

## ***2005 MAASA Presidential Symposium***

# **More Than Meets the Eye: Movies in American Studies**

**Lauren Rabinovitz**

Movies in American studies should always be about more than what meets the eye: the power and function of cinema within larger spheres of cultural power are central to any particular vision or analysis of American culture at home or abroad. But, when it comes to movies, the central struggles about conflict and power often taken for granted in other arenas of cultural analysis become clouded in emphasis on individual films as representative texts of their times. American studies may have embraced cinema and the mass media in general, but movies in American studies scholarship have consistently and predominantly served as mere textual symptoms of past ideologies.

In the 1960s and 1970s, American studies increasingly incorporated movies as popular expressions of American myths. While we now regularly pride ourselves on how far we have come methodologically since the height of those “myth and symbol” days, changing American studies approaches have not significantly altered the way movies are understood within the discipline. Movies “began” as popular cultural myth providing affirmations of consensus.<sup>1</sup> With Marxist and post-structural theoretical influences in the 1980s, movies transformed into objects of ideology for manufacturing and winning popular consent.<sup>2</sup> By the 1990s, identity politics created a climate for considering how movies serve a counter-hegemonic practice of refusing and resisting stereotypes.<sup>3</sup> But, these evolving theoretical approaches to cultural critique and politics, while

shifting the underlying terrain on which movies are understood, have been little more than “fashion updates” for how to study movies within American studies. What has remained doggedly dominant is: (1) the critical practice of reading movies symptomatically as mere textual symptoms of their times; and (2) the conviction that American cinema is indeed a collection of texts whose meanings are immanent, fixed, and unchanging.

These convictions disavow the historically evolving roles that industry, practices of exhibition and reception, and technologies—each of which is also constantly in flux—play in making meaning. American studies scholarship must shift from contemplating movies alone as cultural artifacts to exploring the interrelationships among institutions, texts, and spectators. In this way, movies (whether as DVDs, videotapes, 16mm or 35mm film reels, or some other material) can be seen as the artistic residue of a more responsible sociological set of relationships among films and their audiences and how those audiences make use of movies as leisure, knowledge, and politics.

Let me begin by recreating a cinephile’s dream. Two years ago, I saw the now-forgotten movie, *This is Cinerama* (1952). Cinerama, one of many widescreen processes introduced in the 1950s, is unique among widescreen technologies for three reasons: first, it failed abysmally to become a conventional widescreen format in Hollywood; second, it is difficult to see or study today because it is actually three separate films shown on three separate projectors with the sound played separately on a magnetic reel recorder all manually synchronized so that the result is one continuous wide band of film on a curved screen that stretches beyond one’s peripheral vision; third, there are only three theaters in the world today capable of even showing Cinerama and there are only a handful of Cinerama films—six travelogues and a few 1960s Hollywood films.

In other words, Cinerama reveals film as a manifestly unstable material object, an artifact that cannot be reproduced except under ideal conditions. While *This is Cinerama* is a movie, its condition as a movie allows me to raise questions about the assumption that any movie, once mass produced, is both stable and permanent. The material un-reproducibility of Cinerama directly contradicts the artistic conceit that movies are hermeneutic texts that either follow or intentionally break certain rules of narrative or aesthetic presentation. Like a new car once driven off the lot, any movie is subject to a slippery slope of material changes, transformations, or deterioration once out of the gate (not to mention, the slippery slope of discussions and changes before any movie passes through the gate).

Movies materially deteriorate over time and get transferred across different types of formats. Any extant movie today may have been seen at different times with different clarity of image, screen ratio, and scale in 35mm, 16mm, video, laserdisc, or DVD. We even recognize that many examples we see of old movies bear traces of their color and material deterioration over time. We take these

simple facts for granted as movie-watchers today, but we don't recognize that the variability of the material object was a continuous condition from the beginning.

For example, for the first 35 years of cinema, one might have seen and heard any given movie title with different music or lecture accompaniments, with dramatically different audience or atmospheric effects, or with other programmatic elements—including additional movies, amateur talent shows, tableaux vivant, fashion shows, or musical numbers added to create a variety program.<sup>4</sup> Even the contents of an individual film changed from screening to screening because movies up until the introduction of features in 1913 were often re-edited by individual theater exhibitors.<sup>5</sup> The feature film we associate with classical Hollywood cinema also was subject to a series of contextual pressures and material variations. From the 1930s to the 1950s, they were always shown with other program elements, some of which were live. They were subject to different domestic and foreign national censorship boards and, especially, since the 1950s when TV distributors bought old Hollywood movies to fit into certain time slots and under federal broadcast rules, any movie may exist in a variety of lengths with different pieces that have been excised along the way.

