

# BODY SHOTS

## EARLY CINEMA'S INCARNATIONS



JONATHAN AUERBACH

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# Contents

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| <i>List of Illustrations</i>                                    | ix  |
| <i>Acknowledgments</i>  | xi  |
| Introduction: Body, Movement, Space                             | 1   |
| PART I. BODIES IN PUBLIC  |     |
| 1. Looking In: <i>McKinley at Home</i>                          | 15  |
| 2. Looking Out: Visualizing Self-Consciousness                  | 42  |
| Interlude. The Vocal Gesture:<br>Sounding the Origins of Cinema | 63  |
| PART II. BODIES IN SPACE  |     |
| 3. Chasing Film Narrative                                       | 85  |
| 4. Windows 1900; or, <i>Life of an American Fireman</i>         | 104 |
| Conclusion: The Stilled Body                                    | 124 |
| <i>Notes</i>  | 137 |
| <i>Bibliography</i>   | 179 |
| <i>Index</i>  | 195 |

# 1 Looking In

## *McKinley at Home*

No scene, however animated and extensive, but will eventually be within reproductive power. . . . Not only our own resources but those of the entire world will be at our command. . . . Our archives will be enriched by the vitalized pictures of great national scenes, instinct with all the glowing personalities which characterized them.

W. K. L. DICKSON AND ANTONIO DICKSON  
*The Life and Inventions of Thomas Alva Edison* (1894)

Let us begin by looking at a singular body, with important implications for the body politic: the president of the United States. William McKinley was the first U.S. presidential candidate to be filmed, appearing on-screen within six months after the earliest projected moving images had been commercially exhibited in the United States. Depicting McKinley campaigning near the end of the decisive 1896 election, the film inaugurated a long-standing intimacy between politics and cinema in twentieth-century America that would culminate in the presidency of the actor Ronald Reagan.<sup>1</sup> William McKinley was also the first U.S. president whose funeral appeared on film, after he was assassinated in spectacular public fashion at the 1901 Pan-American Exposition by a lone gunman with shadowy left-wing ties. Eagerly viewed by audiences across the nation, the 1896 cinematic debut of the presidential candidate, as well as the tremendously popular 1901 films of his state burial, offer an important means to gauge the effects of a new kind of visual technology on the shaping of public opinion. Both in terms of how McKinley is embodied in these films, and of how these films were received, I seek to show how early cinema significantly altered Americans' understanding of the relation between public and private space—a question, if not a confusion, that clearly continues to plague the office of the president today, thanks largely to the intervention of mass media: television, video, the Internet, and snap opinion polls.

## I

Working backward from Clinton, Reagan, and JFK to Franklin D. Roosevelt and his fireside chats, scholars of mass communications often end up con-

ferring the title of “first media president” on Theodore Roosevelt by virtue of TR’s self-conscious public management of his manly physique and equally charming personality. Early in the century, Roosevelt dynamically courted the press, encouraged cartoons and caricatures, and mugged for the cameras, both moving and still.<sup>2</sup> Yet the prior claim of McKinley on film offers perhaps a more intriguing case, in that the powerful mass media effects he occasioned had less to do with charismatic presence than the cinematic and cultural forces of production that served to render him incarnate. While there are certainly other ways to examine the relation between cinema and the public sphere at the turn of the twentieth century, these moving images of McKinley offer a useful focus, especially since the historical period they frame, 1896 to 1901, corresponds closely to crucial changes in the emerging medium of film and to key transformations in American politics.

It is important to realize that early cinema was a profoundly intermedial mode that emerged as a new sort of visual representation, one that drew heavily and conservatively on a wide range of established nineteenth-century cultural forms such as still photography, vaudeville routines, staged amusements and spectacles, popular magazine illustrations, and comic strips. We therefore must resist the teleological temptation to regard cinema strictly as a technological innovation carrying its own self-evident and self-contained meanings for audiences then and now. Film theorists during the 1970s frequently proposed psychoanalytically inflected accounts of “the cinematic apparatus” that tended to assume a single, unitary kind of movie spectatorship.<sup>3</sup> Yet despite cinema’s apparent appeal to the self-sufficient eye, viewers at the turn of the twentieth century had to learn how to read the moving images projected before them in relation to what they already knew and understood.

### *Early Cinema and the News*

In the case of the McKinley films, audiences’ prior cultural knowledge centered on newspapers and the news as a medium of mass communication. Film historian Charles Musser has emphasized how early cinema often functioned as a “visual newspaper” offering glimpses of the kinds of stories, events, and people that readers found in their daily newspapers.<sup>4</sup> According to Musser, before the advent of fictional story films in 1903–4, the majority of films depicted “documentary-like subjects” ranging from simple everyday actualities that featured motion in the very early novelty years of cinema (feeding doves, crashing waves, and speeding trains) to historical events and personages such as Pope Leo XIII and McKinley.<sup>5</sup> Beyond serv-

ing as a cultural point of reference for these early films, newspapers served more specifically on occasion as shooting scripts, allowing filmmakers like Siegmund Lubin to reproduce famous boxing matches, for example, by closely following the detailed blow-by-blow “body shot” accounts in the newspapers.<sup>6</sup>

However useful as a starting point, the phrase *visual newspaper* requires far greater historical contextualizing and more precise attention to the differences between seeing bodies on-screen and reading about them in print—differences that can help us more carefully articulate conceptions of the public sphere. First, at the turn of the twentieth century virtually all newspapers relied on woodcut or steel line-engraved illustrations rather than photographs, so that “the motion picture news film provided a predominantly photographic kind of news coverage long before most newspapers and magazines of the period began to do so.”<sup>7</sup> Early cinema thus gave newsworthy figures the power and immediacy of a photographic realism that could not be matched by print. Second, as a print medium, newspapers depended on physical transportation for their daily circulation, which therefore tended to be restricted to a single region, usually a city.

In this regard it is instructive to briefly consider for comparison the telegraph, an antebellum electronic technology that, as James Carey has demonstrated, “freed communications from the constraints of geography” by “allow[ing] symbols to move independently of and faster than transportation.”<sup>8</sup> Without falling prey to a technological determinism, we nevertheless can see how this distinction between telegraph and newsprint gives greater specificity to the concept of a national public sphere. As Harold Innes has suggested, “The telegraph emphasized the importance of news with the result that the newspaper was unable to meet the demands for a national medium.”<sup>9</sup> Meditating on this new communications technology, Henry Adams in his autobiography chose to mark the moment in May 1844 when “the old universe was thrown into the ashheap and a new one created” by the opening of a railroad line, by the introduction of Cunard steamers, and most important, by “the telegraphic messages which carried from Baltimore to Washington the news that Henry Clay and James K. Polk were nominated for the Presidency.”<sup>10</sup>

Like telegraph transmissions, the screening of McKinley films also could give citizens the experience of instantaneous news without being tied to the material medium of newspapers.<sup>11</sup> But unlike the telegraph, the news of the cinema, a potential new national medium, was made up of moving images. When we turn from transmission to reception, we begin to see how the reading of images, rather than print, could transform perceptions of public

and private. Drawing on Jürgen Habermas, Michael Warner has shown how, in the colonies and the early republic, print culture crucially built and sustained a public constituted by impersonal, abstract citizens: writers and readers motivated by disinterested civic virtue.<sup>12</sup> With the introduction of the penny press in the 1830s; a growing emphasis on lurid stories detailing crime, violence, and sex; the attenuation of the editorial page; and the increasing blurring of the boundary between information and entertainment, American newspapers by the end of the nineteenth century were primarily serving other purposes more in line with the self-interest of a free market mass democracy.<sup>13</sup>

