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# Telling Descriptions: Frank Norris's Kinetoscopic Naturalism and the Future of the Novel, 1899

Paul Young

To-day is the day of the novel. In no other day and by no other vehicle is contemporaneous life so adequately expressed; and the critics of the twenty-second century, reviewing our times, striving to reconstruct our civilization, will look not to the painters, not to the architects nor dramatists, but to the novelists to find our idiosyncrasy . . . . If the novel was not something more than a simple diversion, a means of whiling away a dull evening, a long railway journey, it would not, believe me, remain in favour another day.

—Frank Norris, “The Responsibilities  
of the Novelist” (1902)<sup>1</sup>

“Go out into the street and stand where the ways cross and hear the machinery of life work clashing in its grooves,” Frank Norris charges his fellow novelists in his essay “The Need of a Literary Conscience.” “Or look from your window. A whole literature goes marching by, clamoring for a leader and a master hand to guide it.”<sup>2</sup> Norris’s self-assured command belies the paradox of calling a centuries-old literary form the key medium of “to-day” in the epigraph. Indeed, by using “machinery” to metonymize the “life” awaiting depiction, he conjures the specters of newer media: the phonograph, still photography, and the machine that haunts his 1899 novel *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco*, the kinetoscope—“the crowning scientific achievement of the nineteenth century.”<sup>3</sup> I characterize the kinetoscope’s appearance in *McTeague* as a *haunting* because it recognizes the novelty of moving pictures but relegates them to the role of a “diversion,”

MODERNISM / *modernity*  
VOLUME FOURTEEN, NUMBER  
FOUR, PP 645–668.  
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UNIVERSITY PRESS

**Paul Young** is Associate Professor of English and Director of Film Studies at Vanderbilt University. He is the author of *The Cinema Dreams Its Rivals: Media Fantasy Films from Radio to the Internet* (Minnesota, 2006), and is currently working on a book about early American cinema’s relationships to contemporary discourses of realism in the arts, philosophy, and media.



646 a role to which novels, Norris assures us, could never stoop. The moving picture show at the Orpheum vaudeville theater leaves McTeague and his companions “awestruck” by replicating the movement of horses, cable cars, and trucks, but it seems to impress them no more than do the slapstick comedians, “cigar-box fiddle[rs],” and tone-deaf singers who precede it (*M*, 62). The kinetoscope may offer a staggering mechanical reproduction of visible reality, but it sheds no light on the spirit of the age to this overawed, boisterous audience who come only to be shocked and amused. By contrast, *McTeague* offers equally detailed descriptions of such settings as McTeague’s “dental parlors,” his wedding table, the mining cabin where he seeks work after killing his wife, and the vaudeville show itself, but it supplements these descriptions with commentary on the social and psychological currents of working-class life, offered for the enlightenment of refined readers who (Norris assumes) grasp the difference between mechanical imitation and aesthetic craft.

*McTeague*’s kinetoscope, though contained diegetically by the Orpheum and narratively by a single chapter, has more to say about Norris’s definition of naturalism than *McTeague*’s narrator admits. My opening quotes suggest that Norris defined “the novel” by its ability to adapt to changing cultural conditions, including the ascent of new technologies. In what follows, I show that for Norris, stalking the machinery of life meant more than writing technologies and traffic into his fiction. It meant reinventing the novel as a form appropriate to telling the stories of modernity, technology, and mass culture as well as the atavistic extremes of human behavior for which naturalism was notorious in Norris’s time. It also meant risking the novel’s singularity as a medium by adapting aspects of new representational technologies to outfit its armory of effects. Mark Seltzer has argued that the naturalist novel “devis[ed] a narrative machine that inscribes . . . [social] technologies [of power and biopower] as part of its textual practice.” *McTeague* exemplifies this assessment beautifully, but in a form that speaks directly to the cinema’s challenge to the cultural authority of the novel: a narrative of intermedia mutiny in which the incorporated medium surreptitiously turns the tables on its elder. The challenge of expressing “adequately” the early cinema and the social relations and quotidian experience of American culture in which it participated curtails *McTeague*’s capacity to “coordinate,” as Seltzer would have it, the bodies of its characters and the machine of the cinema “within a single technology of regulation.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, Norris’s peculiar naturalist aesthetic (and it should be noted that, despite its critical champions then and now, “American naturalism” in the 1890s was less a movement than a jumble of proffered peculiarities) owes its shape in part to the pressures that the cinematic imagination exerted upon his notion of the forms and roles the traditional arts must take in the new century. I suggest that the early cinema weighed heavily enough upon Norris’s conception of the novel’s future that to put his aesthetic into practice, as he did most aggressively in *McTeague*, was to transform the cinema from an inscribed technology—a form of representational, social, and industrial power that naturalism could, ideally, narrate and contextualize among other forces—to one which inscribes itself upon naturalism to the point of twisting the latter into a literary refraction of the cinema itself.

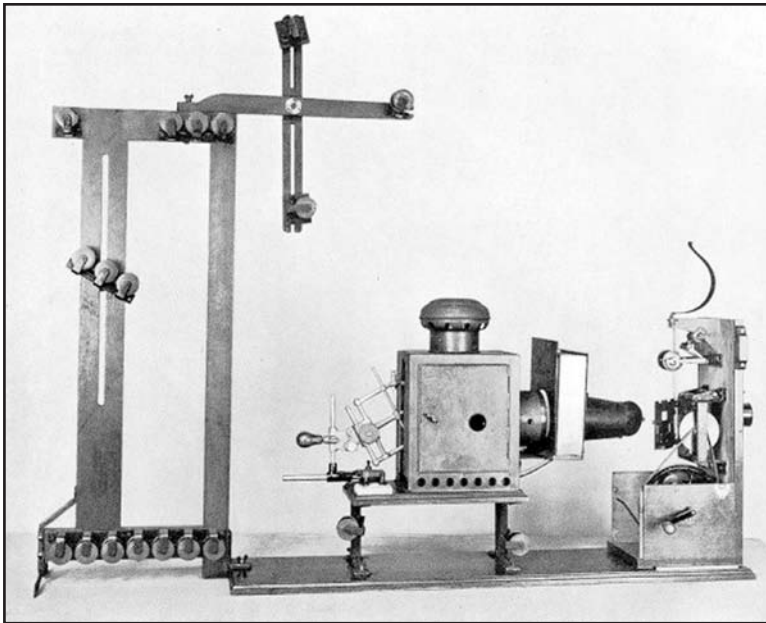
One of the few critics to deal with cinematic discourse in *McTeague*, Alfred G. Litton, points out that *McTeague* gets the name of the Orpheum's projector wrong. Mac and his future in-laws could not have watched images projected by a *kinetoscope*, because kinoscopes displayed film loops in single-serve peephole arcade machines, not on auditorium screens for masses of spectators (Fig. 1). Litton suggests that by calling the projector a kinetoscope rather than a vitascope (or another of its many proprietary names, such as Eidoloscope or Biograph), Norris derides everyone from slow-witted *McTeague* to the Orpheum publicists for their inability to keep up with technological change.<sup>5</sup> But Litton neglects two facts: first, the Edison company used the name "Projecting Kinetoscope" to market its own projectors beginning in 1897 (Figs. 2 and 3); and second, Norris alludes to "the kinetoscope" numerous times in his criticism as an idealized metaphor for naturalist fiction.<sup>6</sup> The ideal, kinetoscopic novel that collectively emerges from these allusions is engineered, if you will, for what I call *telling descriptions*, that is, narrating stories via discrete, concrete images while obscuring the overt traces of narration as a discursive act. Whether he intended to shuffle the names or not, or was simply reporting the name he saw on Orpheum advertisements in 1897 or after, Norris's use of the term *kinetoscope* instead of *vitascope* invites us to attend more closely to the cinematic context of Norris's idealized naturalism.<sup>7</sup> As I will discuss, Norris predicted, or rather prescribed, novels that could capture not merely *vita*, "life" in an abstract and reified form, but also the *kineticism* of American life, "clashing in its grooves" in the streets of urban modernity, and the multiple and fragmentary perspectives from which the modern subject perceived it. But this target proved elusive, and the search for it potentially damaging, to a medium lacking images and moving parts at a time when mechanization affected every sphere of modern life—including the consumption of fiction.