Today, we may watch a movie in privacy at home, socially in commercial spaces, or even sequestered on an airplane; we may watch a movie continuously from beginning to end, or we may watch it piecemeal, interrupted by human behavior, commercial advertisements, or a host of other things. But we are not all experiencing the same material object, and the context of our viewing may dramatically affect our experience as well. The instability of the material object as well as the variety of viewing contexts are endemic to the institution since movies throughout history have been exhibited in a variety of social settings, including theaters, outdoor parks, amusement parks, art galleries and museums, churches and schools, military bases as well as some of today's preferred, often more private venues of domestic living spaces, airplane seat headrests, and individual computer screens. Movies are not hermeneutic texts but *ephemeral experiences*. We have generally ignored that central characterization because we erroneously came to believe that an object that could be mass reproduced would also guarantee a reproduction of identical experiences. Movies thus share more with the performing arts than we have admitted in our haste to differentiate the cinema as an artistic medium distinct and separate from theater, in particular.

So, back to my cinephile's dream. Here is what met my eye in *This is Cinerama* (1952): the film began with a 15-minute black and white history of the movies as an *American* phenomenon of continuously improving technologies (e.g., motion picture film and equipment, synchronized sound, 2- and 3-strip color processes). It was a teleological history that led up to the very creation of Cinerama, at which point the curtains parted to reveal the full width of the Cinerama screen. The black and white movie image switched from a conventional aspect ratio to a glorious Technicolor image that filled the entire screen. We saw

a view taken from the front seat in a roller coaster at New York's Rockaway's Playland and were immediately treated to a real-time, point-of-view thrill ride on the coaster. The next 45 minutes of the film, narrated by co-producer Lowell Thomas, took us to several theater spectacles including a choir recital inside a cathedral, the Vienna Boys' Choir, the opera at La Scala—all so we could witness the audio-visual grandeur and sense of immersion in high art live theatrical performances, performances now appropriated and reproduced Cineramically.

The second half of the film shifted its locale back to the United States and to an aquacade show at Florida's Cypress Gardens. This section of the film juxtaposed tropes of 1950s modernity with those of the ante-bellum South. Here, weirdly, women posed demurely in hoop skirts and then stripped down to become pinup girls in modern bathing suits; gentlemen formally courted women in antebellum garden party scenes and then discarded their clothing as they ran to the beach for athletic, choreographed waterskiing displays of them hoisting bathing beauties onto their shoulders. Gender, race, and sexuality were articulated through an historical time warp: we viewed an Old South as well as a modern tourist locale both produced only by an overwhelmingly WASP environment.

The climax of the film, however, was its last 25 minutes: a fly-over of the United States landscape, moving from east to west in an apotheosis of manifest destiny—the familiar skylines of New York, Washington, D.C., Pittsburgh, and Chicago gave way to Niagara Falls, to heartland prairies, to aerial views of the Mississippi, and then lingering over the Rocky Mountains, aerially diving through mountainous canyons, viewing Yellowstone's majestic formations, covering California redwoods and sequoias, and of course, flying over the Grand Canyon, all set to "America the Beautiful" and "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" as sung by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir in seven-channel stereo sound. Now, I have gone on at great detail because I am hoping you will understand how it was very tempting to feel the "rush" of the aesthetic sublime, as it was presented in the grand tradition of nineteenth-century landscape painting that linked the sublime beauty of the U.S. landscape with the idea of national unity. It was also easy to conclude—as would many American studies scholars—that the grist of *This is Cinerama* is that it is a nationalist diatribe set during the Cold War, that the "natural" beauty of the country provides transcendent evidence of U.S. superiority, and the aerial point of view affords a convincingly majestic, even godlike coherence to the doctrine of manifest destiny.

But I say *tempting* and *easy* because I want to demonstrate how insufficient is this purely symptomatic reading. So, let me reread my cinophile's dream as something else, something that may invert the fantasy into a nightmare. First, I glossed over that I had to travel at some expense to Seattle to one of the three working Cinerama theaters in order to attend an annual widescreen festival. Upon arrival at the downtown Seattle theater, I could see that the theater's owner had spared no expense in restoring a theater built in the early 1960s—the restored interior includes three working-projectionist booths with fully refurbished

equipment, a perfect and expensively restored curving screen, miles of plush carpet, a recreated Sixties lobby, expert lighting, ceiling starry sky effects or what in the 1930s were called “atmospherics” and rocking-chair seats as comfy as a Lazy Boy and covered in very expensive mohair velvet.