By the 1920s, Walter Lippmann and other cultural critics would openly castigate the press for fostering a “phantom public” in which Americans found themselves increasingly privatized and impotent, cut off from the political and social processes that most affected their lives.<sup>14</sup> While this thumbnail historical sketch is certainly open to refinement, its broad outlines remain convincing. One thinks, for instance, of how Theodore Dreiser in his novel *Sister Carrie* (1900) depicts George Hurstwood’s increasingly desperate, lonely, and self-absorbed newspaper reading, which serves to convey, and to protect him against, the ravages of New York, providing a simulacrum of the city more “real” than Hurstwood’s own firsthand experience. Consider, too, how American paintings representing newspapers change during the century, from antebellum genre paintings rendering well-defined social groups reading the news together, to William Harnett’s 1880s trompe l’oeil still lifes of folded newspapers, which offer the eye only “disembodied news, as free of ideas or events as . . . of readers.”<sup>15</sup>

Cinematic news seemed to allow for a very different kind of reception than isolated newspaper reading, in that the McKinley films and others were exhibited in front of noisy crowds of spectators who were encouraged to give voice collectively to their responses and to interact with each other. Until the arrival of storefront nickelodeon movie houses around 1906, these brief films were shown in vaudeville houses in between live stage acts. Yet audience reaction is only half the story, since I am equally interested in examining how public and private dichotomies are negotiated on the screen as well as in the vaudeville house. In discussing these early films, I tie together my twin concerns—representation and reception—by way of the pervasive incorporated figure of the politician “at home,” which runs throughout my argument. Referring at once to the domestic and the national sphere, this key trope helps us to appreciate the formal composition of the films as well as the composition of their audiences. Examining the implications of “at home” for both viewers and viewed also compels us to link representation

and reception to broader cultural transformations taking place in the United States around the turn of the twentieth century. Given the explicit political content of the McKinley films, particularly the fact that his debut as a presidential candidate roughly coincides with the debut of cinematic exhibition, it makes sense to look at the 1896 presidential campaign in some detail.

### *The Front Porch Campaign*

Republican candidate McKinley's successful 1896 presidential contest against Democrat William Jennings Bryan marks a pivotal moment in modern American politics for a variety of reasons. The contest raised important issues of some consequence, particularly the Republican business-oriented embrace of the gold standard versus Bryan's free silver stance, as well as the absorption of the more radical Populist movement into the Democratic Party. But perhaps more important than the issues themselves was the fact that the 1896 election signaled a break in the way presidential campaigns were run. On the Democratic side, Bryan displayed youth, vigor, and an open desire to court the American people for the presidency against a political tradition that favored experience, age, and reticence. Democrats were banking on Bryan's personal presence, especially his eloquence and charisma, as a public politician who tirelessly stumped across the country giving hundreds of campaign speeches in front of large crowds of sympathetic listeners.<sup>16</sup>

The Republicans opted for a different campaign strategy. Under the watchful eye of party boss Mark Hanna, the party raised enormous sums of money, far greater than in any previous presidential campaign, by systematically soliciting major corporations in the East and Midwest.<sup>17</sup> The Republicans spent their money on numerous flag-waving parades and thousands of pamphlets, posters, and buttons, while McKinley himself mainly stayed put in Canton, Ohio. As Theodore Roosevelt famously remarked of Hanna, "He has advertised McKinley as if he were a patent medicine."<sup>18</sup> At home, the candidate cordially greeted dozens of delegations on a daily basis, delivering carefully crafted short speeches (sound bites, in effect) to selected groups of supporters who had been brought in via train at reduced rates courtesy of the Republican-leaning railroads.

This orchestrated "front porch" campaign allowed Hanna to control access to the newspapers, whose reporters were invited to come to Canton to interview McKinley and cover the campaign from the relative comfort of a small town—a setting laden with nostalgic associations invoking simpler times and family values. Rather than have the candidate reach out to the press as Bryan sought to do, Hanna invited the press to come to the candi-

date. Maximizing his party's fund-raising power, Hanna sought to rationalize and standardize political campaigning (along the lines of emerging national brand name advertising) by first localizing the candidate and then disseminating his message via national networks of distribution. As Harold Innes has noted, Hanna in effect managed the Republican newspapers as if they were a trust, mobilizing them into a unified front and giving them a single story in common to counteract the regional, local inclinations of each paper.<sup>19</sup> If the 1896 campaign is noteworthy for being the first national election in which the presidential candidate himself *was* the entire message for each party,<sup>20</sup> then it is doubly noteworthy that the victory went to the candidate who remained at home, physically removed from the campaign trail, a reticent body rather than an aggressively virile one.

Yet to contrast an absent shadow of the Republican Party against a fully manifest Democratic candidate is somewhat misleading. For one thing, the majority of American citizens directly encountered neither McKinley nor Bryan in the flesh; rather, they primarily negotiated them via newspaper print. Bryan's self-consciousness about the press, in fact, occasioned his first and worst major speech on August 12, a droning two-hour acceptance address at Madison Square Garden that according to Bryan was calculated "to reach the hundreds of thousands who would read it [the speech] in print" at the expense of a few thousand bored audience members.<sup>21</sup> Bryan believed that how he would be read was more important than how he was heard. In his subsequent campaign stops, over six hundred all told, Bryan strove mightily to bridge this gap between newsprint and personal presence, directly reaching approximately 5 million listeners with his golden oratory, a remarkably high percentage of the 6.4 million men who voted for Bryan in November.<sup>22</sup>

But Bryan was not the only candidate who managed to touch citizens in such massive numbers. Given the astonishing daily procession of delegations brought in by the railroads to meet McKinley—one historian estimates 750,000 people, or 13 percent of the total votes cast for him<sup>23</sup>—empirical data is less crucial here than the fundamentally different ways each of these candidates was represented and represented himself. In the case of Bryan, traditional rhetorical context was everything. His acts of speaking emerged from deeply held personal convictions (as even the Republican press granted), intended to touch the convictions of his listeners. Any news that Bryan made was made by virtue of the public directly before him, while the press conveyed the style and content of his speech.