If for Stendhal the novel was a mirror walking down the road, one may be excused for assuming that Norris wanted to supplant the mirror with a camera. American naturalism, Michael Davitt Bell writes, drew from Zola's purportedly scientific theory of the novel the "promise of a reality unmediated by language, a direct transmission of 'real' life in which style remains transparent . . . [A]nything that makes us aware of the writer as writer—or . . . makes the *writer aware* that he *is* a writer, a mediator—damages the goods."<sup>8</sup> Though one must be skeptical of general claims about such an idiosyncratic genre as American naturalism, Davitt Bell's appraisal matches up fairly neatly with Norris's own critical calls for the "removal of the author as personality and for the communication of theme through scene and action" alone.<sup>9</sup> In Norris's own words: "The man behind the pen—what has the public to do with him? The more he differentiates himself from his story, the more remote his isolation, the more real will appear the things and people of which he treats, the more will his story seem to have a life of its own."<sup>10</sup>

Photography provided Gilded Age literary critics with a convenient metaphor for this zero degree of style, as when Harold Fredric praised the imagery in Stephen Crane's novel, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), by comparing it to the motion studies of Eadweard Muybridge: "At last, along comes a Muybridge, with his instantaneous



▲  
Fig. 1. Bacigalupi's kinetoscope arcade, San Francisco, 1894 or 1895. Edisionia Collections, Edison National Historic Site, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.



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Fig. 2. The 1897 model of the Edison Projecting Kinetoscope. Reprinted courtesy of The Projection Box collection. <http://easyweb.easynet.co.uk/~s-herbert/ProjectionBox2.htm>

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We also furnish an excellent 50ft. strip. (Code word, Ungainful.)

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**GORDON SISTERS BOXING.**.....(Code word, Ungallant) 100 ft.  
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We also furnish an excellent 50 ft. strip.....(Code word, Ungartered)

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**HAPPY HOOLIGAN'S SURPRISE.**.....(Code word, Unelmlg) 65 ft.  
**WHY BRIDGET STOPPED DRINKING.**.....(Code word, Unedlthor) 75 ft.  
**MONTRÉAL FIRE DEPARTMENT ON RUNNERS.**(Code word, Unedifying) 100 ft.  
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Fig. 3.A 1901 broadside advertising the improved Projecting Kinetoscope to exhibitors. From entertainment trade journal *The New York Clipper*.

camera, and shows that the real motion” of battle scenes “is entirely different” from what other writers had depicted. Fredric’s analogy prompts Bill Brown to read Crane’s novel in terms of how it “begins to register . . . the technology that made ‘photographic revelation’ a novelistic possibility.”<sup>11</sup> If fiction writers hoping to attain objectivity felt the need to wipe their fingerprints from their own handiwork, Brown demonstrates that Crane, at least, left a snapshot camera behind—or the discursive outline of one—in his stories to signify his authority as a reporter of facts.

As one might expect, Norris picks up the strain of Fredric’s photography metaphor on multiple occasions. But rather than holding up photography as a model for artistry, Norris joined the gainsayers who fretted over realist fiction’s focus on visual detail.<sup>12</sup> According to Daniel Borus, the critic W. H. Thayer accused realists from Crane to the more staid William Dean Howells for founding an “Epidermis School” of authors who “sought to accumulate so much detail [as] to ‘produce as sure an effect of reality as genius produced by using a few essentials,” while Hamilton Wright Mabie complained that “observation, the method of science,” was no replacement for “insight” and hard-earned skills of intuition when it came to excavating the reasons and meanings hidden beneath the skin of everyday life.<sup>13</sup> For his part, Norris asserts that “most people” mistake Zola’s “Naturalism . . . [for] an inner circle of realism . . . a theory of fiction wherein things are represented ‘as they really are,’ with the truthfulness of a camera.” In fact, Norris avers, Zola’s naturalism comes closer to “Romance” than to

650 photorealism, because it concerns itself not with trifling visual details but with the “world of big things; the enormous, the formidable, the terrible . . . no teacup tragedies here.”<sup>14</sup> “Teacup tragedies” refers to Norris’s infamous complaint that Howells’s novels, crowded with “crises involving cups of tea,” simply could not accommodate more consequential crises, such as the outbursts of sexual desire, greed, envy, and murder that drive McTeague to his fate: from “stupid,” satisfied bachelorhood and romancing Trina Seppe, through her winning \$5,000 in a lottery, their marriage, and the loss of his dental practice, to his murdering Trina for her money and his showdown with her cousin Marcus in Death Valley, where he ends up handcuffed to Marcus’s corpse, dying of thirst without a tea tray in sight.

Norris’s critique of Howells, snide as it sounds, needs to be understood less as a complaint (Howells was in fact a champion of Norris’s work) than as a plea to readers to differentiate realism from naturalism according to how *description* functions in each genre.<sup>15</sup> When realists load their pages with “the smaller details of every-day life,” they achieve what Norris terms “Accuracy” rather than “Truth,” for “the most scrupulous adherence to fact, even when narrated with the meticulous science of the phonograph or pictured with the incontestable precision of the photograph,” can never familiarize readers with “the broad truth of the thing . . . the words [people] would have spoken” at times of mortal crisis “if only they could have given expression to *his* thoughts”—that is, the author’s thoughts—about the event depicted (emphasis added).<sup>16</sup>

This last remark, in which Norris champions the expression of “broad truth” over thick description, seems to counter the notion that Norris incorporated cinema into his theory of naturalism. In particular, his faith in the truth-value of an author’s purely vicarious experience of disaster smacks of anti-empiricism if not class condescension. But by the 1890s, photography had come to metonymize perceptual possibilities beyond the accretion of what Oliver Wendell Holmes had called the stereograph’s “frightful amount of detail.”<sup>17</sup> Michael North argues that photography was an attractive medium for the first modernist painters and poets not because of its iconicity, but because of how photographs “bridge the gap between language and visible phenomena by making a language of visible phenomena.”<sup>18</sup> North characterizes the drive to gather, process, and frame random traces of material, temporal reality—wallpaper and newspaper swatches, blobs of paint that call attention to when and how they were applied, advertising posters and the like—as both inherently modernist and inherently photographic. This drive recognizes all of “ordinary reality” as elements of a modern aesthetic that only awaits the artist to commit it to, or rather leave its record upon, a more traditional medium.<sup>19</sup> Norris’s literary criticism channels a parallel impulse in that it presses for an *epistemologically* realist fiction, one that depends less upon faithful descriptions of people, objects, or settings than upon transmitting a sensation of stumbling upon the real akin to that triggered by running across a snapshot. In “Fiction is Selection,” Norris backs an Aristotelian model of verisimilitude in which the author must use “facts” sparingly, because some facts might “seem like a rehash of some tawdry yellow-covered romance of fifty or a hundred years ago. Fiction is what *seems* real, not what *is* real.”<sup>20</sup> For readers to accept an event as real, Norris argues, it must be plausible,

unencumbered by any implication that it was shaped for some “literary” purpose—and readers must accept its truth-value as automatically as they accept the indexicality of a photograph. To twist Norris’s parallelism a bit, Norris does not want naturalism to *be* photographic, but to *seem* photographic.

In order to foster such impressions, Norris’s ideal novelist must never invent anything, but rather must collect, frame, and juxtapose frozen fragments of real events. Later in “Fiction is Selection,” he portrays this novelist as

a maker of mosaics in front of a vast pile of tiny many-colored blocks. He doesn’t make the blocks nor color them—the storywriter does not invent nor imagine the parts of his story. Writer and mosaicist alike select and combine. The maker of a mosaic has a design in his brain, or, better still, infinitely better, sees in the pile of little colored blocks in front of him a certain little group . . . that, by merest accident, has tumbled into a design of its own . . . much more original than any design he could work out.<sup>21</sup>

For all the stress he places on the “suppression of the author’s personality,” Norris insistently characterizes the author as a skilled mediator between “life” and readers who wish to confront that life in fiction. This figurative mosaicist’s skills resemble those of the photographer whose images result from what filmmaker Maya Deren later called the “controlled accidents” of photographic artistry, the selection and framing of what one finds in the visual field into a collage of things that communicates both the things found and the photographer’s intent in framing them.<sup>22</sup> For Norris, the difference between a novelist and a recording device is that the latter can never produce a record that explains itself: “[I]f in spite of all willful self-suppression the point of view of the writer—his ideals, his ideas, his personality, in a word—does not appear in his work indirectly—mind I say indirectly—he had best give over the attempt to produce readable fiction; as well have the cinematograph and the phonograph.”<sup>23</sup>