My introduction to the show occurred technically before the movie itself began. As I sat, very comfortably, in this gem of a theater, I listened to all the Seattle-ites around me. It was like being in a church. In hushed tones, people whispered reverently, “Where is Paul?,” “I see Paul,” or “I talked to Paul.” Through eavesdropping, I learned that revered theater owner and self-proclaimed Cinerama revivalist “Paul” is Paul Allen, co-founder of Microsoft and owner of several sports teams, TicketMaster, and other investments—a capitalist billionaire whose fortune comes from a company I especially loathe. So Paul Allen had bought and restored the theater for millions and millions of dollars, which was all pocket change to him.<sup>6</sup> The very monopolistic, unfair trade practices that I detest, of a corporation steeped in today’s newest technologies, have also produced the reinsertion of Cinerama as a failed, but eccentrically nostalgic technology into a twenty-first century popular history that remakes Allen as its heroic savoir. From the front row of a restored Cinerama theater in 2004, I got my first glimpse of the “Paul Allen” history of Cinerama, a history produced through his theater’s publicity releases and magazine journalism about Cinerama and Allen’s restoration activities, through the convinced testimonies of audience members around me, and finally through the theater manager’s spoken introduction to the festival in which she used as evidence the luxurious theater itself. The “Paul Allen” contextualization for *This is Cinerama* provides an especially accessible history as it remakes Cinerama into a lovable, fun, even thrilling product of inventors, pioneers, and geniuses both from the past and from the present. This is an old, familiar approach to history as the narrative of inventors and inventions celebrating technology as the creative artistic product of individual achievement. In this new history of Cinerama, the history begins with one “inventor,” Fred Waller, and ends with another, computer-software developer Allen. Like other histories of technology that are stories of inventors and inventions, this history too masks the dynamic roles of corporations, corporate greed, and the courtships and marriages between corporations and military defense. I began to seethe as, over the course of hours in this perfect theater, I realized that probably no one in the audience shared *my* understanding of Cinerama. I alone thought Cinerama is a type of grand audio-visual spectacle that remakes the cinema into a passenger thrill ride, and the purpose in manufacturing a belief in physical and sensual immersion is to create through bodily knowledge and pleasure a willingness to integrate new technologies into everyday lives as well as to accept their attendant perceptual and ideological accommodations.

Allen’s self-serving hagiography obscured the overlapping set of historical contextualizations that produced this film’s significance in the first place in the

1950s and contributed to its revival fifty years later. First, Cinerama is simply not the outcome of a mad scientist's cinephiliac dream: it is a product of technologies developed for defense use in WWII. Fred Waller's wraparound screen and camera/projection systems were originally developed to train air gunners and, similarly, Cinerama's multiple-channel stereo sound was developed to train submarine pilots in underwater navigation. In a move often repeated throughout history, when the war ended and technologies designed for military use were no longer needed, the investors in these technologies began to seek ways to adapt them for peace time in order to continue to maximize profits, and so the Rockefellers set up Waller in a laboratory-motion picture studio on Long Island. Radio personality Lowell Thomas invested money and lent his celebrity to the project at the moment when the American movie market was breaking wide open. Hollywood studios were being forced to divest themselves of their theaters, movie distribution and exhibition practices were dramatically changing, and the demographics for movie theater locations and leisure activities were shifting. Cinerama initially combined education and entertainment in a new format for armchair travel, a strategy with longstanding success in both nineteenth- and twentieth-century entertainments—including panoramas, magic lantern shows, stereographs, photography, disaster shows, and movies—in order to improve filmmaker and studio reputations for pedagogy and/or higher aesthetic values.

In fact, the armchair travel discourse of the first six Cinerama films, their exposure to tourist spots in the United States, Europe, and Pacific, are especially interesting not just for their Cold War ideology but also for specifying in their point of view the aesthetics, perfection, and spatial mastery that could be achieved through aerial cinematography at a time when commercial air travel for tourism was just taking off, so to speak. The second half of the film, with its climactic American fly-over, was the artistic product of Merian C. Cooper, Hollywood director and World War Two aviator who joined the Cinerama team midway through this first project and directed this portion of the film. He not only wanted to create a "subtle" Cold War assertion of U.S. superiority, but he believed in the importance of training audiences to adapt to aviation as a superior experience and way of seeing.<sup>7</sup>

*This is Cinerama* promoted air travel to a middle-class affluent enough to consider it as an improved form of tourism while it also substituted armchair air travel to those who could not yet afford the real thing, all the while making hyperbolic claims that Cinerama both replicated tourism while being better than actually being there. In this context, Cinerama is part of a long continuity of armchair travel lectures (going back to the nineteenth century and up to IMAX today) that asserts a kind of global imperialism through visual, spatial mastery set in discourses of scientific, geographic, and anthropological education. It was within these contexts that Cinerama prepared Americans to understand their citizenship and relationships to the world in both new and old ways in the period immediately following World War Two.