Confining their candidate to his porch but also keeping him well in front of the press, the Republicans by contrast tended to blur the traditional dis-

tinctions between private and public, between corporeal presence and media representation. Only by being absent from the campaign trail could McKinley be at once at home and before the nation. Hanna's strategy thus paved the way for a new style of modern presidential campaigning that more and more has depended on the power of abstracted images produced by "pseudo-events," to use Daniel Boorstin's term: images most forcefully, immediately, and efficiently disseminated by film technology.<sup>24</sup>

McKinley's 1896 Republican campaign was obviously not the first presidential election to rely heavily on patriotic slogans, symbolism, and imagery to prepackage its news. But in terms of economies of scale, it dwarfed all previous efforts and suggested how the media in particular could be enlisted to help make winning less a matter of substance accumulated over space and time (the whistle-stop campaign speeches of Bryan) than synchronic national perception that tended to erase traditional notions of time and space (ceaseless reiterations of McKinley at home). While it would be overstating the case to claim that, at this early stage, cinema was comparable to print in disseminating the candidate, the McKinley movie is clearly of a piece with Hanna's front porch logic.<sup>25</sup>

Cinema and politics in this case were brought together by shared business concerns. The filming of McKinley was most probably arranged by McKinley's own younger brother, Abner, who in late 1895 or early 1896 had become a shareholder in the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company.<sup>26</sup> This newly formed corporation would become by the end of the century the chief rival to Edison Manufacturing Company's own kinetograph division. An integral member of his brother's campaign team and yet something of a skeleton in William's closet, Abner had previously engaged in a variety of dubious entrepreneurial enterprises, including selling bogus railroad bonds and promoting a scheme to make artificial rubber. As with the 1896 Republican campaign as a whole, Abner's instrumental role as a go-between, working for both Biograph and the Republican Party, suggests the new technology's growing contribution to converging business, media, and political interests.<sup>27</sup>

McKinley was filmed at home by Biograph's cofounder (and former Edison collaborator), W. K. L. Dickson, and the cameraman Billy Bitzer in the middle of September 1896.<sup>28</sup> Titled *McKinley at Home—Canton—O* (see fig. 2), the film opens with a mid-to-long frontal shot of the candidate and an aide—presumably his personal secretary George Cortelyou—standing by his renowned front porch, which clearly serves as a visual reminder of his party's chief election strategy. As in most pre-1900 cinema, the camera is fixed and the actors look directly into the lens, fully aware that they

[To view this image, refer to  
the print version of this title.]

Figure 2. *McKinley at Home* (1896).

are being filmed. The two men slowly walk toward the camera, McKinley pauses midway on his front lawn, dons his hat and then his glasses to read a telegram presumably informing him of the progress of his campaign. After briefly conferring with his secretary, the candidate removes his hat, wipes his brow (the day must have been hot), looks at the camera again, and then continues to walk with his associate toward the camera and out of the right front corner of the frame. From start to finish, the carefully controlled management of McKinley's body movements (emblematic of his entire campaign) indicates a well-rehearsed, well-timed piece of filming. Less than a minute long, it depicts at its center the presidential candidate's act of news reading.

### *Reception and the Public Sphere*

The significance of McKinley's scene of news reading becomes clearer once we turn from the film's content and its formal properties to consider the conditions of its initial reception. Accustomed to a century's worth of patriotic blockbusters depicting presidential power, such as *Air Force One*, we may find it hard to appreciate how viewers thrilled to *McKinley at Home*. The film was shown as part of the Biograph company's New York debut at Hammerstein's Olympia vaudeville theater on the night of October 12, roughly six months after Edison had introduced his own version of pro-

jected moving images in April. Given the great success of Edison's *vitascope*, the newspapers were more than ready to greet another new technological novelty that promised to eclipse its rival. Here we see early cinema not simply drawing on newspapers for its source material but actively working with the press, long before Hollywood mythmaking, to generate interest and excitement about film: to turn the screening into a newsworthy event in its own right. As a result, the October New York Biograph debut has produced one of the richest and most detailed records of early cinema reception that we have, as newspaper after newspaper, virtually all sympathetic to the Republican cause, weighed in to describe the brilliance and import of the event. These accounts provide a rare opportunity, for such detailed newspaper descriptions would quickly disappear, once cinema's novelty wore off and before film reviewing was institutionalized, around 1912, as a regular feature of the press.

As was customary with such media events of the era, the New York newspapers were treated to an advanced showing of Edison's technological rival, thereby encouraging the press to make the news as much as report it. An article in the Republican *New York Mail and Express* published on the twelfth (before the public screening), for example, opens with this provocative prediction: "Major William McKinley will appear tonight in New York before a great throng of people, which will include members of the Republican National Committee. . . . Major McKinley will not make a speech. . . . The distinguished statesman will make his appearance, apparently on the lawn of his house in Canton, full life size, and in action so perfectly natural, that only the preinformed will know that they are looking upon shadow and not upon substance." The article then goes on to ponder the phenomenology of the images themselves: "The picture thus shown is not flat—in fact it can not be distinguished as a picture at all." It concludes: "There is no clicking noise to disturb the illusion, and prosaic indeed is the mind that can look upon the rapidly shifting scenes and believe it to be unreal. Major McKinley is likely to get an ovation to-night when he advances to the footlights."<sup>29</sup>

This important account raises three interrelated issues that require careful analysis. First, the article introduces the problem of the candidate's physical presence—will he "appear tonight in New York," or "on the lawn of his house in Canton"?—a crucial spatial dislocation that the reporter finesses in the end by merging his steps on the lawn toward the camera with his "advanc[ing] to the footlights" toward the Hammerstein audience. Second, the role of the theater audience is explicitly acknowledged from the start ("a great throng of people"), so that the matter of the film's active reception ("ovation") by a very partisan group of Republican dignitaries is in effect

already built into the film itself. Finally, what is the status of McKinley's body in the moving image? On the one hand, the reporter opens and closes his account by pretending that McKinley's appearance carries the force of reality, yet he undermines his assertion by cautioning against naive mimesis, insisting that "only the preinformed" will properly not mistake shadow for substance. But such preinformation is precisely the purpose of this article itself, as if newspaper readers actively needed coaching about how to read the film to be screened that very night. Similarly, the reporter can celebrate the verisimilitude of the images only by a convoluted, inverse logic that downgrades a "prosaic" mind (as in readers of printed prose?) for believing such scenes to be "unreal." The reporter thus admits that such unreality, not reality, constitutes the baseline response to films. To grasp such representations as "real" seems to require a certain imaginative investment on the viewer's part.

In the days and weeks following the New York debut of the Biograph (the machine and the company), these conceptual perplexities cropped up in various other newspaper accounts that struggled to find terms to describe the novelty of watching cinema. In the *New York Mail and Express's* account published the very next day (and perhaps penned by the same reporter), McKinley is described as appearing "in the flesh." Yet the phrase is itself set off in quotation marks, thereby acknowledging the cliché as a mere figure of speech. The article ends by playfully remarking that, just as the candidate appeared to be stepping down in the audience's midst, "came the edge of the curtain and he vanished round the corner." Here "corner" simultaneously stands for both the edge of the stage (marked by the proscenium arch) and the frame of the moving picture, enabling the writer to fuse two very different ontological planes. The newspaper reporter's appreciation of spectacle—in the theater, in politics, on the screen—thus helps to negotiate the difference between image and corporeal person.

What's striking in reading through these early accounts of cinematic reception, in fact, is the degree to which the moving images of McKinley and others gain their force and immediacy by virtue of their disembodiment, their potential to vanish suddenly, rather than their pretended embodiment. Herein lies the particular significance of the McKinley film's title, *McKinley at Home*. As I remarked earlier, the initial newspaper account of the movie raises the problem of the candidate's location: is he here in New York or in Canton? But given the disembodied immediacy of the moving image, McKinley can occupy both spaces at once, so that "home" comes to stand for the place of reception as well as the image's presumed geographical referent. The vaudeville house turns into home. By choosing to film their candidate

in an intimate domestic setting perfectly in keeping with their campaign strategy, and then continuously disseminating this image, the Republicans, in conjunction with the Biograph Company and its exhibitors, helped to redefine traditional public/private dichotomies. Moving from his house across his lawn to greet his audience, McKinley negotiates the space between home and country, with the lawn functioning as an interface between the two. The candidate's stroll thus serves to domesticate public spectacle by bringing national politics to everyone's collective front porch.