The cinema functions here as a figure for naturalism’s bad object lesson, the author as an idiot savant who merely reproduces sense data. The comparison with cinema illustrates how inclusive the naturalist’s eye must become while setting a limit on how objectively the naturalist should represent what that eye has seen. But the allusion to moving pictures also betrays Norris’s keen interest in mass culture in general, and the cinema in particular. As both author and San Francisco flaneur, Norris was fascinated by contemporary realities that most middle- and highbrow fiction shunned, including sensationalist mass culture like street fairs, vaudeville, and lurid pulp novels.<sup>24</sup> Whereas Howells dismissed “dime-novel” authors as hacks paid by the word to sensationalize violence and lionize characters who stumble into success rather than earning it, Norris reminded his readers that a growing fiction market some “70,000,000” strong had to have something to read, and claimed they were better off reading boy’s-adventure series like *Deadwood Dick* than shooting dice in the alley: “a bad book—that is to say, a poor, cheap, ill-written, ‘trashy’ book—is not after all so harmful as ‘no book’ at all.”<sup>25</sup> Norris’s condescending tone here belies the allure that “romantic” plots and characters held for him; one need look no further for this than McTeague himself, the “young giant” whose “mallet”-like fists (*M*, 6) finally pummel Trina to death for



652 the lottery jackpot she has socked away. Only the truly masterful novelist can unify such diverse and artless fragments of modernity—"low" culture amusement, picnic outings, atavistic violence, and all—into a unified aesthetic whole that yet manages to reflect that diversity: "Little by little he pieces together that crude and rough design, gets everything to fit, everything to harmonize . . . . A little polishing, very little, for in roughness there is strength and in sharp contrast, vividness; and there you are, a rounded whole, a definite, compact and complete thing . . ." <sup>26</sup>

As much as the mosaic allegory emphasizes the indispensability of the mosaicist, however, characterizing the author as framer and selector threatens to reduce the virtual presence of the author before the reader. As an ambitious professional writer with a market stake in gaining and retaining cultural authority, Norris could not afford to wipe all traces of his shaping presence from his work: "Because [the novel] is so all-powerful to-day, the people turn to him who wields this instrument with every degree of confidence."<sup>27</sup> But if naturalists achieved their strongest effects by disappearing, what, exactly, would keep their unique sensibilities before the public in their fiction? An implicit answer lies in Norris's more forgiving critical reflections on the cinema, in which the erstwhile bad object emerges as a model for the arrangement of discrete scenes. Of an early scene in Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893, republished 1896), in which Maggie's brother Jimmie rams his horse-drawn truck forward through Bowery traffic, Norris writes:

The picture he makes is not a single carefully composed painting, serious, finished, scrupulously studied, but rather scores and scores of tiny flashlight photographs, instantaneous, caught, as it were, on the run. Of a necessity, then, the movement of his tale must be rapid, brief, very hurried, hardly more than a glimpse . . . . At first one is tempted to believe that it is a "long exposure," but on second thought I conclude that it is merely a great number of snap-shots taken at the same subject.<sup>28</sup>

Norris, like Fredric in his *Red Badge* review, seems to have Muybridge's motion studies in mind; Crane's narrator leaps from image to image and scene to scene as if producing a series of discontinuous images of a continuous motion.<sup>29</sup> Unlike Fredric, however, Norris attributes the motion here to the "flashlight photographer" who is himself "on the run," rather than to the subject. This man on the run bristles with the energy of urban modernity as described by Georg Simmel in 1903 as "the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impression," and as Ben Singer writes, such "preoccupation with the sensory intensity of urban life can be found in every genre and class of social representation in this period . . ." <sup>30</sup> When Norris asks in 1897, "Where is the man that shall . . . go a-gunning for stories up and down our streets and into our houses and parlors and lodging houses and saloons and dives and along our wharves and into our theaters; yes, and into the secretest chambers of our homes as well as our hearts?" he seems to be describing both an ideal author-figure and a contemporary cameraman.<sup>31</sup>

This author-figure, like Norris's fantasy of Crane as photographer and like the roving camera operators for the Lumières, dips into and out of the streets taking snapshots

without discriminating between the polite and the brutal, the private and the public, and takes particular note of the bustle and push of the masses:

In the manner of Baudelaire's stroller, the [Lumière] cameraman chooses the crowd as his privileged territory. Micromovements, flux and reflux, attitudes and faces of anonymous passers-by, clothing and accessories of beautiful ladies, children's games: so many fleeting and transitory phenomena that provide material for his inspection, at the same time delineating the contours of his sphere of intervention.<sup>32</sup>

But the filmmaker had already surpassed the author in this search to catalog the elements of modern hyperstimulus by the time *McTeague* was published in 1899. During most of the scant decade of Norris's career as a novelist, moving picture shows linked city streets, onrushing trains, parades, violent slapstick gags, panoramic shots of rivers from the Seine to New York City's North River, historical executions, and hundreds of other subjects in the form of fifty-second films screened with little regard for continuity or theme.<sup>33</sup> The films of the Lumière Brothers, whose portable *cinématographe* allowed them to document outdoor events and street scenes that the Edison company's heavy and bulky apparatus often missed, were first screened in San Francisco at the Orpheum in August 1897.<sup>34</sup> If Norris based any of his Orpheum scene on the Lumière screenings, which is entirely possible, he would have seen the French beating the Americans to the naturalist punch yet again, this time in their cinematic denotation of "life as it is lived" right down to the reproduction of a horse champing at its bit in *New York, Broadway et Union Square* (1896) or one of many other street *actualités* the Lumières produced (Fig. 4).<sup>35</sup>

Norris develops his ideal of peripatetic authorship explicitly in terms of such cinematic capture. In 1897 he writes in praise of contemporary "short-story men" who "strike off an incident or two, clean-cut, sharp, decisive, and brief, suggesting everything that is to follow and everything that precedes." Achieving such effects "demands an originality and ingenuity on the part of the author that is nothing short of abnormal . . . [The story] must be told in sentences that are almost pictures in themselves. The whole tale must resemble, as one might say, the film of a kinoscope, a single action made up from a multitude of view points."<sup>36</sup> In "From Dawn to Dark—Fighting," an undated report on the Spanish-American War of 1898, Norris parallels this authorial peripateticism to the mosaicist's sensibility when he describes the fate of those non-dramatic events that pass before his imaginary camera: "The events of the next two or three days came back to the imagination without the connecting links that intervened . . . Only the essentials, the striking pictures, remain, as though one were looking at a Kinetoscope in which gaps—fortunately of no importance—had occurred in the films."<sup>37</sup> Here the novelist processes his memories of war through the discourse of moving pictures, which mimicked not the "real" continuity of time and space but rather the modern subject's *experience* of reality by screening heterogeneous films in distracting circumstances—think of *McTeague*'s Orpheum show, presenting unrelated acts to a crowd that never stops talking—that heightened their discontinuity. The process of viewing films under such conditions provides an analogy for the perception and recollection of only those events that make the profoundest impact on the audience.



Fig. 4. Frame enlargement from *New York, Broadway et Union Square* (Lumière, 1896). Author's collection.

Norris's kinetoscopic dream of naturalism exploits the possibilities of this analogy. But we must remember that these examples also represent a fantasized version of moving pictures that differs from the historical early cinema, most notably in terms of producers' control over the meanings of films for their audiences. As Seltzer points out, Norris's "The Mechanics of Fiction" (in its 1899 version) imbues the naturalist with an engineer's powers to systematize the processing of facts: "The great story of the whole novel is told thus as it were in a series of pictures, the author supplying information as to what had intervened."<sup>38</sup> When Norris imagines the new "short-story" men filming a "single action" from multiple perspectives, he envisions a film the likes of which had never been seen in 1897, one which would supply information not only about non-dramatic events, but also about how to see an event as the objective author ostensibly does: not from one point of view rooted to a single spot or a single set of interests, but from all sides. Had such an authorial force supplied such connections at the Orpheum, the moving picture display might have left Mac and his party cheering the superiority of American technology instead of chattering about the kinetoscope's sensational effects or wondering if it were all a "drick," as Mrs. Siette calls it—a trick played to fool the masses into thinking they watched real events rather than a simulation.<sup>39</sup> The masses are attracted to this new technology just as the novelist is, but the Orpheum chapter portrays them as in dire need of a "leader and master hand to guide" their encounters with it. The trick for the naturalist is to provide that guidance covertly, exchanging "friendly" storytelling for impersonal narration with a cinematographic sheen.