My conflicted reaction to my Cinerama experience in Seattle is indicative of my conflicted experience as a scholar working at the intersection of movies and American studies wherein I am pulled equally by love of cinema's pleasures and by my need to critique America's past. This conundrum, typical of my generation of scholars, was not always the prevailing attitude and approach. Although American studies scholars like Henry Nash Smith had acknowledged the value of popular culture in the 1950s and people like John Cawelti celebrated the way movies could encapsulate central American myths in the early 1970s, it wasn't until the latter half of the 1970s when film studies itself had come of age as a discipline that American studies got serious about film.<sup>8</sup> Robert Sklar's *Movie-Made America* (1975, Vintage) was a paradigm-shifting work for film in American studies.<sup>9</sup> It revamped the intellectual (or highbrow) versus popular polarities in which filmic expression was celebrated or denigrated in discussions of American culture by such culture critics as Dwight MacDonal writing during the height of the Cold War or historians like Richard Pells a decade later who began to incorporate Hollywood activities within the intellectual and cultural landscapes they portrayed.<sup>10</sup> Sklar maintained an interest in movies and ideology but located them within Hollywood as an institution of capital, of culture, of even the State.

The publication of his book seemed to be part of a new wave of addressing the role of movies and Hollywood within American culture. Other scholars, including Cawelti, Richard Slotkin, and Will Wright almost simultaneously published books that examined Hollywood westerns in relationship to studies of the American frontier, the myths of the West, and questions of manifest destiny.<sup>11</sup> Although still steeped in regarding movies as popular expressions of American mythology, these studies were "new" in their anthropological definitions of American culture and the cinema's role in the inter-relationships among American institutions and rites. In 1977, the American Studies Association funded a four-day faculty workshop on methods for teaching film in American Studies, and I was both the only graduate student and female participant. In 1979, *American Quarterly* published a special issue on film, with essays by several of the participants in that workshop.<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Hey's piece on Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront* as both a parable of and in the context of the McCarthy hearings especially advocated a methodology that synthesized American studies cultural history with contemporary critical film theory.<sup>13</sup> With optimism that only a graduate student could muster, I regarded that volume as a harbinger of greater things to come and as an insurance policy that movies would play a leading role in the future of American studies. I can't remember exactly when, but at some point in the last ten years, I threw away that 1979 issue of *AQ* because it had clearly expired—both as an insurance policy and as intellectual property.

But, surprisingly, as much as one might have expected, not a lot happened. While the numbers of references to films as objects have grown exponentially

in American studies scholarship, the number of American Studies Association annual conference papers, dissertations, and, even more importantly, the number of professors trained to do film in American studies has remained depressingly small. Movies as cultural artifacts have become widely accepted in the field, but methodologically, we have not moved much beyond the late 1970s. George Lipsitz's landmark 1990 *AQ* essay, "Listening to Learn and Learning to Listen: Popular Culture, Cultural Theory, and American Studies," begged the field to stop resisting the central importance of continental post-structural critical theories that had been embraced by the developing discipline of film studies and a new generation modeling their work on the foundations of British cultural studies.<sup>14</sup> His position was hotly debated within American studies throughout the early 1990s.

But the current state of movie scholarship within American studies suggests that the diffusion of movies into the field has failed substantially to change our understanding of cinema as anything beyond a text, albeit a text often regarded as "hipper" than a print text.<sup>15</sup> Of approximately 28 American studies dissertations written on film since 1995 (and this doesn't include dissertations on other types of media), 16 or two-thirds of them focus primarily on screen image *representations*—representations of Catholicism, black preachers, the Middle East, North Africa, Asia, masculinity, race, gender, and sexuality and often in a single film, star, or small corpus of films. It is encouraging, however, for the future of the field that the other third of the dissertations do develop historical contextualization for individual movies, locating cinema within discourses of criticism, institutions of religion, state, economics, as well as relevant industries and forms of popular culture.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, two leading journals, *American Quarterly* (*AQ*) and *American Studies*, regularly review new books in the fields of film and television. However, original scholarship on cinema remains at the margins of American studies with only five essays that incorporate cinema as cultural artifacts in the last ten years in *AQ* and four in *American Studies* (although *American Studies* ran a special issue on TV and American culture [volume 39, no. 2] in the summer of 1998), and these articles are still dominated by matters of textual representation, often even more narrowly as a literary critical reading of a single text.<sup>17</sup> Again, it is encouraging for the future of the field that some essays do examine film as an institution in a matrix of historical cultural institutions.

