that nice day, and cross your fingers that a fiftieth of a second and its flicker of light can smooth away eighty years.

If you don't feel good today, just cut to tomorrow—it's the cutting that is organic and energizing. The moving image is all very well, and lovely, but the cuts teach us, we may be crazy.

The Sea Is Moving

There's a point in *Citizen Kane* (1941) where the investigating reporter, Thompson, goes to interview Bernstein, Kane's right-hand manager and loyal believer. He wants to know what Kane meant by "Rosebud," that last word before he died. Bernstein is a small man at a large desk, chairman of the board with nothing to do, beginning to realize how his life emptied out with the death of Kane. But he's not downcast about this. He has a way of trusting the unexpected, a patience like the passive waiting in a camera.

No, he doesn't know what "Rosebud" meant. But he does believe in small rosebuds that can last a lifetime without blooming or dying. Like seeing someone in passing, on a beach or on a boat. Bernstein has a story; maybe he's been waiting all his life to tell it.

"One day, back in 1896, I was crossing over to Jersey on the ferry, and as we pulled out, there was another ferry pulling in, and on it there was a girl waiting to get off. A white dress, she had on. She was carrying a white parasol. I only saw her for one second. She didn't see me at all, but I bet a month hasn't gone by since that I haven't thought of that girl."

That is all we have of the girl. A snapshot, exposed but undeveloped. Was she going to meet a gentleman friend? Can you guess from seeing her?

Writing urges you to see; movie leaves you no choice. You might make a movie about Bernstein, a decent shy man who searches for that woman in white until, weary of pursuit, he marries another woman in green. Or he makes a hobby out of following strange women, like a lonely detective in San Francisco who is afraid of his *Vertigo* and being involved with a real woman. (There's just one screen where all our pictures are

playing.) Movie has turned us into watchers, half aware that we cannot have what we see. We don't deserve it—we know this because we have been made Peeping Toms.

I'm conjuring this stuff, but isn't that what movies do for us? Don't we look and wonder in the way Haskell Wexler saw a couple on a beach and felt at the brink of his disenchantment with what he had been doing—making lustrous images that confuse our footing in reality? Or fill us with dread? It's playing with "the facts," and that can seem perilous, or disturbed. Fantasy is a readiness for surpassing fact, an itch of madness, and photography set it free. But hasn't that habit passed into us, so that we can't stop seeing tomorrow? We walk around seeing the world, stepping over the bodies, et cetera, while behind our gaze we are seeing a story named "Desire."

This is conjecture, but that's what looking frees. Suppose that Bernstein, a few years earlier, had been an employee of the University of Pennsylvania. It was in that service that he could have been assigned to assist a strange, forbidding man, an Englishman once, a man named Edward Muggeridge. This Muggeridge had been recruited by the university and by the painter Thomas Eakins to pursue a photographic study of motion. Despite reports that the Englishman had been a rogue in California (he had killed a man there who had seduced his wife—he admitted it—and been exonerated by the jury). Was that just being English, or Californian?

Eadweard Muybridge (that new name shows American energy at work) was a photographer, but of a rare sort. In looking at stills, he wanted to explode stillness. He had discovered that by using a row of cameras, tripped off in a few seconds, the images could spring to life. The sequence of frames was like a loaded gun, ready to be fired. In Pennsylvania, this Muybridge was taking volumes of still pictures of everyday actions—a man climbing a ladder; a woman opening an umbrella; a kid emptying a bucket of water on a chum. See the falling water, like a loin of meat—and then it tumbles. And so on. These are some of the most spectacular photographs ever taken, not least those of Muybridge himself, naked but for a white beard, striding into the future.

Well, our Bernstein had turned up at Muybridge's premises in Philadelphia one day to be an assistant, and the old man had asked him if he'd ever played tennis. The fellow admitted it—one thing leads to another—so Muybridge tells him to find a racket and some tennis balls. "I want you to serve," he tells the fellow. "You have a good body, I think?"

You see, he wants the server naked. When the fellow blushes at this, Muybridge says it is all in the name of science (optics and physiology), done on respectable university funding. He shows the young man a series of pictures of young women washing their hair, sweeping some steps, a couple of them playing leapfrog. They are all naked, and not unappealing. In the name of science. So the fellow spends two days serving tennis balls, over two hundred a day, and at the end of it all he is like a god or a Federer, bronzed but sepia in the sunlight in Muybridge's open-air studio.