But Norris does not make that trick look easy. *McTeague's* Orpheum scene stages a clash between Norris's cinematic imagination and the historical cinema in that it showcases the cinema's terrific powers of mimesis in what Norris characterizes as a space completely evacuated of aesthetic judgment. The narrator misses no chance to expose the pretended sophistication of the vaudeville offerings, placing scare quotes around the performers' titles ("artists," "musicians," "The Society Contralto") and interposing such ironic asides as "'Home, Sweet Home' played upon a trombone. Think of that! Art could go no farther."<sup>40</sup> Norris further emphasizes the distance between "low" and "high" culture simply by describing the vaudeville acts—acrobats, slapstick sketches, vocal and instrumental acts, and a ventriloquist—in all their diversity. Norris's ideal of a kinoscopic naturalism requires selection and unity of effect. The vaudeville revue replaces that ideal with a dual fetish of pure effect on the one hand, and on the other a radical disunity on the order of the photograph's equalization of all details regardless of their significance—the same tendency that inspires Norris to refuse the analogy between naturalism and still photography.

The Orpheum's climactic unveiling of the kinoscope would seem to represent the nadir of vaudeville's anti-aesthetic of attractions and distractions. As Litton notes, in the face of the kinoscope views, McTeague "is incapable of forming any judgment. . . . He is a mere passive observer whose own language reflects the fact that he can only react to the phenomenon, not evaluate it: 'Look at that horse move his head. . . . Look at that cable-car coming—and the man going across the street. See, here comes a truck'."<sup>41</sup> But one can scarcely hold Mac's dimwittedness solely responsible for his stunned reactions. What Tom Gunning calls the early cinema's "aesthetic of astonishment," its stress of distraction and sensation over continuity and unity, drew laughs, gasps, squeals, and dumbfounded silence from viewers of all classes.<sup>42</sup> Noël Burch specifies the Lumières' version of this aesthetic as "polycentrism":

[N]either the street scenes nor the other general views . . . offer the reader's guide that would allow their complex content to be grasped and enumerated . . . . These films . . . derive in the end from the same procedure: to choose a framing as likely as possible to "catch" a moment of reality, then to film it without any attempt to control it or to centre the action.<sup>43</sup>

Norris presents the historical kinoscopic film as an "art" form that trumps photography's capacity to fill the eye with new details and new stimulations by putting still images into motion, but also a form that, like its viewers, has no capacity for hierarchizing perception.

When read as a volley in Norris's discursive battle to legitimate naturalism, then, the Orpheum scene functions to project *McTeague's* potential implication in the waning of taste on to the primal scene of cinema and mass culture. But confining the kinoscope to a single chapter does little to contain the more complex connotations of writerly craft and force that Norris attaches to it. *McTeague* evinces the return of the kinoscopic repressed in subplots that imagine a very different future for American naturalists than Norris the critic predicts, one in which quasi-cinematic objectivity overwhelms their

656 tenuous authority as “makers” of narrative mosaics. In this scenario, the storyteller who exchanges narratorial presence for impersonal and objective description runs the risk of losing any of the novelist’s authority to *interpret* what the descriptions represent. One subplot in particular focuses on an act of storytelling, and specifically on the dangers of “mechanical” description. Zerkow, a stereotypically miserly Jew, becomes obsessed with a story, told by Maria, a stereotypically flighty Spanish maid with a “diseased imagination,” about a long-lost set of gold dishes—a story the narrator, protesting incomplete knowledge, will not dismiss as mere fantasy: “Was Maria actually remembering some reality of a childhood of barbaric luxury? . . . It was not impossible. Of Maria Macapa’s past . . . absolutely nothing could be learned” (*M*, 30). Maria, as if in a trance, repeats the story verbatim whenever Zerkow requests it, leading him to become hysterical for the gold service—or rather, for the image of the service that her retellings produce. “There were more than a hundred pieces, and every one of them gold,” the description begins, and she repeats it no fewer than four times after the first telling. But Zerkow is not the only one impressed with Maria’s story. The narrator intervenes to suggest that the rich details of her description reflect the quality of her mental picture, which she avers she “can see . . . just as plain”: “Illiterate enough, unimaginative enough on all other subjects, her distorted wits called up this picture with marvelous distinctness. It was plain that she saw the plate clearly. Her description was accurate, was almost eloquent” (*M*, 30). Considering Norris’s preference for believability over mere facts, it isn’t surprising that the existence of the dishes matters less to the narrator than the verisimilitude of Maria’s description. “Accuracy” here arises purely as a byproduct of the visual and other sensory detail (the ringing sound it made when struck, its softness when bitten) that Maria supplies.

Even as Norris praises Maria’s capably naturalist descriptions, however, he uses her to illustrate the difference between his imaginary cinema and that pesky Other that savages the novelist’s art—the actual film technology of the mid-1890s.<sup>44</sup> By repeating the story nearly verbatim multiple times, Maria comes to resemble historical projection technology more than she does Norris’s kinoscopic prototype for the novelist of the future. During the first half-decade of cinema, moving pictures were usually “looped,” or shown between three and six times apiece in succession (*EC*, 117). In addition, the brevity of each film and the slow production of new films ensured that even the casual cinemagoer could see the same film on multiple nights in multiple theaters. Maria does not even tell a story so much as describes exactly what several looped films of the dishes could have shown if taken from several optical points of view, and repeats it for an audience as avid for its iteration as the first film audiences were for repeat viewings of such instantly popular films as *The May Irwin Kiss* (Edison, 1896), a brief closeup of a notorious Broadway stage kiss, or *Rough Sea at Dover* (Robert Paul, 1895), a simple long shot of waves crashing on a beach.<sup>45</sup> Like the camera operators for these first “hit” films, Maria is a mosaicist who only collects images without a thought of arranging them into an aesthetic whole. Despite her artlessness, however, her “crowd” of one sits rapt, clamoring for more, before the force her images carry when, like those early films, they appear in a wholly new and strange context (here the tenement neighborhood of Polk Street).

If Maria does not live up to Norris's dream of verbal descriptions that tell as well as show, Norris partly succeeds in fixing the blame on her gendered and racialized body, thereby reducing her "art" to instinct and banishing it to the same nether realm of mimicry for mimicry's sake in which he locks up the historical cinema.<sup>46</sup> Yet the implicit contrast of Maria's habit of description to Norris's narrative craft cannot protect Norris's idealized cinematographer-storyteller from the implications of Maria's fate. Barbara Hochman argues that Maria, like all of *McTeague's* Polk Street characters, "evoke[s] fear of desolation only to neutralize it." The two stories she repeats, about the dishes and her pet flying squirrel, "at once refer to loss and serve to stabilize its effects. Any feelings that Maria's losses might have stirred are presumably neutralized by the stabilizing mechanism" of the tales' reiteration.<sup>47</sup> As Hochman describes them, these repetitions perform for Maria the duties of Freud's stimulus shield, the psychic protection against future neurological shocks that the subject accrues by cultivating lesser, more manageable shocks. Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer famously suggested that the early cinema's jumps in space and time afforded the masses a similarly homeopathic salve for the threatening shocks of traffic, crowds, factory machinery, and technological change in general.<sup>48</sup>

If we apply it to *McTeague's* narrator rather than to Maria, however, Hochman's analysis suggests that Norris's obsessive focus on the dishes "story" both implies the superiority of Norris's own balancing act between showing and telling and also admits that Norris's quasi-kinetoscopic naturalism may already have fractured the boundary between high and low culture beyond repair. By praising the "accuracy" of Maria's word-images, *McTeague's* narrator recalls Norris's distrust of factual accuracy as an overrated value of literary realism opposed to the red-blooded truths of "real" culture in general and naturalism in particular.