Yet, looking back over ASA programs and panel topics since 1997, I find the analytic practices of incorporating cinema generally discouraging: while there are more media studies papers available at the ASA than a decade ago, there is often little economic understanding of the amalgamation of popular culture industries and less attention to particularizing or differentiating any one industry—in this climate film and media analysis in general are both marginal and suffer when TV, the internet, popular music, individual celebrities, and questions of popular style and performance are all merely equivalent forms of



textual discourse. Now, I don't want to paint all ASA media studies papers with one brushstroke since there are examples of excellent research. For example, some of the best work on censorship in either film studies or American studies has been dominated by American studies scholars, including Francis Couvares, Tom Doherty, Richard Maltby, and Lee Grieveson.<sup>18</sup>

Is this state of affairs because we are all consumers of movies, we take for granted our ability to interpret them as transparent objects in our historical work? Or, rather is the state of film scholarship within American studies an outgrowth of the evolution of the discipline of film studies and the ways in which American studies has historically accepted or resisted the integration of that discipline's dominant theories and methods? Or is cultural studies, as it has evolved and become popularized in the U.S. academy, with its emphasis on critical interpretation of an array of inter-related popular texts, the villain here? Or is it some combination of all three? I had initially thought I would individually take up each of these three charges, since these are matters that have bugged me for more than a decade. But, since I am concerned that such an extension of my jeremiad will strain everyone's attention, I will only evoke these questions through another example of my own efforts to understand cinema as a cultural artifact by arguing for a social history of cinema that contextualizes films within cultural knowledge.

In this regard, I would like to turn to a 1907 film: *Laughing Gas* (directed by Edwin S. Porter for Edison Manufacturing Company). *Laughing Gas* is an exceptional film: (1) it actually features an African American woman rather than a Caucasian in blackface or, a man in blackface playing a Black woman; (2) it offers this woman as the *subject* of the narrative rather than as a mere caricature or type who figures in along the sidelines; (3) and in the film's story about the effects of laughing gas on her following a trip to the dentist, she instigates riotous laughter on the subway, clashes with two Italian street vendors, stops a fight between two drunken Irishmen, overturns the dignified atmospheres of a courtroom and a church service, and then dumps her White employer's dinner on his head—all of which allows for pleasure in a politicized reading of disruption and resistance against authority. We do know that although *Laughing Gas* seems to present a complete enough episodic comedy toward this end, the extant print is missing a scene described in the company's original advertisement in which the protagonist named Mandy interrupts a group of German street revelers.<sup>19</sup> One can only speculate about the missing scene, one likely excised by an exhibitor since exhibitor editing was a common practice and perhaps removed because this particular exhibitor had an audience less likely to be amused by anti-German stereotypes or German men being the butt of Mandy's jokes. So, there are material variations and limitations to the reach of Mandy's resistance.

There are as well typical social limitations inscribed in the film: first, it *displays* the protagonist, by relying upon conventions that made women

simultaneously the subject and object of early cinema's camera gaze; second, the display itself of medium-close up shots showing Mandy grimacing at the beginning and laughing at the end reinforces a racist stereotype of Blackness presented in numerous other early films, ethnographic displays, or other popular visual imagery.<sup>20</sup> The presentation of Black performance for White audiences always necessarily offers up something suspect about an entertaining exoticism conscripted in Otherness. On a superficial level, *Laughing Gas*'s Mandy conforms to Donald Bogle's description of the "aunt jemima" as a mammy who wedges herself into the dominant White culture and is generally "sweet, jolly and good-tempered—a bit more polite than mammy and certainly never as headstrong."<sup>21</sup>

But Mandy resists any easy stereotype. First, she is unlike other mammy figures in contemporary films since she is not represented conventionally as other mammies were—as a character played by a man in blackface.<sup>22</sup> Even in *Mixed Babies* (American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1908), a comedy contemporary to *Laughing Gas*, the Black mother whose baby gets switched with a White one while she shops at a New York City department store is still played by a White actress in blackface. She is only replaced by a Black actress for the final close-up of mother and baby.

Second, Mandy is the active agent of the film's proto-narrative as she moves easily back and forth between public and private spaces, White and Black cultures. We see her on city streets, riding in an integrated subway car, and on her way to work in a suburban neighborhood. We also see Mandy at an all-Black church service and being courted by a male suitor: she is neither completely assimilated nor so clearly a female "tom" character. Her mobility across the predominantly White spaces connects the shots of the film and suggests the agency of an independent actor. In this regard, she functions similarly to the protagonist of *Mixed Babies* who shops with confidence in the largely White environment of the department store. These films suggest that the boundaries of White American public spaces could not only be transgressed by White but also by African American women.<sup>23</sup>

Mandy thus falls somewhere between the blatant racist caricature and the construction of a full character with individual psychological traits and motivation. So far, my description is a considered set of observations about a character, set within a framework of contemporary movies and popular imagery, and it relies upon seeking out the identity markers of race and gender that preoccupy us today. But, if we consider the identity markers that were socially prominent to audiences in 1907, we would notice a third stigmata that would have been paramount.