If we look again closely, the film gives us another, more poignant evocation of the domestic. Well in the background, as McKinley and his aide Cortelyou cross the lawn, a third person sits on the front porch in a rocking chair. It is difficult to tell, even on repeated viewings (a common exhibition practice in 1896), whether this shadowy figure is a man or a woman. But contemporaneous audiences perceptive enough to discern this rocking figure would undoubtedly have been reminded of McKinley's wife, Ida, a frail invalid who suffered from chronic depression and epileptic seizures dating from the tragic deaths of their two young daughters in the 1870s. During the presidential campaign, Hanna and the Republican Party sought to turn a potential liability into an asset by publicizing the selfless devotion of husband to wife, who became the first prospective first lady in U.S. history to warrant her own campaign biography. McKinley's steadfast refusal to abandon his sickly companion for the sake of political electioneering on the road reinforced the logic of the front porch as an intimate, ideal space shared by loving spouses whose mutual tenderness was described by the press as an "exceptional domestic relationship." *McKinley at Home* thus visually conjures up and culminates a long-standing, powerful tradition linking sentimentality and domesticity.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to its capacity to dislocate space, the film manages to dislocate time as well, projecting the candidate in perpetual present tense in order to keep his news fresh and up to date. As I have suggested, the shot thematizes the centrality of news by focusing on McKinley being handed a slip of paper. But what is he supposed to be reading? According to Billy Bitzer, McKinley's reading was intended to reenact the moment he received notification of his party's convention nomination, an event that took place in the summer, some months before the actual filming in September.<sup>31</sup> But audiences who first saw the movie in October assumed McKinley was receiving "a hopeful message from New York headquarters" describing his campaign's progress,<sup>32</sup> and those who subsequently saw the film in November after the election thought he was reading a telegram announcing his presidential victory. Like Harnett's still life paintings, the effect was to create

news with no content, or whose content varied according to the moment of its screening, to be filled in each time by those particular cinema viewers “at home” who occupy the here and now of the vaudeville house. In this way the telegraphed news depicted in the film becomes one with the exciting news of the film—the news of McKinley’s campaign as well as the news of the Biograph debut. And by deliberately incorporating into its drama a prior medium of mass communications, the telegram (recall Adams’s comment about Clay and Polk), the film self-consciously signals its own power to deliver electrifying messages across time and space.

Here it is useful to consider the sequence in which the McKinley clip and other short films were originally shown to the Hammerstein audience. As Charles Musser has demonstrated, exhibitors during this initial phase of film screening exerted enormous control by virtue of the way they ordered their presentations.<sup>33</sup> The October 12 Biograph program began with a film titled *Stable on Fire*, followed by *Niagara Upper Rapids*, scenes from stage adaptations of the novel *Trilby* and the short story “Rip Van Winkle,” *Hard Wash* (a black woman washing her baby), another shot of Niagara Falls, followed by *Empire State Express* (a locomotive running toward the camera), then a McKinley parade, and finally, *McKinley at Home*.<sup>34</sup> The biggest hits of the show were clearly this final shot of McKinley and the clip of the onrushing train; it is interesting to note how several newspaper accounts in fact pair the two films,<sup>35</sup> implicitly comparing the thrill of seeing a locomotive “steaming toward you—right dead at you at full speed”<sup>36</sup> with the thrill of seeing the Republican candidate walk deliberately toward the camera and viewer. As one paper put it, these images provoked a “needless excitement”:<sup>37</sup> sensation that is all the more powerful for being temporary and for not seeming to carry any practical consequences.

The excitement produced by the train and the analogous excitement generated by the Republican candidate thus had less to do with verisimilitude than the reality effects such cinematic images could trigger. Already accustomed to seeing a variety of dazzling spectacles in numerous other forms of popular culture—Coney Island stagings and restagings of fires and other disasters, fake train wrecks, death-defying stunts, and lurid waxworks tableaux depicting crimes and criminals in action—these modern viewers were unlikely to duck their heads in the naive fear that they would actually be run over by the image of a moving train.<sup>38</sup> As I have indicated, this myth of the power of early cinema (especially persistent in regard to hysterical women spectators fainting in dread) was partly manufactured by the newspapers themselves in order to encourage the public to indulge in a viscerally thrilling, mock pretense of emotion.

Such visual shock and sensation remains at the heart of the most important theory of early cinema currently available, Tom Gunning's "cinema of attractions" model. Challenging teleological schemes of film history, Gunning demonstrates how early cinema organized time and space quite differently than classic Hollywood narrative films subsequently did, and therefore produced a significantly different sort of spectatorship. Instead of being absorbed into the narratives unfolding before them—that is, identifying with the figures on the screen as we do today—early cinema viewers were directly assaulted by a number of visually stimulating and often startling displays (magical, scientific, theatrical, or otherwise) designed to provoke immediate responses of wonder, puzzlement, or joy. As my introduction describes, in subsequent articles Gunning and other early film scholars have sought, by way of spectators' astonishment, to link these cinematic "attractions" to broader cultural patterns of modernity as analyzed by Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, and other critical theorists of the Frankfurt school.<sup>39</sup>

While the attractions argument offers us crucial ways to distinguish early films from classic Hollywood narratives, this more recent focus on demonstrating how cinema was, and still is, one key symptom of modernity threatens to lapse into the same kind of ahistoricism that Benjamin identified as a feature of modernity itself. In trying to get such a comprehensive picture of what early cinema was, we lose sight of what it did and how it worked in particular instances. As the pairing of McKinley at home with the speeding train suggests, visual sensation was not produced simply for sensation's sake. Such stimulation was in fact instrumental, designed in this specific case to move a select and partisan audience to show their support for their party's presidential candidate. The political consequences of this early screening take on even greater import when we recall how the press, virtually all Republican-leaning, consorted with Biograph and its new technology to generate excitement about the event as well as the national election.

Over and over again in these newspaper accounts, reporters emphasize the intensity of the crowd's reaction to the candidate's stroll on his lawn:

"The house was crowded and the picture of McKinley set the audience wild. Seldom is such a demonstration seen in a theatre."

"The audience caught sight of the next President . . . [and] pandemonium broke loose."

"The audience went fairly frantic over pictures thrown on a screen."

"When . . . Major McKinley stepped onto his front lawn, the whole house went wild."

"The concluding scene of Major McKinley walking across the lawn to meet the visitors, was vociferously greeted."

"The scene when McKinley strolled across the lawn of his house evoked infectious enthusiasm."

"He was received with tremendous cheering, and there were loud calls for a speech."