But Norris treads a fine line between deriding mass culture and simply describing it, and if the reader cannot tell the difference between the two, it matters little what the author intended. The narrator's verdict of "accurate" reveals the Maria-Zerkow plot as less a proof of urban atavism and more an unconscious, nightmare vision of the American market for fiction in the new century. To compete in an economy where commodities must produce, predict, and mirror consumers' desires, the novelists of this fearsome future, represented here by Maria (playing the part of stand-in for the regionalist women novelists who, for Norris, represented the hack-wave of the future), would have to remove *every* trace of their presence from their books. For Zerkow, Maria is not an author but a medium that churns out on demand an image he cannot live without. "He saw someone who was near this gold," the narrator writes, and by proxy, "[h]e seemed near it; it was there, somewhere close by, under his eyes, under his fingers" (*M*, 36). Like the masses at the turn of the century, Zerkow takes pleasure in what Benjamin describes as "get[ting] hold of an object at very close range by way of an image, or rather its copy," and is willing to go to any lengths, even murder, to obtain that image.<sup>49</sup> As Walter Benn Michaels puts it, "The distinction between [Zerkow's] desire for the gold and his desire for the description gets lost."<sup>50</sup> In other words, Zerkow has not lost his ability to distinguish between the gold service and the

658 description. He has lost his ability to know which one he desires the most, the object or its representation. The word-pictures that Maria offers and retracts in this naturalist game of *fort-da* hold value for their consumer *as images*, not as guarantors of reality, let alone some unified, tacitly pedagogical, naturalist reconstruction of it. When Maria stops repeating her descriptions, the exasperated Zerkow kills her and begins to look for the “real” gold service, but his desire obsessively returns to representation and reproduction. When Zerkow himself dies of undisclosed causes, he leaves behind a hovel littered with rusty pots and pans, totems for the weightless word-image that became his heart’s desire.

This bitter satire of the relationship between an overly impersonal narrator and an overly authoritarian reader predicts disaster for Norris’s ideal novel. In dubbing himself both a mosaicist and a creator, Norris himself constructs the criteria by which to judge his first great commercial success a naturalist failure, for he cannot resist distancing his own narration style from Maria’s droning descriptions. As critics from Donald Pizer to Bell have noted, Norris alternates striking descriptions with grotesque asides about Man and Woman, Force and Evil, Nature and Fate: “Below the fine fabric of all that was good in him ran the foul stream of hereditary evil, like a sewer . . . . The evil of an entire race flowed in his veins. Why should it be?” (*M*, 22). At such moments, the novelist’s traditional *droit de seigneur* over readerly interpretation asserts itself with a vengeance. These asides also assert a second, similarly uneasy function of *McTeague*’s calling a projector by an arcade machine’s name: they express the importance to Norris of intimate address for distinguishing the novel from mass(-addressed) culture. Whatever kind of kinoscopic-literary hybrid Norris wants the naturalist novel to be, it must nevertheless retain the whispering distance from the individual that belongs to the novelist who offers the fiction, though only the fiction, of holding open a curtain of language for the individual reader alone.

As I’ve suggested, however, *McTeague* closes this curtain in spite of itself, in part thanks to Norris’s own flirtation with mechanical literary reproduction. The gold plate story is only the primary *represented* example of a repeated description. *McTeague*’s omniscient narrator repeats itself more obsessively than either Zerkow or Maria when describing the scent of Mac’s “dental parlors” (“a mingled odor of bedding, creosote, and ether,” three iterations), Marcus’s parroted political epithets (three iterations), Mac and Trina’s wedding photograph (three iterations), and the descriptions of Trina’s “tiara of swarthy hair,” her “adorable little chin,” and her “lips and the lobes of her tiny ears, pale . . . [and] suggestive of anemia” (four full iterations). Overstated, exhibitionist, and blunt, these repetitions snare the reader’s movement through the causal chain of events by inviting recognition that one has seen exactly this stylized word-image before. In fact, both Norris and his editors recognized the repetitions as a distraction. Norris excised some of them himself before publication, and one page of his handwritten manuscript of *McTeague* bears the annotation “repetition 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> time” in a hand not Norris’s own, in reference to the phrase “the intuitive feminine fear of the male.”<sup>51</sup> Concerned to get “down into . . . life” without mitigating grotesque realities of sex and crime or turning away from quotidian experience of theaters, fairs, and city

streets, Norris obligates *McTeague* to incorporate cinematographic experience—not a metaphorical replication of cinematographic production alone, but the experience of watching films, including its compulsion to repeat—into naturalist craft.<sup>52</sup>

Once committed to this, however, Norris leaves himself little imaginative space for narrational authority. *McTeague*'s techno-writerly narrator effectively becomes like Maria Macapa: a substitute not for the cinematic *camera* but for the *projectionist* of early cinema who, like Edwin S. Porter before he became the Edison company's top filmmaker, arranged unrelated films into thematically-unified programs (*EC*, 259). Like the projectionist attacked by a naïve spectator in Porter's *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (Edison, 1902), the distant, masterly hand envisioned by Norris transforms in *McTeague* into a technician who stages preexisting pictures for an audience separated from him not by a great divide of time, space, or privilege, but by a screen as flimsy as a bed sheet.<sup>53</sup> By foregrounding the “naturalist machine”—or better, the mechanism of naturalism—the naturalist who operates the “kinetoscope” that is *McTeague* simultaneously proclaims his presence and endangers his singularity as an agent.

If we revisit the Orpheum scene from the standpoint of *McTeague*'s kinetoscopic imaginary, the bad object the novel tries to contain seems to be not the medium of film, but rather the mass audience and the transformation of cultural reception that screened cinema represents. The spectacles on stage interest the narrator far less than the spectacles of spectatorship, from the general bustle and heat of the crowd to the incidental remarks made by the party (“at every moment they made comments to one another, their eyes never leaving the stage,” [*M*, 76]) to little Owgooste's pants-wetting episode, that foreshadow Zerkow's final, murderous feat of active reception. Indeed, Owgooste's accident is no more scatological than its neighbors as far as the narrator is concerned. The narrator levels mock-heroic commentary at this “catastrophe” (“his fortitude collapsed. What a misery!”) just as forcefully as he fires it at the spectators in general (“Think of that! Art could go no farther”). The rhetorical parallel links the disaster of wetting one's pants in public to the primal scene of mistaking private activities for public ones, and constructs lowbrow, collective cultural responses as helpless acts of incontinence; these spectators can keep neither their private thoughts nor their bodies to themselves. This mockery punishes them for their imagined naïveté and impropriety while it congratulates the reader for having more shame, and indeed for having the good taste to stay at home and discover the prurient pleasures of vaudeville via naturalist fiction instead.

Norris the artist may have rejected and even scatalogized mass entertainments (even while Norris the slummer enjoyed them thoroughly), but his horror at the public exposure given the conventionally private body negatively expresses the political charge of vaudeville and cinema exhibition. Early cinema appealed directly to workers and immigrants, and offered cheap entertainment in spaces like the Orpheum, which allowed and even invited polyglot social exchange rather than the respectful silence of legitimate theater spectatorship. Cinema granted viewers not merely the illusion of reality, but also a distracted and distanced position from which to consider the machines and mechanisms behind realist representation. This position also granted



660 spectators choices that the traditional arts preferred to obscure: what to look at, how to interpret, and what to ignore. The Lumières' *actualités*, for example, framed their busy subjects from sufficiently long distances that each viewer could come away from the same film with unique impressions. Though I have found no direct evidence that Norris saw *New York, Broadway et Union Square*, it is characteristic in that the camera remains still while points of potential interest enter and leave the screen from every part of the frame and throughout the depth of field.<sup>54</sup> The Lumières' horse, which stops near center-frame by chance and gets obscured continually by other moving bodies much closer to the camera, would probably have attracted Mac's attention only if he happened to be looking at the spot where it stops, or perhaps because he liked horses, not because the filmmaker intended the horse to star in the film.