Mandy is also marked by class or, more specifically, by occupation: she is a domestic. Of course, her employment as a servant is contingent on her race and gender. During the decade in which this film circulated, domestic service in the United States began to shift significantly from being largely done by Irish,

German, and Scandinavian women to African American women. By 1910, White immigrants enjoyed expanded job opportunities in a growing industrial, retail, and office economy. African American women, part of a new migration from Southern tenant farms to Northern and Southern cities, were shut out from other occupations, and they increasingly assumed the immigrants' former positions in middle-class households.<sup>24</sup> By 1910, domestic service was the predominant occupation for urban African American women.<sup>25</sup>

While it is therefore ordinary that a period film depicting a household servant would portray her as African American, the selection of an African American domestic worker as the protagonist is not self-evidently necessary for the success of the film's plot. But by making Mandy the subject of the story, the film allows for an investigation of her body at just the moment when increased numbers of Black women entered White households as well as urban public spaces. Whereas previous generations of domestics were immigrants, lived in the home, and worked long hours for little pay and room and board, African American domestics were day laborers, wage earners, and with families and activities in the Black community that de-centered the place of their employers' homes in their lives. African American maids were often less tractable than their predecessors, who were isolated, unacculturated, or non-English speakers. Employers accepted the new terms because of the increasing shortage of live-in servants of northern European stock. For the first time, many White northern American middle-class families daily encountered Black women in the intimate setting of their homes.

*Laughing Gas* does not solve the predictable problems resulting from this change. But the social tension regarding such new employment relationships can be seen to figure into the film's topical interest in regarding Mandy's laughing body. *Laughing Gas* was an ideological accommodation to a new "servant problem" for both White and Black middle classes. It provided a paradoxical representation of *both* display and agency: Mandy laughs uproariously, calls attention to herself, and commands a public deportment that opposed White and Black middle class efforts to teach "the apron and cap" crowd proper public—and especially public transportation—demeanor.<sup>26</sup> *Laughing Gas*'s Mandy represents an ambivalent figure of urban female appearance when new numbers of African American domestics came to the attention of both the White and Black middle classes, who sought through newspaper columns, Black churches, the YWCA, and other urban charity organization to control working-class public behavior and to get these women to conform more to middle-class standards of feminine gentility.

Mandy claims her right to full subjectivity in public space and in White culture while the film also works to disavow that claim within the popular racist poses already in circulation. A reading of the film as a single text or even within popular representation might set her up only as a racist or quasi-racist stereotype, whereas within an *historical contextualization* she is the focus of fascination, perplexity, and vacillating status. Mandy and *Laughing Gas* provide just one

example of early cinema's and society's preoccupation with the public urban self-presentation of women and minorities. Many of these films articulate promises of new urban mobility for female and minority populations while simultaneously constraining these individuals.

*Laughing Gas*, like Cinerama, has also been subject to re-insertion into new histories of cinema and American society. My interest in *Laughing Gas*, one of only a small number of extant period films that has been easy to rent from the Museum of Modern Art, is also to counteract the way it is actively being written out of African American history today. Even though MOMA throughout the 1990s packaged the film in an "ethnic stereotypes" program of shorts about African Americans eating watermelon, big-nosed Jews burning down their shops for insurance monies, and drunken Irishmen, scholars have generally ignored this film.<sup>27</sup>

Second, the film is part of a newly-released DVD set entitled "Edison: The Invention of the Movies." The package's description of the individual film is: "A woman goes to the dentist for a toothache and is given gas. On her way home on the subway, she can't stop laughing, and every other passenger catches the laughter from her." In this marketing context, the film is neither about her racial nor her class status but is instead a stepping stone in the continuum of movie comedy and, in particular, physical and slapstick comedy. What is even more peculiar is that the DVD's historicization places the aesthetic development of movies squarely at the feet of Thomas Edison the inventor, who had nothing to do with the production of films at his company's movie studio (most of the movies in this package were directed by Edwin S. Porter) and equally nothing to do with the actual mechanical invention of motion pictures. His employee William Dickson accomplished that but in a corporate environment that promised successful production because Edison and his lawyers had bought up so many competing motion picture patents or because they simply strong-armed and beat up their competitors. Still, in 2005, Mandy's significance is lost almost entirely as an irrelevant footnote to the history of Thomas Edison as the great creator of motion pictures as an art form.

I argue that the contexts central to this film's historical importance—Mandy's readily available identity within the dramatically changing economy of household labor, having a contemporary "mental map" for her movements across White and Black urban public spaces (including an integrated subway car), and the individual exhibitor's regular practice of editing or rearranging shots—are exactly the kinds of knowledge external to the film itself that we need today in order to pull cinema out of a cycle of lamentable historiography that avoids addressing real issues of conflict over cultural power.