"McKinley . . . seemed to smile in appreciation of the roar that greeted his appearance."<sup>40</sup>

Such journalistic hyperbole clearly participates in the very sort of wild sensationalism that it aims to document, seeking to draw energy and immediacy from the new medium. Yet these newspaper accounts also highlight the collective and vocal nature of the audience's response. In this regard the final two quotations cited above are particularly revealing. Assuming some sort of interactive relation between moving image and viewers, the crowd adopts the standard patriotic fervor that would greet a politician's appearance, but in a context where such charismatic interplay between speaker and audience is obviously impossible. Yet precisely because McKinley is disembodied, mute, and yet immediately in front of them, the audience is enabled to speak *for* and *as* him, in effect take him on, such as the woman at Koster & Bial's vaudeville house who "insisted upon making a speech" upon viewing the film a day after McKinley's election on November 3.<sup>41</sup>

Screened over and over again in a variety of cities (New York, Baltimore, New Haven, Chicago, and St. Louis) both before and after McKinley's victory, this short film bears directly on the question of a national public sphere, although it would be difficult to show exactly how the film affected the outcome of the election itself. Many historians of communications have tended to take a dim view of the mass media, emphasizing how such totalizing technologies attenuate public discourse by rendering citizens increasingly passive. Harold Innes offers the most axiomatic argument: "Technological advance in communication implies a narrowing of the range from which material is distributed and a widening of the range of reception, so that large numbers receive, but are unable to make any direct response. Those on the receiving end of material from a mechanized central system are precluded from participation in healthy, vigorous, and vital discussion. Instability of public opinion which follows the introduction of new inventions in communication designed to reach large numbers of people is exploited by those in control of the inventions."<sup>42</sup> Following in the wake of Theodor Adorno and other Frankfurt school theorists, Habermas has put the

case more bluntly: "The world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere in appearance only."<sup>43</sup>

The intervention of the New York press who strove to tell viewers how and what to think about cinema, the sequencing of film clips, Biograph's close ties to high-ranking Republicans, and the manipulation of space and time (McKinley at home here and now), all seem to support this top-down model of how modern media functions to exercise control in a mass democracy. Yet to the extent that the Biograph audience was encouraged to participate in the event, give voice to their opinions in the absence of the candidate himself, and therefore make news themselves, such a top-down analysis of monolithic political control falls short by failing to allow for any interactive dynamics between viewer and viewed or among viewers themselves. What do we make of the fact, for instance, reported in several newspapers, that scattered supporters of Democratic candidate Bryan booed at McKinley's screen appearance and were in turn hissed down by the vocal Republican faithful?

From a Habermasian perspective, the impact of such audience interaction would be negligible at best and illusory at worst, since his notion of the public sphere assumes that citizens work to exert influence on state power via channels of rational discourse and sustained debate. Yet there are other ways to construe the public sphere, or multiple publics' spheres, that attend more closely to "the micro-politics of daily life."<sup>44</sup> Drawing on the work of the second-generation Frankfurt school theorists Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, Miriam Hansen makes a strong case for the idea that early cinema exhibition from 1896 to around 1910 enabled a "counter" or "alternative" public sphere: a space where socially marginalized groups of spectators such as women and workers might collectively in dialogue become part of a "social horizon of experience."<sup>45</sup> Hansen's argument is especially compelling when early cinema spectatorship is compared to the increasingly privatized reading of newsprint during the nineteenth century, on the one hand, and to subsequent changes in movie viewing, on the other.

As I have suggested, the infectious, vocal, collective nature of audience response to early cinema stands in stark contrast to classic movie spectatorship, which started with the ascendancy of self-contained fictional narrative films around 1907,<sup>46</sup> was followed by Hollywood's rise to power in the second decade of the twentieth century, and was secured for good with the introduction of talkies in the late 1920s. Once Hollywood's hegemony took hold, the muteness of the figures on the screen was transposed to the mute spectator, interpellated as a subject who sits alone, absorbed in darkness,

voyeuristically identifying with the images projected before him or her.<sup>47</sup> Whereas early screen silence could be filled by the vocal responses of viewers, the solitary, passive spectator became a blank to be inscribed by the stories that classic Hollywood cinema tells. The 1896 Biograph displays of trains, waterfalls, and a sauntering presidential candidate suggest alternative ways that audiences might be constituted, allowing for a wider range of interplay between public and private response to disembodied moving pictures than we may currently enjoy.<sup>48</sup>

Yet Hansen's analysis of early cinema viewing strikes me as perhaps overly utopian, given my own extended discussion of the Biograph debut. It is certainly risky to generalize on the basis of a single screening, however well documented, particularly since movie audiences in 1896 would significantly differ from those a decade later.<sup>49</sup> Nor should my reading of the newspaper reception be mistaken for full-blown theorizing about the public sphere. Still, the case of *McKinley at Home* indicates a highly calculated piece of filmmaking and film exhibition that seems to have left some room, but not a lot, for its viewers to reclaim meaning on their own terms.<sup>50</sup> I therefore propose a more dialectical model for understanding early cinema's relation to the public sphere. In this view, still focusing on the figure of President McKinley, we begin by appreciating the power of the mass medium to collapse space and time for a pointed effect: to present moving images of an important public figure at once intimate and immediate, and disembodied and cut off from context (as in the Republican and Biograph simulation of the news). We can then see how audiences confronted by these unstable images might have actively asserted themselves by revising and recontextualizing what they saw. In the face of cinema's increasingly sophisticated reality effects, if and how audiences could continue to appropriate meaning for themselves would become a proposition more and more difficult to sustain.

## II

Charles Musser, following influential film theorists such as Benjamin, André Bazin, and Christian Metz, has usefully summarized cinema's tendency toward disembodiment as "the absence of presence."<sup>51</sup> But perhaps a more apt phrase for early cinema's uncanny incarnations might be the presence of absence, in that filmmakers and exhibitors in the years following 1896 quickly discovered ways to actively exploit the capacity for phantasmagoric immediacy. Of particular interest here are faked actualities, simulations or reenactments of actual events such as boxing matches, with actors

substituting for the “real” performers.<sup>52</sup> As my quotes around the word “real” suggest, such “reproductions” or “impersonations” (as they were titled) had little to do with the relation between moving image and referential fact, unlike the initial accounts of Biograph’s rushing train and strolling candidate. Rather, these simulations served to call into question the relation of one image to another, especially considering that performances like boxing or the staging of religious passion plays were themselves highly conventionalized displays.<sup>53</sup> Once filmmakers begin to imitate each other in a competition to find the most popular subjects to film, the question of originality—the bedrock source of representation—tended to recede into the background. While rival filmmakers traded charges of “genuine” versus “counterfeit” in describing their products, and audiences might have occasionally worried about the ontological status of the spectacles they were watching, for the most part it seemed not to matter much if it were truly the boxer Jim Jeffries on the screen or an impersonator, as long as the images of the bodies in motion were clear and vibrant.<sup>54</sup>

These filmed reenactments reached their apex during the 1898 Spanish-American War, which was followed two years later by the Anglo-Boer War.<sup>55</sup> It is no coincidence that once again certain kinds of corporeal effects in early cinema, especially shots of the active male body, closely parallel a key moment in U.S. politics, in this case the nation’s opening imperialist foray into global expansion. A full analysis of President McKinley’s ambivalent foreign policy leading up to and during the Spanish-American War is beyond the scope of this chapter. Suffice it to say that, in finally endorsing “the enforced pacification of Cuba . . . in the name of humanity, in the name of civilization, in behalf of endangered American interests,” McKinley freely admitted that “the commerce, trade, and business of our people” were his primary concern in declaring war.<sup>56</sup> The crucial function of the yellow press in drumming up domestic support for the war effort is well known, especially the role of the Hearst and Pulitzer papers, which were engaged in a circulation war of their own. Seeking at all costs for sensational information and entertainment for their readers to consume, American war correspondents flocked to Cuba in order to make the news, playing the part of soldiers and participating in battles, as much as documenting the action.<sup>57</sup>