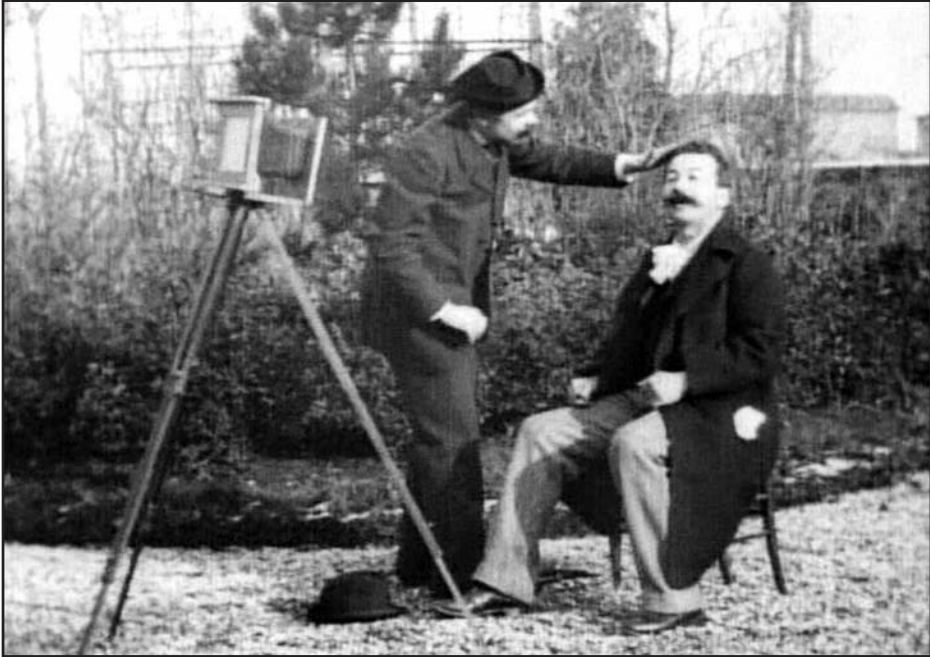
Owgooste's disaster indicates, among other things, that a spectatorial position imbued with such interpretive authority over the text rejects the disembodied absorption of readerly consumption, and demands that the spectator-reader be acknowledged as both fully embodied and intensely public—attentive, reactive, expressive—whether others appreciate one spectator's commentary or not. Tom Gunning has remarked about Mrs. Sieppe's reaction to the kinoscope as a *trick* that she seems less naïve than experienced in technological display culture; after all, she does not believe she sees real people or real horses flickering before her eyes.<sup>55</sup> She identifies these images not as unmediated reality, but as a staged and manipulated representation, a transformation of the real that is recognizable as such precisely because it is so impossibly accurate. If Gunning is right about this, then in representing an audience's response to projected films, Norris portrays a reality that *McTeague* does not recognize: that the crowd gathered before this low-culture machine is neither so gullible nor so homogeneous as its critics imagined.

This primal scene of aesthetic (mass-)consumption suggests that the crowning anxiety of the naturalist author is that the crowd knows at every moment that a machine lies behind the curtain, and that this awareness prompts the crowd to speculate about what culture could produce for them beyond its traditional offerings. The crowd, following the lead of the stubborn Mrs. Sieppe, might for example use cultural texts as excuses for interacting with each other, and for challenging the value of what they have seen. The only happy ending Norris grants to any plotline in *McTeague* hinges on a *reductio ad absurdum* of such cultural appropriation. In another subplot, two comical shy types that Norris borrows from local color fiction, Old Grannis and Miss Baker, realize that their tenement rooms have identical wallpaper and were probably once sections of the same room. Even before this revelation, Maria makes them aware of how they mirror each other within their private spaces despite their scarcely having met (see *M*, 25). This subplot is instructive for its echo of what *McTeague*'s kinoscope show wants to say, apart from Norris's intentions for it, about culture after mechanical reproduction: that the materialism of industrial culture, film included, radically undermines the traditional role of aesthetic *content* in forging shared experience among the recipients of culture. In a U.S. in which wallpaper imprinted with "hundreds and hundreds of tiny Japanese mandarins . . . helping hundreds of almond-eyed ladies into hundreds of

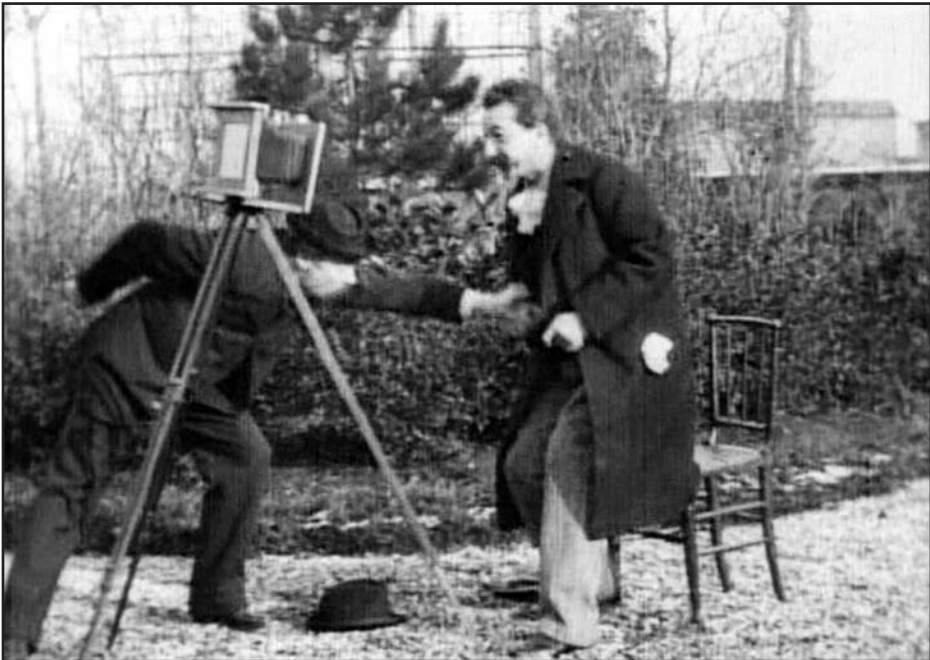
impossible junks" (*M*, 91) and engravings of the court of Lorenzo de' Medici acquire value by containing "a great many figures . . . for the money" (*M*, 6), Old Grannis and Miss Baker's mutual realization that they have some experience in common—even the banal experience of mass-produced décor—is catalyst enough to turn their clandestine longing into an intimate bond. Not even the narrator's merciless parody of sentimental style can vitiate the readerly power that brings about their union, a power he recognizes when he remarks that "[t]hey stood at length in a little Elysium of *their own creating*" (*M*, 181, emphasis added).

Norris may have meant the Grannis-Baker plot to satirize the sentimentality of popular local-color fiction, but the satire turns on Norris, mocking him with a vision of intimacy that novelists, it seems, can never again forge with their readers.<sup>56</sup> The final coup that clinches the elderly lovers' relationship comes when Old Grannis sells the patent on his machine for binding volumes of *The Nation* that he never reads—ironically, the same *Nation* published by E. L. Godkin, who coined the term "chromo-civilization" to chastise those who valued quantities of mass-produced decorations over their quality—and suddenly has no excuse to "keep company" with Miss Baker through the wall at ritualized times; she must propose to do so in person, by taking him some tea.<sup>57</sup> The power of mass production and consumption to foster meanings in new ways resonates in the narrator's representation of even this entirely traditional social overture: "'I was making some tea, and I thought you would like to have a cup of tea.' Her agitation betrayed itself in the repetition of the word" (*M*, 179). Cultural *material*—complex plots, challenging paintings, aesthetic content of any kind with meanings authorized by a producer—plays no part in their union, while the realization about the wallpaper only buttresses *McTeague's* uneasy certainty that mass production, however artlessly repetitive, inevitably generates publics as well as well as saleable images and texts.

In *McTeague*, Norris tests the fantastical novel-kinetoscope that he hoped would express the realities not merely of "life" as an abstract or universal constant, but of modern life. Just as important to Norris, unnerved as his narrator-proxy in *McTeague* is by the massification of both cultural production and textual interpretation, this twentieth-century novel would replicate these realities in the intimate setting of novel-reading, like the original kinetoscope that offered its wares to only one viewer at a time. Yet faced with the task of representing the *actual* cinema—that is, the medium of film and its underdeveloped institutional format as reflected by Norris's Orpheum scene—Norris makes judgments of both technology and spectators that echo back noisily upon the novel both as a form and as an institution with long-standing conventions of inscription and consumption, conventions that seemed increasingly tenuous by 1899. These echoes reverberate in *McTeague* with the force of a modern reality that Norris reconstructs without fully recognizing it: the reality of mass reception and its structural politicization of urban entertainment. Like the 1896 Lumière film *Photographe*, about a portrait photographer and his subject, *McTeague* implies that an elder medium such as still photography—or the novel—must expand its capabilities to match the realities that the new medium had made oddly fascinating through its acts of mediation. The unpredictable movements of the rowdy subject who finally knocks



▲  
Fig. 5.



▲  
Fig. 6.



Fig. 7.



Fig. 8. Sequential frame enlargements from *Photographe* [Photographer] (Lumière, 1896). Author's collection.

664 over the tripod in *Photographe* are matched by the unpredictable collective behavior portrayed by *McTeague's* vaudeville scene (Figs. 5–8). But Norris, projecting his snide joke on to the Orpheum crowd from the safe distance of an unseen and omniscient narrator-function, does not quite see the figure that we might now see in the frustrations of *Photographe's* eponymous artist-technician: a cultural authority fighting a losing battle to frame a “proper” image of and for an individual who refuses to conform to the pose that the medium and its master demand.