So, after 25 years of incorporating the movies in American studies, we face a bigger uphill battle today than we did initially when the first battle was to "see" movies as an art form for cultural understanding. (1) Now that we embrace cinema as one among the arts, we have to let go of the erroneous definition of

movies as a purely textual phenomenon. We need to study more the processes and experiences of movies within cultural frameworks of knowledge, entertainment, industry, and science. (2) At stake in this enterprise is the underlying hermeneutic assumption of attempting to ask about the past so that we may better understand something about the present. I began by complaining about how American studies for too long has overlooked the complexities of how cinema produced its social meanings. My reflections, including epiphanies while eating popcorn in the caressing velvet comfort of a luxury cinema, are a rejoinder to the central importance of historiographic ethics. There is no vitality to movie history scholarship that makes movies by themselves the highway through historical social reality. We need to understand more than the object; we need to pay attention to more than what meets the eye.

### Notes

1. For example, Peter C. Rollins, ed., *Hollywood as Historian: American Film in a Cultural Context* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983, rev. ed., 1998); John G. Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1971, 2nd ed., 1984); Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1800* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000, 1st ed., Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973). Indeed, the reissue of all these volumes speaks loudly to their prolonged popularity and centrality in the field.

2. For example, Michael Rogin, "'The Sword Became a Flashing Vision': D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*," *Representations* 9 (Winter 1985): 150-195; Robert Sklar and Charles Musser, *Resisting Images: Essays on Cinema and History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); Richard Maltby, *Harmless Entertainment: Hollywood and the Ideology of Consensus* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1983).

3. Some exemplary landmark titles concerning African American cinema include: Manthia Diawara, ed., *Black American Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993). On Chicana/o identity politics, see, for example: Rosa Linda Fregoso, *The Bronze Screen: Chicana and Chicano Film Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). Studies that exemplify a queer identity politics include: Juan Suarez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, & Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); Corey Creekmur and Alexander Doty, eds. *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian and Queer Essays on Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

4. For further information on the variety format of early motion pictures, see: Rick Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); "Part Three: Sound Practices in Exhibition," *The Sounds of Early Cinema*, eds. Richard Abel and Rick Altman, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 121-183; "Part Three" above includes: Richard Abel, "That Most American of Attractions, the Illustrated Song," 143-155; Jeffrey Klenotic, "'The Sensational Acme of Realism': 'Talker' Pictures as Early Cinema Sound Practice," 156-166; Lauren Rabinovitz, "'Bells and Whistles': The Sound of Meaning in Train Travel Film Rides," 167-182; Miriam Hansen, *From Babel to Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991, 2005); Lauren Rabinovitz, *For the Love of Pleasure: Women, Movies, and Culture in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

5. For an explanation of this practice, see: Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

6. For a summary of Allen's purchase of the theater, see: Bruce Handy, "This is Cinerama," *Vanity Fair* April 2001: 258-274; see also, the website for Allen's theater, [http://www.seattlecinerama.com/theatre1\\_save\\_the\\_cinerama.html](http://www.seattlecinerama.com/theatre1_save_the_cinerama.html).

7. Mark Cotta Vaz, *Living Dangerously: The Adventures of Merian C. Cooper* (New York: Villard, 2005), 323.

8. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950, 1970, 2005); Cawelti, *Six-Gun Mystique*.

9. Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage, 1975, 1976, 1994).

10. Dwight MacDonald, *Against the American Grain* (New York: Random House, 1962); Richard H. Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

11. Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence*; Cawelti, *Six-Gun Mystique*; Will Wright, *Six-Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

12. *American Quarterly* 31 (Winter 1979).

13. Kenneth Hey, "Ambivalence as a Theme in *On The Waterfront* (1954): An Interdisciplinary Approach to Film Study," *American Quarterly* 31 (Winter 1979): 666-97.

14. George Lipsitz, "Listening to Learn, Learning to Listen: Popular Culture, Cultural Theory, and American Studies," *American Quarterly* 42:4 (December 1990): 615-36.

15. An interesting, brief discussion that examines both this question as well as a bibliography that frames the cinema's "hipness" as historical reflection is Bryan F. Le Beau's review essay, "Historiography Meets Historiophoty: The Perils and Promise of Rendering the Past on Film," *American Studies* 38 (Spring 1997): 151-155.

16. I am thinking especially of the following dissertations: Melani McAlister, "Staging the American Century: Race, Gender, and Nation in U.S. Representations of the Middle East, 1945-1992," Brown University, 1996; Christina Klein, "Cold War Orientalism: Musicals, Travel Narratives, and Middlebrow Culture in Postwar America," Yale University, 1997; Allison McCracken, "Real Men Don't Sing: Crooning and American Culture, 1928-1933," University of Iowa, 2000; Kirsten Ostherr, "Cinematic Prophylaxis: Globalization and Contagion in the Audiovisual Discourse of World Health," Brown University, 2001.