He becomes good at the game that is captivating the world. There is already a tournament, in Britain, at a place called Wimbledon, for leading players. Tennis clubs are coming into being where young men and women can meet, without taking off their clothes.

And in that spring of 1896, he wonders if she would like to go to Koster & Bial's Music Hall, at Thirty-Fourth and Broadway, where they are putting on some kind of moving picture show. The place is packed (it holds three thousand; seats are twenty-five cents in the gallery), and full of smoke. There is a small orchestra accompanying the pictures on a white screen, along with shouts and cries from the audience. They watch mere fragments, but they are entranced: there is a comic boxing match; two people dance beneath an umbrella; and then there is the sea.

This is miraculous and transporting. The figures on the screen seem just like the spectators—a large, vague wave of fellowship hangs over the show. There is infinity, too. For whereas the boxing match and the dance might have been taking place on the stage at Koster & Bial's, the sea is somewhere else, the promise and the threat of a wider, unknown world. A newspaper in New York describes it: "One could look out to sea and pick out a particular wave swelling and undulating and growing bigger and bigger until it strikes the end of the pier."

The sea is moving.

"I feel I am going to get splashed," says the fellow.

"I could watch the waves forever," she replies.

They are falling in love with treasured tennis and swimming all their lives together. They feel they are falling and undulating. What a knockout to be young in 1896.

The pieces of film are just one shot; they begin, they end, without a story or a point. At the music hall, they are interludes in the regular program of singers, comics, jugglers,

and magic acts. But the fragments are oddly compelling, perhaps because they are a novelty, maybe because they signal the arrival of technology, but also because they provide a cool, remote, and sufficient somewhere without the smoke and din of Koster & Bial's. You could imagine you were in that other there, and it feels more charming than here. There is an escapism when you had not realized you were imprisoned.

That was 1896, or half an hour ago.

If this is a nonfiction book, how does the fiction come in, like a tide? But recall that we are considering a medium that makes an astonishing, instantaneous contrast (call it a cut), and an uncalled-for contract, between the here-and-now and its dogged life and a never-ever land that only looks like life. Real people (tired and sweaty) are sitting down to watch tireless and perfect people they will never meet. There is a rhythm in movie that puts the real and the fantasy not just in apposition but in the same place. This may be delightful, funny, scary, and seductive (and those responses all partake of one another), but the dynamic technological thrust of the show, and the cunning of its voyeurism, are a reckless guide as if to say, "Who cares?" Identity and integrity are in jeopardy. That air of fellowship is not far from the dawning of the multitudes out of sight—so many that maybe none of us matter.

Too late now to muster urgent interest in all the early efforts to provide moving film for an audience—and there were so many conscientious ventures, many of which never knew they were in a contest. It's more helpful to identify the different motives. Nearly every film buff knows that in France there was a famous meeting in Paris on December 28, 1895, where the Lumière brothers, Auguste and Louis, whose father owned a still photography business in Lyon, demonstrated that they could—by use of a single instrument—record on film what the camera was pointing at and then (after it had been developed and printed) project that film strip back at a screen. They called the machine the Cinématographe, and it was a camera *and* a projector, with the necessary light source in front of it at first and then behind the film. Their practical ingenuity had seen that the light could be moved around so that the trick worked. We believe about forty people paid for that first show at the Salon Indien of the Grand Café on Boulevard des Capucines.

The audience members were impressed. On seeing workers coming out of the Lumière factory they nodded and said, “Oh yes, I see.” Or something like that. They recognized actuality and a strange unknown existence that suddenly seemed intimate. On looking at a family having a picnic, they murmured over how pretty the baby was and how they wouldn’t mind a picnic themselves someday soon. And when a rather plodding steam locomotive came into a station (and toward the camera) some of them cried out—in alarm, or pretend alarm—and ran from the salon fearing that the engine would burst out of the screen and run them over. Note: We do not have proof that alarm prompted that reaction. But the story of it was told, as if the enchantment of pretending was underway as a communal passion. It was a version of the fellow thinking he might get wet in ocean spray. Ah yes, I know, he does not exist. Not even if I call him Harry. Or Tateh. Please remember that name. I am talking to you—can you see me? I can see you.

One person in that Parisian audience was Georges Méliès, a skilled stage magician. He was excited by the Lumière show. He had long appreciated that photography was a tricked reality, a medium begging for subterfuge, “effects,” and bare-faced lies. But that potential was accelerated by what the Cinématographe offered. He saw that one image might be superimposed on another; he realized how scale could be played with; he saw that duration could be slowed or hurried; he understood that the fake and the actual could be married without us losing faith in the process. He even recognized that the Cinématographe need not be limited to running forward. Surely it was possible for the film to run through the apparatus backward. Whereupon the sheer daft beauty of life in reverse was revealed. That is still a treat that too few films have the wit to employ.