Cinema’s role as a “visual newspaper” during the Spanish-American War is lesser known. Boosting lagging sales by boosting patriotic fever, Edison and Biograph primarily filmed and exhibited panoramic views of the nation’s preparations for war (soldiers drilling, ships heading off to Cuba or the Philippines, and the wreck of the battleship *Maine*) and the war’s aftermath (numerous victory parades).<sup>58</sup> These films became so prevalent during

the first half of 1898, in fact, that one vaudeville venue began to dub its cinema projector a "War-Graph," one of many such electronic "device[s] for stirring patriotism," as a New York trade paper put it.<sup>59</sup> Given the bulkiness of American moving cameras before 1900, attempts to film the field of battle itself largely proved impractical and the conditions of war too difficult to capture. In the absence of battle footage, cameramen back home began producing simulations of conflict: skirmishes and sinkings fashioned in Florida, on rooftops, and even in bathtubs (with miniature models).<sup>60</sup> A striking clip titled *Shooting Captured Insurgents*, for example, shows Spanish soldiers summarily execute four Cuban rebels against the side of a jungle hut. Only an overly histrionic fling of the arm on the part of one of the victims betrays the firing squad "shooting" as fabricated theater filmed most likely in New Jersey.<sup>61</sup>

I should emphasize again that this was nothing new: throughout the nineteenth century, Americans were accustomed to seeing staged reenactments of historical events in other forms of popular amusement. Nor do I wish to dwell on the deceitful intention of such films. As with other faked actualities, many of these war scenes were openly advertised as "counterfeit presentments," and even if they were not billed as such, their veracity or authenticity was less at issue than how thrilling they seemed. For both audience and makers, in other words, the quest for sensation tended to render the opposition between fact and fiction moot.<sup>62</sup> Whether the projection on the screen was the actual battleship *Maine* or another ship posing as the *Maine*, the phantom image was immediate, vivid, and powerful, capable of invoking intense patriotic responses from the cheering vaudeville audiences. My main point is that these intimate simulations, frequently accompanied by the running commentary of a lecturer on stage, reveal an important dimension of our global conflict as a whole: that in the national imaginary, starting with McKinley, the Spanish-American War was largely conducted "at home," to borrow once more from the title of the 1896 campaign film. Whereas in that film "home" served to carry national politics to the candidate's personal front porch, in the war films such domesticity is constituted and defined in terms of concepts of the foreign as much as concepts of the public.<sup>63</sup>

Most of the handful of surviving cinematic images of the president taken between 1898 and 1901 show McKinley engaged in a variety of ceremonial tasks, such as reviewing inaugural and military parades.<sup>64</sup> But another group of films made during the last days of McKinley's administration dramatize more urgently how cinema could help shape a national imaginary. In the wake of the Spanish-American War, the Buffalo Pan-American Exposition

of 1901 was designed to celebrate the ascendancy of the United States as a world power and promote better commercial relations between the nation and its neighbors to the South.<sup>65</sup> The exposition actually had two themes: it reaffirmed the Monroe Doctrine (to retrospectively make sense of the recent conflict with Spain) and applauded technological progress, symbolized by the electricity generated from harnessing the enormous natural force of nearby Niagara Falls (recall that this was a key subject in Biograph's 1896 New York debut). President McKinley sought to combine these two themes in his final speech, which dwelt on the "genius of the inventor and the courage of the investor" in hastening global communications and trade.<sup>66</sup> Delivered at the exposition on September 5, 1901, the day before he was shot, and filmed by Edwin S. Porter of Edison's company, McKinley's last speech carries greater resonance when compared to other Pan-American Exposition films taken by Porter that more actively drew on the fair's emblematic *mise-en-scène*.

Three are of particular interest: *Pan-American Exposition by Night* (registered for copyright on October 17, 1901), *Sham Battle at the Pan-American Exposition* (copyrighted November 25, 1901), and *The Mob Outside the Temple of Music at the Pan-American Exposition* (copyrighted September 11, 1901). The day-to-night film is a beautiful sweeping panoramic two-shot, time-lapse composition highlighting the fair's chief symbol, the four-hundred-foot electric tower illuminated by thirty-five thousand lightbulbs that were energized by Niagara Falls. Dramatizing how colossal forces of nature can be tamed, the fair's illuminated tower was a bigger outdoor version of the "Edison Tower of Light" that Edison had exhibited in the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exhibition to glorify America's industrial dominance.<sup>67</sup> This film therefore functions essentially as a spectacular corporate advertisement for Edison, genius inventor and investor (to echo a phrase from McKinley's last speech), whose electrical devices, including cinema, were helping to further the cause of America's global expansion.

Attempting to shrink the globe to a manageable space for the public's viewing pleasure, world fairs in general are by nature phantasmagoric productions necessarily driven by a logic of simulation. Like cinema itself, world's fairs displace both time and space. The Pan-American Exposition of 1901 was no exception. As Porter's films show, its pavilions included "Darkest Africa," "Japanese Village," and "Esquimaux Village," complete with African and Japanese and Eskimo performers on display dancing and playing and just being authentically themselves amid ersatz huts and igloos.<sup>68</sup> But the most dramatic show Edison's crew shot was an internal affair—a smoke-filled gun battle between U.S. foot soldiers and hostile native Ameri-

cans circling on horses that was staged on the closing day of the exposition. A reenactment of Custer's Last Stand and other frontier episodes on the road leading to Indian genocide, the battle clearly followed on a long tradition of popular touring Wild West shows such as Buffalo Bill's. Yet in the aftermath of the recent Spanish-American War, and in the context of an exhibition dedicated to our international relations, the inclusion of military action against natives functions as an uncanny replay of our imperialist venture abroad, domesticating or bringing the 1898 war home again by recasting it in the familiar and former terms of manifest destiny. Still resisting U.S. occupation in 1901, Filipinos in effect revert back to (already conquered) Indians, who assumed their accustomed role as subjected insurgents for spectators watching the exposition's theater of conflict.<sup>69</sup>

As with the bulk of Spanish-American cinematic reenactments, no attempt was made by Edison to disguise the fact that this film depicts a "sham battle," as its title plainly states. Yet what precisely is being shammed and the effects of such staging remain ambiguous. Placing the camera at a low angle behind the line of soldiers, and pointedly avoiding revealing the viewing stands filled with spectators until the end of the film, Porter produces a powerful simulation of a scene of war.<sup>70</sup> The spectators *in* the film watching the spectacle from the stands would clearly have seen and understood something very different—a mere stage show—from what was understood by the spectators *of* the film, which both then and now resembles actual battle footage. Once again, we see how the disembodied immediacy of cinema heightens the effect of reality: "reality" is defined by the dialectical relation between film's spatiotemporal dislocation, projected moving images of human forms cut off and abstracted from their material heft, and film's recontextualization via the particular circumstances of exhibition and reception.