17. In *American Quarterly*, see: Martin Kevorkian, "Computers with Color Monitors: Disembodied Black Screen Images 1988-96," *American Quarterly* 51 (June 1999); Ardis Cameron, "When Strangers Bring Cameras: The Poetics and Politics of Othered Places," *American Quarterly* 54 (September 2002); Jonathan Auerbach, "McKinley at Home: How Early American Cinema Made News," *American Quarterly* 55 (September 2003); David Greven, "Troubling Our Heads about Ichabod: *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, Classic American Literature, and the Sexual Politics of Homosocial Brotherhood," *American Quarterly* 56 (March 2004); María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, "In the Shadow of NAFTA: *Y tu mamá también* Revisits the National Allegory of Mexican Sovereignty," *American Quarterly* 57 (September 2005).

In *American Studies*, see: Matthew Costello, "The Pilgrimage and Progress of George Bailey: Puritanism, *It's A Wonderful Life*, and the Language of Community in America," *American Studies* 40 (Fall 1999); Richard Boyd, "Representing Political Violence: The Mainstream Media and the Weatherman *Days of Rage*," *American Studies* 41 (Spring 2000); Steven T. Sheehan, "'Costly Thy Habit as Thy Purse Can Buy': Gary Cooper and the Making of the Masculine Citizen-Consumer," *American Studies* 43 (Spring 2002); Nancy West and Penelope Pelizzon, "Snap Me Deadly: Reading the Still Photograph in Film Noir," *American Studies* 43 (Summer 2002).

18. See, for example, Thomas Patrick Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930-1934* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Lee Grieveson, *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early Twentieth Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Francis G. Couvares, ed., *Movie Censorship and American Culture* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996); Richard Maltby, "More Sinned Against than Sinning: The Fabrications of 'Pre-Code Cinema,'" *Senses of Cinema* 21 (November-December 2003): <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/03/29/contents.html>.

19. "New Edison Films," *New York Clipper*, 1193, 1907.

20. See, for example: *Laughing Ben* (American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1902). For a more detailed catalogue, see: Jacqueline Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 181-187; and Henry Sampson, *Blacks in Black and White: A Source Book on Black Films* (2nd ed., Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1995).

21. Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 1990), 9.

22. The drag performance in early cinema was routinely reserved for mammies and spinsters as comic caricatures. For examples of mammies, see: *What Happened in the Tunnel* (Edison Manufacturing Company, 1903), *A Mis-Directed Kiss* (American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1904), *A Kiss in the Dark* (American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1904), *Everybody Works But Father* (American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1905), and *Under the Old Apple Tree* (American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1907). Jacqueline Stewart has demonstrated that the logic of blackface, while not always consistent, generally adapted blackface practices from popular minstrel performance styles for the first story film comedies in order to produce Blackness. Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies*.

23. Yet, Mandy's agency as an individual subject is mitigated because it is the laughing gas that she took at the dentist's that controls her and her body's mechanically convulsive movements of laughter. It is not through Mandy's desire that any of the disruptions occur: it is indeed because of her *lack of or loss of control* over her body.

24. For example, in Philadelphia and New York City, the share of African American women in domestic service rose significantly in this period: from 30 percent to 40 percent of all female domestic workers in Philadelphia; from 10 percent to 15 percent in New York City. In some southern cities, like New Orleans, Black women comprised 80 percent of all female servants by 1910. In other cities like Chicago, where African Americans were still relatively few in the overall population, women were 10 percent of the servant work force by 1910, which was still a sharp increase over 1900. U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Statistics of Occupations," *The Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1904), 520-521, 634-635, 640-641, 676-677; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States 1910, vol. 4: Population/Occupation Statistics* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1916), 547, 571, 574, 590.

25. African American historian John Hope Franklin says that because African American women had less difficulty finding employment as household servants than their male counterparts, a larger number of women than men migrated to the cities; John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (6th ed., New York: McGraw-Hill, 1988), 279. In sum, while the rate of their expansion and domination of the domestic labor force occurred unevenly, a major national shift was occurring, one that only accelerated with the Great Migration of World War One.

26. For more on the subject of campaigns to teach "the apron and cap" crowd of African American domestics, see: Jacqueline Stewart, "Negroes Laughing At Themselves? Black Spectatorship and the Performance of Urban Modernity," *Critical Inquiry* 29 (Summer 2003): 650-677.

27. The one exception to this is Stewart's *Migrating to the Movies*.