## Notes

This essay is for Miriam Hansen.

Thanks to the librarians at the Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley, for their assistance with the Frank Norris Collection, to the Georgia Tech Foundation for funding my visit to Berkeley, and to Katherine Fusco for her research assistance. Luke McKernan and Stephen Herbert of Projection Box and the website Who's Who of Victorian Cinema ([victorian-cinema.org](http://victorian-cinema.org)) provided valuable advice about image sources. Many thanks also to Catherine Jurca for her thorough reading of an earlier draft, to Susan Felleman at Southern Illinois University for inviting me to present a version of this argument and offering important advice, and to Mona Frederick and the 2006–07 Robert Penn Warren “Beyond Word and Image” fellows group at Vanderbilt University: Cara Finnegan, Teresa Goddu, Gregg Horowitz, Robin Jensen, Kevin Leander, Ellen Levy, Richard McGregor, Catherine Molineux, and especially Carolyn Dever, whose acute eye and unstinting support helped see this essay through.

1. Frank Norris, *The Responsibilities of the Novelist and Other Literary Essays* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1903), 5 and 6. The version published in this posthumous collection is somewhat different from the version in *Critic* 41 (December 1902), 537–40. For the latter, see Donald Pizer, ed., *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), 94–98. Henceforth abbreviated *LCFN*.

2. Norris, “The Need of a Literary Conscience,” in *The Responsibilities of the Novelist*, 52 and 53.

3. Frank Norris, *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco*, ed. Donald Pizer, (New York and London: Norton, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1997), 58. Henceforth abbreviated *M*.

4. Mark Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 44.

5. Alfred G. Litton, “The Kinetoscope in *McTeague*: ‘The Crowning Scientific Achievement of the Nineteenth Century,’” in *Studies in American Fiction* 19:1 (1991), 110. On the introduction of the Vitascope projector in early 1896, see Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990) 110–11. Henceforth abbreviated *EC*.

6. The Edison Manufacturing Company inaugurated its “Projecting Kinetoscope” in early 1897 after breaking ties with Raff & Gammon, the company that provided the Vitascope (*EC*, 166). See also the contemporary fliers and other publicity materials collected in the DVD collection *Edison: The Invention of the Movies* (Kino on Video/Museum of Modern Art/Library of Congress, 2005), disc 1.

7. According to Charles Musser, the Vitascope had its San Francisco première on 8 June, 1896. Charles Musser, “Introducing Cinema to the American Public: The Vitascope in the United States, 1896–7,” in *Movieworld in America: A Sourcebook in the History of Film Exhibition*, ed. Gregory A. Waller (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) 17–18. On the opening of cinematic markets via “big-time” (middle-class) vaudeville and the newer “cheap” or “family” vaudeville theaters beginning with the first films shown in the US in 1896, see Robert Allen, *Vaudeville and Film, 1895–1915: A Study of Media Interaction* (New York: Arno, 1980) and Richard Abel, *The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900–1910* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 1–6. The high number of acts described in chapter 6 of *McTeague* suggests that Mac and his party are watching a big-time show (“cheap” theaters featured five- to six-act revues), which would fit the

profile of both the Orpheum in San Francisco and the entire Orpheum chain, as well as implying that McTeague and his friends are using public entertainment to obtain some middle-class cachet; note Trina's brand-new gloves (which are cheap enough to split after some hard applauding) and her brother "Owgooste's" too-tight "Fauntleroy 'costume'" (*M*, 57 and 60).

8. Michael Davitt Bell, *The Problem of American Realism: Studies in the Cultural History of a Literary Idea* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 133.

9. Pizer, "The Mechanics of Fiction: Introduction," in *LCFN*, 46.

10. "Frank Norris's Weekly Letter," in *Chicago American* 13 July 1901; *LCFN*, 55.

11. Bill Brown, *The Material Unconscious: American Amusement, Stephen Crane, and the Economics of Play* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1996), 133 and 142.

12. On the waning of authorial personality and "friendly reading" in the American novel due to the influence of Henry James, Crane, Norris, and others, see Barbara Hochman, *Getting at the Author: Reimagining Books and Reading in the Age of American Realism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), chapters 1 and 2.

13. Daniel H. Borus, *Writing Realism: Howells, James, and Norris in the Mass Market* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1989) 15 and 77–78. See also Hochman, *Getting at the Author*, 21–28.

14. Frank Norris, "Zola as a Romantic Writer" (1896), *LCFN*, 71 and 72.

15. Georg Lukács's 1936 essay "Narrate or Describe?" turns on this same distinction, condemning naturalism for effectively replacing realism's narrative analysis of historical conflict with a morass of incidental descriptions. Norris's self-conscious remarks about description and its effects on narration offer a remarkable, if uneven, rebuttal to Lukács's complaint. See Lukács, "Narrate or Describe?" in *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, ed. and transl. Arthur D. Kahn (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1971), 110–148.

16. Frank Norris, "Frank Norris's Weekly Letter" (3 August 1901), in *LCFN*, 73 and 74.

17. Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph" (1859), in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, CT: Leete's Island Press, 1980), 77.

18. Michael North, *Camera Works: Photography and the Twentieth-Century Word* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 8.

19. North, *Camera Works*, 18.

20. Frank Norris, "Fiction is Selection" (1897), in *LCFN*, 50.

21. Norris, "Fiction is Selection," in *LCFN*, 51.

22. "The cinematographer . . . must . . . refrain from overcontrolling the aspect [of an event] if he is to retain the authority of reality." Maya Deren, "Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality" (1960), in *Film Theory and Criticism*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., 2004), 192.

23. Norris, "Weekly Letter," in *LCFN*, 55.

24. As a fellow traveler of Les Jeunes, a San Francisco poet's collective, Norris attended vaudeville shows for pleasure as well as research, and "value[d] out-of-the-way cafés where aesthetes and proletarians alike could enjoy themselves free of contamination from the Philistines." Don Graham, *The Fiction of Frank Norris: The Aesthetic Context* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1978), 47.

25. "Salt and Sincerity: I" (1902), in *LCFN*, 200. For Howells, such portrayals threatened to undo the distinction between fiction and reality. See Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 197. For Norris's weigh-in on the "great increase in novel reading" in America around 1900, see "The American Public and 'Popular' Fiction" (posthumously published 1902), in *LCFN*, 126–28: "If the Megatherium has been obliged to swallow wind for sustenance for several hundred years, it would be unkind to abuse him because he eats the first lot of spoiled hay or over-ripe twigs that is thrust under the snout of him. Patience and shuffle the cards. Once his belly [is] filled . . . the pachyderm will turn to the new-mown grass and fruit trees in preference to the hay and twigs" (127).

26. Frank Norris, "Fiction is Selection," in *LCFN*, 51.

27. Norris, "The Responsibilities of the Novelist," in *LCFN*, 95.

28. Frank Norris, "Stephen Crane's Stories of Life in the Slums: *Maggie* and *George's Mother*" (1896), in *LCFN*, 164.

29. Norris's choice of a horse for a film subject in *McTeague* pays homage simultaneously to Muybridge's most celebrated revelation, that a horse's legs all leave the ground at intervals when it runs, and the scene from *Maggie* of Jimmie piloting his horse—both representations not simply of a moment as depicted by a still photograph, but of movement in time through space.

30. For this gloss on Simmel's "The Metropolis and Urban Life" through contemporary cartoons, journalistic accounts, and sociological reports, see Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) 61 and 65.

31. Frank Norris, "An Opening for Novelists: Great Opportunities for Fiction Writers in San Francisco" (1897), in *LCFN*, 29–30.

32. Livio Belloi and Mary Carla Criner, "Lumière and his view: the cameraman's eye in early cinema," in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* 15:4 (1995), 462.

33. The critical literature on early cinema's emphasis on "attractions," distraction, and "shocks" over narrative or thematic continuity, and its reflection of the enervation of urban experience between 1894 and 1909, is extensive, so I will only touch on a few of the texts most relevant to this essay: Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde" (1986), as well as the rest of the key volume that reprints this essay, *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser with Adam Barker (London: British Film Institute, 1990); Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema*; Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, transl. and ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity*; and Belloi and Criner, "Lumière and his view," 461–65.