The third film in this assemblage of Edison's Pan-American movies works quite differently from the sham battle. The day after his President's Day speech of September 5, while greeting well-wishers inside the Temple of Music, McKinley was shot at close range by Leon Czolgosz, a young anarchist with a history of mental instability, who, when apprehended, initially gave his name as "Nieman," Nobody.<sup>71</sup> In the days that followed, as McKinley lay dying (he would finally succumb on the fourteenth), conspiracy-minded police investigated Czolgosz's ties to other anarchists, including Emma Goldman, who was arrested but then released. Taking place amid the phantasmagorical backdrop of a world's fair, the assassination was at once intimate, public, dramatic, and surreal. Unfortunately Edison's film crews were not on the scene to capture the drama: no equivalent of the Zapruder

home movie depicting JFK's assassination exists for us to muse upon.<sup>72</sup> But given the common practice of the Spanish-American War reenactments, it should come as no surprise that the filmmakers subsequently toyed with the possibility of restaging the murder in front of movie cameras. They had second thoughts about the idea, however, leaving the simulation of the assassination to the French film company Pathé.<sup>73</sup> In the absence of the actual crime, as word of the shooting spread, Edison's film crews contented themselves with filming the crowd milling outside the Temple of Music, where they had gathered to await the emergence of the president.

It is a rather unsettling news film. Dozens of densely packed bodies, with no room to move, are shown in a panoramic sweep from behind, looking expectantly at the Temple of Music. Virtually every inch of the frame is filled with agitated human figures, mostly the backs of heads. Occasionally, a man or a child will turn and face the camera directly, revealing relatively close-up looks of puzzlement or distress. In the distance, framing the top of the shot, we see police and other officials seeking to keep the crowd from entering the building. We can also see newspaper correspondents seated at tables urgently composing reports of the shooting—a rare and revealing literalization of the way that written news translates into cinematic news in the process of being visually documented by the movie camera. As with the 1896 campaign clip showing McKinley reading a telegram, film serves to give newsprint the powerful impression of immediacy.

Edison copyrighted this actuality on September 11 (while McKinley was still alive but dying), choosing, in its title, to call the crowd a "mob"—a word that rarely if ever appears in Edison's film listings, indeed nowhere in any other film company's catalogs printed between 1896 and 1910.<sup>74</sup> By using the highly charged term *mob* to describe the scene, Edison is clearly drawing a parallel between the anarchism of Czolgosz, the intended effect of his action, and the subsequent chaotic reaction of the panicked and packed throng, who began calling for the lynching of the assassin.<sup>75</sup> The (missing) moment of murder itself becomes less central here than its consequences: the fleeting possibility entertained in this film that Czolgosz might have succeeded in producing anarchism, at least of a local nature. Indeed, once we see that the term *mob* may apply to the potential audiences who would watch this film as well as the crowd depicted within it, then the anxiety of Edison's filmmakers to control the response of the masses becomes all the more urgent, to help construe or reconstruct a body politic with less chaotic potency.

On film and throughout the nation at large, such anarchistic potential was quickly foreclosed, primarily by way of the tremendously popular

series of funeral films that Edison and other companies shot and packaged for exhibitors around the country. Never before had citizens seen an American state funeral projected on-screen. As with previous rituals of national mourning, such as the funerals of assassinated presidents Lincoln and Garfield, newspapers worked to help console the public and consolidate their grief, but now with the additional support of moving images. Shot in Buffalo; Washington, D.C.; and Canton, Ohio, these films literally helped to restore rules of order by visually organizing bodies and space within the frame along familiar lines. In these films, that is, the “mob” gives way to the controlled funeral procession, itself a close approximation of the military parades of orderly marching figures that McKinley had presided over while living, with President Roosevelt now assuming his ceremonial role.

But unlike in earlier cinematic depictions of funerals, such as Edison’s 1898 *Burial of the “Maine” Victims*, frequently in this sequence of films as much attention is paid to the spectators as the funeral procession itself. Of particular note in this regard is the film *President McKinley’s Funeral Cortege at Washington, D.C.*, which shows a variety of close-up shots of individual onlookers—men, women, and children, including a number of formally attired African Americans—who look directly at the camera and then back at the procession. That African Americans are not merely included but prominently featured at a time and place of racial segregation suggests the deep desire of the filmmakers to embrace the public in the widest sense. In this way all viewers of the film could identify with the viewers in the film and share their common grief as citizens of the United States.

McKinley’s funeral ceremonies offered Americans the most obvious and most important means to achieve a sense of closure within the confines of a national public sphere. Although public, such closure was not designed to serve as a referendum on McKinley’s administration but rather to forestall opinion altogether. Even newspapers intensely hostile to McKinley, such as Hearst’s *New York Journal*, ran a full-length front-page editorial titled “FAREWELL TO A GOOD AMERICAN” that sang the praises of the fallen commander in chief.<sup>76</sup> This kind of focused mourning in print and on film worked to erase differences (if only temporarily) and provide the semblance of national unity. While exhibitors could buy individual films and show them in any order they pleased, Edison also offered a prepackaged sequence that moved chronologically from Buffalo to Washington to Ohio, ending with the slain president’s burial in Canton’s Westlawn Cemetery—the final, permanent, and somewhat ironic twist to the pervasive trope of “McKinley at home.”<sup>77</sup>

In the aftermath of the September assassination, following the October

29 execution of Czolgosz, book publishers scrambled to produce memorial accounts of McKinley in time for Christmas gift-giving. The Library of Congress lists nearly two dozen such books registered for copyright by the end of 1901. This means that publishers had less than two months to write, compile, print, and distribute these four-hundred- to five-hundred-page hardbound books that comprehensively detailed McKinley's life and death with print, photographs, and lavish illustrations.<sup>78</sup> Such a subgenre of keepsake memorial books owes something to the analogous subgenre of the campaign biography, with its boilerplate assemblage of speeches and testimonials. But apart from their profit motive, the impetus for these urgent publications, astonishing in their rapid assembly and bulk, can be more fruitfully linked to the rise of cinema, which had conditioned its audience to expect instant ocular information: news in the making or immediately after its making. Unlike daily newspapers, moreover, films of such import could be shown and reshowed for months to come. Although these books could not quite rival the speed of cinema or newspaper in distributing images nationally, these material memorials did provide a less ephemeral source of consolation for readers to preserve and give to one another and, thereby, helped sustain collective rituals of mourning.

In early October, Edison produced another spectacle for exhibition that similarly sought to memorialize McKinley beyond the present moment. Described in the company's catalog as being "most valuable as an ending to the series of McKinley's funeral pictures," *The Martyred Presidents* offers a series of still photographs of Lincoln, Garfield, and McKinley, after the fashion of a magic lantern show, followed by a static tableau: either the assassin or a mourner kneeling beneath an allegorical figure holding the scales of justice.<sup>79</sup> Here we see film returning to its roots in nineteenth-century popular visual and theater culture to approximate the long-standing iconography of martyrdom, in which the slain body is frozen and fixed for eternity.

In its complex self-referentiality, a third and final form of cinematic closure deserves more careful attention. On the day of Czolgosz's execution in late October, an Edison crew including Edwin S. Porter and James White traveled to Auburn Prison in upstate New York (near Buffalo's Pan-American Exposition) to capture the assassin's punishment. The cameramen were turned back at the gate. Apparently some events, including state-sanctioned acts of retribution, were beyond the reach of moving pictures, even though such gruesome spectacles had been popular forms of entertainment and discipline for hundreds of years. The public would have to be content with newspaper reports, which in advance had been stirring up interest in the occasion.<sup>80</sup> Or so it would seem. After taking two panoramic

shots of the prison's exterior, Porter and White returned to Edison's recently completed studio in New York City. Closely following eyewitness newspaper accounts, they filmed two studio scenes that restaged the execution, using actors to play the parts of criminal, guards, doctors, state officials, and witnesses. Edison's men had missed the moment of McKinley's murder, but they were determined not to miss out on the murder of his assassin. The resulting film, *Execution of Czolgosz, with Panorama of Auburn Prison*, was distributed in two parts to allow exhibitors to show exterior and interior scenes separately,<sup>81</sup> but it is the four-shot whole, a striking hybrid of actuality footage and theatrical reenactment, that most forcefully dramatizes early cinema's developing capacity to plot and sustain a powerful kind of excitement of its own.