So Méliès approached the Lumières with an obvious business question: How much would they require to sell him a Cinématographe so that he could make magical films? The idiots were stuffy about it. They had been preoccupied with the scientific precision in achieving motion. They turned Méliès away and told him, “This is an invention without a future.” It’s not clear that anyone admitted to having heard that remark. But stories were gaining ground.

For a few years by then, over in West Orange, New Jersey, Thomas Edison had been producing short films and a Kinetoscope, a viewing apparatus, so that a person could apply himself to a viewfinder, turn a handle, and look at the unwinding of time as if studying matter through a telescope. One person at a time—and Edison regarded himself

as a genius, oblivious to the idea that a hundred or three thousand people might view the show at the same time. But the Kinetoscope had a secretive power: No one saw what we were seeing, and so the film strips that played on it were sometimes lewd. Or what we were dreaming. That private viewing would only be fulfilled fifty years later in a clumsy process called television.

I do not have the space to list all the pioneering film inventions across the world at the end of the nineteenth century. But there was great striving going on in Britain, in Germany, in France, in Scandinavia, and in what was called the Far East. The Lumières went to film Japan in 1897, and the Japanese told them that they had this wonder already. They called it the magic lantern. But the Lumières and Edison felt secure: They possessed patents. In a matter of months Méliès and others took decisive creative action and simply stole the inventions.

The accumulation of all this early film material is fascinating, yet tedious at the same time. Méliès had made five hundred films before 1914, full of fun and magic and crazy ingenuity, but monotonous and childish if set beside the work Picasso was doing in those same years—the moment of Cubism and *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907). But the historical importance of Méliès and the short films by D. W. Griffith pulled the rug out from beneath the settled attitudes of historians. They began to see that history was not just the engraved facts, the dates of kings and queens, the battles, the discoveries, the anecdotal events but also how people went up and down stairs, how they looked at one another, and were looked at. It began to offer the possibility that history did not only concern famous people, and that the simpleminded eminence of one century or the next, the ages of reformation and counterreformation, ping and pong, slavery or liberty, were underlain by something we could only call “duration,” and which often felt humdrum at the time.

For example, *Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)*, painted by Marcel Duchamp in 1912, is not just a beautiful picture, a stilled revery on motion that can be contemplated for your available hours. In addition, it is an exultant realization of the repetition and insignificance of our purposeful actions, and the degree of formal inhumanity that awaits the sweet aim of going downstairs to find something. It is an early apprehension of a virtual reality in which every one of us is lost in the billions-strong forest of humanity. And it is a painting that would not be possible without the chance for a smart mind to

look at several hundred foolish movies and see how God had been upstaged by motion and passing time.

Duchamp's picture shows seven or eight theoretical figures coming downstairs, but it might as well be billions. The word "nude" may seem to clarify female in the history of painting. Later in life, Duchamp did speak of "her." But the case is unclear. Not just faceless, the figure has no gender, no intent or personality—it has no story, as if the charade of narrative prettifies the human condition. But there's the point and the place of the picture in our history of a medium that has tried to lay down story outlines as the structures of being alive. All those gestures toward crucial individuality are less telling than the larger mood of infinite impersonality, the texture of the crowd.

It's not facetious to ask whether "the crowd" had really existed or been felt before the late nineteenth century. But in that moment, the graph of population had nearly turned a right angle. Between 1500 and 1800, our worldwide mass grew from about 450 million to a billion. Then in the nineteenth century it went to 1.6 billion. By 2000 it was over 6 billion. Today it has passed 8 billion. In so many ways that seems like good news: If life is measured as a positive force then there is much more of it. That speaks to advances in medical practice that have shattered schedules of life expectancy. It entails better nutrition, the harnessing of power to keep us warm and well lit, and able to have iPhones and televisions. It enabled cinemas, a performance that revolutionized theater's reliance on natural light or candles. Household plumbing and sewage systems reduced the state of infection and epidemics. In theory, at least, it was possible that we might all be reached, at the same time. Politics went crazy.