34. Charles Musser, "Nationalism and the beginnings of cinema: the Lumière cinématographe in the US, 1896–1897," in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* 19:2 (June 1999), 158. Musser tracks the nationalist discourse of American cinematic superiority and the French threat to its primacy, represented by the *cinématographe's* late but impressive arrival in the U.S., that ribboned through entertainment journalism in 1896–97: "The assertion of Lumière priority [as the true inventor of cinema] . . . was inevitably seen as a direct challenge to Edison and his apparently proper role as father of the latest fad. The *cinématographe's* fresh subjects and technological superiority could suggest a logical progression rather than priority" (161).

35. Norris had begun *McTeague* in 1894 in Lewis Gates's English 22 course at Harvard, but did not complete it until as late as December 1897. See Joseph R. McElrath Jr. and Jesse S. Crisler, *Frank Norris: A Life* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), chapters 13 and 14.

36. Norris, book review, "Millard's Tales: Pungent Episodes of Western Life, Short and Pointed" (1897), in *LCFN*, 168. My attention was called to this review by Ron Mottram's essay "Impulse Toward the Visible: Frank Norris and Photographic Representation," in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 25 (1983), 589. Norris had already, in 1895, titled a series of pre-*McTeague* sketches of Polk Street life "Instantaneous Photographs." Norris, April 30 1895 theme from Lewis E. Gates's English 22 writing course at Harvard University; Frank Norris Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley, vol. 5.

37. "From Dawn to Dark: Fighting," copy of fragment of undated story (original in University of Southern California Library), Frank Norris Collection, vol. 5.

38. Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines*, 44. The wording of this passage of "The Mechanics of Fiction" that Seltzer cites, from an 1899 Collier edition of *Blix* and *The Moran of the Lady Letty*, was revised for a 1901 article in the *Boston Evening Transcript* to make "pictures" refer to *chapters*: "Each chapter thus treated is a little work in itself, and the great story of the whole novel is told thus as it were in a series of pictures, the author supplying information as to what has intervened between the end of one chapter and the beginning of the next by suggestion or by actual résumé. As often as not the reader himself can fill up the gap by context." See *LCFN*, 61.

39. On this moment in *McTeague*, see Tom Gunning, "Primitive Cinema: A Frame-Up? Or The Trick's On Us," in Elsaesser ed., *Early Cinema*, 95–102.

40. *M*, 59–61. Davitt Bell distinguishes this scene from Norris's globalizing ruminations on McTeague's atavistic traits in that here, as during the initial descriptions of Polk Street and the wedding of Mac and Trina, "narrator and reader stand aloof" as the narrator reveals "in the quietly reported details of this world what its inhabitants could never see themselves" (127)—that is, the chasm of taste that separates Mac's people from the upper-middle class to which *McTeague's* presumed reader belongs.

41. Litton, "The Kinetoscope in *McTeague*," 110.

42. See Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)credulous Spectator," in *Film Theory and Criticism* (1989), 865–68.

43. Noël Burch, *Life to Those Shadows*, transl. and ed. Ben Brewster (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 17 and 19. Belloi and Criner modulate Burch's claim by suggesting that "non-centering only represents for Lumière [one] spatial paradigm among others," and arguing that certain features of the subject to be filmed, such as a gangplank in *Debarquement d'une mouche*, allowed operators to make "a simple attempt at a centering of the representation." Belloi and Criner, "Lumière and his view," 469.

44. Maria's repetitions mimic other technologies of mass production that caused consternation among the cultural elite: the presses that cranked out chromolithographs, wallpaper patterns, and other cheap cultural commodities. Don Graham provides a useful discussion of how Norris's description of the "Grandpa and Grandma" chromos (*M*, 91; Graham calls these "fine example[s] of department store art"), wallpaper, and interior decoration of Mac and Trina's flat "suggests the bad taste that characterizes everything about the place" and "express[es] perfectly the infantile, sentimental cast of Trina's mind" (Graham, *The Fiction of Frank Norris*, 57); Maria's descriptions also seem to perform an affirmative function, similar to that performed by the chromos, of recognizing and (temporarily) appeasing her desire for material wealth. Early in the novel, Norris spends entire paragraphs poking fun at newlyweds Trina and Mac's collection of such "facts," the cheaply manufactured kitsch they cram "prolific[ally]" on to their walls: "Most of them were framed colored prints from Christmas editions of the London 'Graphic' and 'Illustrated News,' the subject of each picture inevitably involving very alert fox terriers and very pretty moon-faced little girls" (*M*, 91). It seems, then, that the moving-picture show at the Orpheum provides only one example among many in *McTeague* of the "chromo-civilization" predicted by *The Nation's* E. L. Godkin in 1874, a debauched universe of American "culture" replete with reproductions of paintings and a "large body of slenderly equipped" (i.e. under-educated) cultural pretenders like the McTeagues to buy them. "To be real," Godkin cautions his readers, "culture ought to affect a man's whole character, and not merely store his memory with facts." E. L. Godkin, "Chromo-Civilization," *The Nation* 482 (24 September, 1874), 202. See Trachtenberg's discussion of this essay in *The Incorporation of America*, 157.

45. On the first American screening of moving pictures at Koster & Bial's theater in New York City on April 23, 1896, and the popularity of these looped films, see *EC*, 115–19.

46. Maria's monotonous storytelling style allows Norris to distance himself both from slavish fidelity to detail and from what he considered the market-ready sentimentality of regionalist women writers. Norris's 1901 essay "Why Women Should Write the Best Novels—and Why They Don't" characterizes women as blessed with "impressionable, emotional and communicative" natures. In an 1897 article Norris reports that according to police detectives, a little girl is better at "identification and observation" than a photograph: "She is more sensitive to impression than an older person—a veritable sensitized plate, as one might say." Yet the development of women as fiction writers is limited by social constraints (she cannot move freely enough through the world to "live life" fully) and biological difference ("A man may grind on steadily for an almost indefinite period, when a woman at the same task would begin . . . to chafe, to fret . . . to polish too highly . . . Then come fatigue, harassing doubts, more nerves . . . and a final abandonment of the enterprise"). Like the little girl with a keen eye for details but innocent of the skills to structure them, Maria mass-produces images so highly "polished" that they trap her in a vivid past, or worse, a hysterical fantasy. See Frank Norris, "Why Women Should Write the Best Novels: And Why They Don't" (1901), in *LCFN*, 35, 35, and 36.

47. Barbara Hochman, *The Art of Frank Norris, Storyteller* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1988), 64. Maria's description "habit" places her in a role that Jennifer Fleissner identifies as common among women characters in American naturalism, that of the woman who desires to pro-



668 duce something other than children or domestic space but, finding no outlet for that desire, turns obsessive-compulsive. Fleissner characterizes Trina's hoarding as related to narrative as well: "Like the gold piece, the virginal body can also be said to possess a 'purity' that allows it to stand for . . . the moment when the woman's defiled body is 'refilled' in order to produce the desired offspring. Yet . . . this movement from purity to fulfillment is thus a movement away from the valued object itself to the narrative it more properly represents . . . She remains stuck at the initial moment of seeking value in the object itself—the gold, her body—rather than moving forward into the story that object is meant to imply." Jennifer L. Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 215. As I will discuss, Zerkow becomes a destructive audience for the gold plate "view" due to a similar fixation on the representation rather than its purported object.

48. See Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (1939), *Illuminations*, transl. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968) 174–76; Siegfried Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament" and "Cult of Distraction," in *The Mass Ornament*, transl. and ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 75–86 and 323–28.

49. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, 223; Miriam Hansen suggested the modification of Zohn's translation.

50. Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 158.

51. See leaf 263, handwritten manuscript of *McTeague*, tipped into Argonaut Manuscript Edition of *McTeague* and recollected by the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley (this leaf donated by C. W. Barrett), Frank Norris Collection, vol. 2.

52. Norris, "Stephen Crane's Stories," in *LCFN*, 166.

53. Other scholars have used *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* to characterize the social zeal of early film's audiences. See Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, 91 and Judith Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women's Cinema* (Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990), 31–32.

54. It also displays everything Mac reports seeing during the kinoscope projection: cable cars, trucks, passers-by, and a horse that stops near center frame and tosses its head. I have no direct evidence that Norris saw this film, but I'm intrigued enough by its similarities to Mac's description to speculate that this is, in fact, the film Norris imagined Mac seeing.

55. Gunning, "Primitive Cinema," in Elsaesser ed., *Early Cinema*, 95 and 102.

56. See Donna M. Campbell, "Frank Norris' 'Drama in a Broken Teacup': The Old Grannis-Miss Baker Plot in *McTeague*," in *American Literary Realism* 21 (1993), 40–49; reprinted in *M*, 396.

57. See note 44.