The film's two exterior high-angle shots offer a sweeping panorama of the prison's imposing walls, with a train, that most favored of early cinema subjects, moving parallel to the walls in the foreground. The film thus opens with a Foucauldian gesture celebrating the movie camera as an instrument of surveillance. But it is the camera's apparent ability to penetrate inside the prison that produces its uncanny magic, as bare tree branches outside the prison wall dissolve into the rectilinear bricked wall that makes up the prisoner's cell. Yet the transition between outside and inside is hardly seamless, in that the interior sets call attention to themselves as fake. As Charles Musser has pointed out in his important discussion of the film, this interior scene showing Czolgosz looking out from the barred doorway of his cell, as well as his subsequent removal by guards and the following scene of his entrance into the death chamber, "are photographed against sets that show a single wall running perpendicular to the axis of the camera lens. . . . The images lack almost all suggestion of depth—flattened not only by the sets but by the actors, who move parallel to the walls."<sup>82</sup>

In other words, even though the acting is subdued in an effort to heighten cinematic verisimilitude (as opposed to exaggerated stage melodrama), the flatness of the *mise-en-scène* robs the entire film of depth, particularly in the slow, solemn march of the squeezed two-dimensional human figures walking across the frame from the prison cell to the electric chair. Dissolving from exterior to interior produces not a unified sense of realism but rather a sort of twilight zone of self-conscious simulation whose continuity depends on prison walls, exterior (actual) and interior (artificial). These walls mark the limit of the movie camera's vision past which we cannot see. It would perhaps be too much to claim that the film contains a postmodern impression of its own fictionality in relation to the fictionality of the world it purports to represent. Yet following so closely in the wake of

[To view this image, refer to  
the print version of this title.]

Figure 3. *Execution of Czolgosz, with Panorama of Auburn Prison* (1901).

the Pan-American Exposition's staged effects, *Execution of Czolgosz, with Panorama of Auburn Prison* does carry an eerie feel for its own ersatz status as news, as we can appreciate most clearly in the final, death chamber scene (see fig. 3).

The scene opens with a full frontal shot of an empty electric chair being tested by means of a bank of lightbulbs. As Miriam Hansen has shrewdly suggested, these lights refer directly back to the lights illuminating the exposition's electric tower.<sup>83</sup> In a single unbroken circuit, the power of the state to punish President McKinley's killer by electrocution merges with the power of the genius inventor Edison to harness electricity, which in turn merges with the power of his corporation's filmmakers to represent such spectacles. Facing one another, movie camera and electric chair become mirror images, so that a new technology proclaimed to reproduce life uncannily serves to register the process of dying. This doubling between chair and camera carries all the more import when we consider how in the late 1880s Edison, overcoming some initial reluctance, helped pioneer the use of electrocution for criminals.<sup>84</sup> Cinema's capacity to execute its models culminates with the impersonation of the anarchist's end. To quote from the Edison catalog's own description, after the prisoner is brought in and strapped to the chair, the "current is turned on at a signal from the Warden, and the assassin heaves heavily as though the straps would break. He drops prone after the current is turned off. The doctors examine the body and

report to the Warden that he is dead, and he in turn officially announces the death to the witnesses."<sup>85</sup> To give his final declaration, the official turns directly to the camera, suggesting how in the process of viewing the film we have become those witnesses for the state.

Witnessing such an act of morbid disembodiment directly as the re-enacted execution of a presidential assassin, we are reminded of the authority of the state as well as the power of the filmmaker to reproduce that authority so effectively and efficiently, albeit in such a ghostly fashion. One sort of current is turned on, so that another will soon forever shut down. Passing from life to death, the figure on the screen goes from motion to frozen stillness, literally becomes Nobody (Nieman), thereby reversing the normal animating process by which cinema works its magic. This reversal is all the more unsettling in that electricity throughout the nineteenth century was typically regarded as the very the medium of animation (think of *Frankenstein*): the body's nervous life force, not the harbinger of death. Such an arresting process of physical disembodiment thus foregrounds the kind of disembodied immediacy that we saw in other early filmed historical reenactments. But however remarkable a reproduction, the film did not occasion much, if any, comment in the newspapers.<sup>86</sup> Cinema by 1901 was simply too commonplace a medium to warrant any particular mention, so that empirically assessing audience response becomes virtually impossible.

*Execution of Czolgosz* was clearly calculated to serve as a harsh warning against revolutionaries, but what was the effect of such a warning? It is certainly difficult to imagine *Czolgosz* being used as a recruiting film for anarchists, yet it is equally difficult to think that the sobering evocation of the technology of death could trigger the same sort of vocal patriotic cheering that greeted the Republican campaign and Spanish-American War films. Nor is it easy to suppose what a lecturer on stage might have said to accompany the showing of this somber film. Made at a time in the early stages of cinema when the generic categories of "documentary" versus "fiction" had yet to become firmly established, the film in its curious hybrid form seems to oscillate uneasily between historical fact and grim, obscene amusement, akin to a snuff film. Crime and punishment, death and dying, would shortly become mainstays of classic Hollywood fictional narratives, while filmed actualities, documentaries, and newsreels would become more and more marginalized genres. But how would viewers in 1901, unaccustomed to the ways of seeing cinema that we take for granted today, understand what they were watching?

Given the absence of any available historical information about its reception, we are left to ponder the film's enigmatic qualities more directly for

ourselves. Unlike McKinley's state funeral, the state execution of his assassin took place behind closed prison walls. A kind of cleansing or purging of the body politic, this act of grave national consequence was brought to the public only through the mediation of a select group of eyewitnesses, primarily newspaper reporters. Attempting yet again to contain and control the passions of the "mob," such print functioned to distance citizens from the moment of death, which was hidden from view. As Michel Foucault has argued, public executions gradually disappeared during the nineteenth century as the open torture of the condemned's body gave way to a complex set of mediations about the nature of crime and criminality itself.<sup>87</sup> But in so immediately communicating pictures of the execution to vaudeville venues, Edison's filmmakers cut out the middlemen, presuming to give their audiences a succession of powerful images of the stiling of the condemned without the intervention of the press or other sorts of juridical authority. Seeing the news entailed an experience different from reading it. Yet this was not a simple return to popular shows of physical punishment staged for eager crowds, since the filmed space of execution (its representation) and the space of film exhibition (its reception) here shared a claustrophobic closeness. As eyewitnesses for the state, viewers were compelled to gaze in mute wonder upon a moving spectacle at once intimate and on national display. In so offering an insider's look at what the state wanted every citizen to know but none to see, *Execution of Czolgosz* signals a kind of breakdown between publicity and privacy. By virtue of early cinema's capacity to make such national news of its own, the president's assassin is finally and fatally brought home, like McKinley before him.