There are drawings of Koster & Bial's Music Hall that night in 1896 when the fellow and the woman in white went to see the picture show—fragments, fifteen seconds long, the sea and so on—and the place seems well-filled. As a regular music hall it could have had a thousand people a night. But the available sites for large congregations in that era were very few. The Dickensian city seems like a dense throng (the population of London in 1850 was 2.3 million, of New York 515,000). But so many lived in small rural communities. The movie construct of the American West is that of the wilderness being

populated, and of how the mystique of raw nature and splendid isolation was handled. There was only one kind of venue to rival the music hall, and that was the church. As soon as we face that competition, we realize how quickly the existence of crowds (a community of strangers) leads to new questions of what life is for and how it should be organized. Once people gather in crowds, political consciousness is a fever.

Crowdedness occurred from time to time before 1914. There seem to have been 230,000 people in or near the Battle of Waterloo (1815), with around 40,000 casualties. We believe 6 million visited the Great Exhibition in Britain in the course of 1851. The influenza epidemic of 1918–20 gathered a crowd of dead so large yet uncertain that historians can only place it between 20 and 100 million. As yet, government lacked the clerical thoroughness to count how many. Still, the figures were shocking. The modest 15 million (the dead in the Great War) had ended the theory of war as an adventure for brave men.

Some of these numbers are local and specific. Some are estimates of worldwide travails. Others are also emblematic—like the 6 million lost in the Holocaust. Or the 200 million in the world who are said to have seen *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915–16.

There is something else, not easy to see. We are talking about an age—the late nineteenth century and the start of the next—in which there is so much cheerful advertising on behalf of “the individual.” He gets an education; he has “rights”; he and even she may be allowed to vote; there is a mass of artistic expression that is amply soulful about what individualism feels—this is the age of beneficial art feeding into an educated society. Citizens (a new term of rhetoric) are actually counted in the systems that try to interpret and direct society. Thus schemes of democracy seek to tame power. Yet at the same time, the crowd or the mass appears. Plainly, we had been intellectually aware that there were lots of people elsewhere, or out of our sight. But strangers side by side at the movies was new; and the dark was a lesson and distinction from the hallowed light in churches, the only real predecessor of the movie theater.

Sentimentalists for that age of packed theaters tell stories about people laughing in unison and being frightened as a mass. Those feelings were real. But the crowd in the dark was also—and perhaps more effectively—a model for individual insignificance. We were all as one; we were a mass; perhaps we hardly mattered in the way Dickens, Henry James,

or Chaplin wanted to believe. How did we know we didn't matter? Because the film would not pause for us. It was the locomotion that would not stop.

With so many of us there, was it fatuous to insist on individuality? Wasn't the Great War the enactment of that indifference? Isn't Duchamp's figure on the stairs a reference to everyone, and anyone? Or no one. The figure has no face. And wasn't the crowd giving up the precious individuality by dreaming of the ghosts on the screens? Wasn't power, authority, or magic (they all come together) reliant on screens—a more significant invention than the Cinématographe?

Think of it this way: Critical history says that for *The Great Dictator* (1940) Charlie Chaplin worked to make himself a cartoon of Adolf Hitler. But don't miss this extra possibility: that in Munich when he was a hapless twenty-five, indignant over not mattering, Adolf had tried to look like Charlie. No matter the votes, the rights, and the theory of equality, we wanted power, and the screen gave it through fantasy. And fantasy was *the* modern industry. If the place where this worked was dark, that cloaked our voyeurism. Why did Adolf go to the movies so much? (As a young man, he was in and out of the dark. In 1937, Goebbels gave him a dozen Mickey Mouse pictures for Christmas.)

Adolf wanted to pretend he was someone else. It was time, long ago, to pay attention to how steadily movie has appealed to and been understood by totalitarians and monsters. And too late now?

At the music hall in 1896, such transitions are twenty years away. But in the dark at Koster & Bial's, in the face of its great illumination, the fellow and the woman in white are seeds in the new crowd. Suppose they hold hands in the dark (as if fearsome demons lurk in the screen, or some aching fondness that will be revealed). They are fixed on the screen but they steal sideways glances, not just at each other but at the human immensity that sighs or chuckles in unison. For they are surrounded by unknown others and they feel excited by that. From the first night, they are watching their own watching. And if the fellow (who has never been to sea, and cannot swim) is stirred by those waves, so that in his boyishness he tells himself, "This is what *Moby-Dick* might be!" he feels the loneliness of being at sea and the waviness in water that began so long ago and that may soon wash over him and her—and even New York City. He sees eternity, and he knows there is no God. It is all up to him. And he realizes that the audience and the great surge