PROGRAMING VICTORIAN CINEMA

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Good afternoon, everyone. The title of my talk is 'Programming Victorian Cinema', and its subject is firstly the WORLD IN 1900 programme which you saw earlier today, and how it came into being; and through that to ask questions of why this particular programme, why this particular period, why this particular route around the world.

We said something before the film show started of how it came together, and what rationale we employed in its construction. It was 1998, and I was then working at the National Film and Television Archive, where I had a particular interest in so-called Victorian cinema – that is, films produced before the death of Queen Victoria, in January 1901. The centenary of cinema in 1996 had seen a natural growth of interest in these early films, of which the NFTVA had a collection of several hundred titles. At that time, I put together a series of programmes at the NFT on Victorian cinema, showing some 700 titles over eight shows, arranged thematically, and without any musical accompaniment – just someone talking over each title, giving its history, pointing out things, giving some meaning to what people were seeing.

It's important to realise the extent to which the films of this earliest period in cinema history were seen at that time in terms of film form. Inspired very much by the work that came out of the 1978 Brighton conference, they were seen as demonstrating particular types of film language, basic examples of film grammar that were evolving to establish cinematic form. As such, they were generally classified into 'schools', or the products of particular filmmakers or companies. If they were programmed at all, it was either the first steps in a type of film – so that THE BIG SWALLOW might be shown as a precursor of the avant garde film – or were bunched together, so that an audience might see all that the Warwick Trading Company had produced, or all that G.A. Smith had filmed.

There was nothing wrong with this stylistic, or auteurist approach, except that it could not be the whole story. The Victorian Cinema shows in 1996 followed such conventions to a certain extent,

but they also showed the films as thematic records of Victorian life – films showing warfare, films of sport and recreation, films of science and experiment. Again, this was not a new concept as such, but we tried to go further in presenting these films by adding greater contextual detail in the commentary – pinpointing films to a time and a place, indicating why they were filmed, giving them a greater specificity. Bringing them back to life, hopefully.

One of the themes covered in the Victorian Cinema shows was Queen Victoria, not terribly well as it happens. A year later, in June 1997, we followed up some of the ideas generated by the earlier shows to create a film programme based around Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, which had occurred a century before. The films of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee procession through London on 22 June 1897, one of which you saw this morning, are notably frustrating. Here are precious moving picture records of a great ceremonial occasion, perhaps the apex of the Victorian age, and what we have are silent, monochrome, indistinct figures parading past, seen through technology ill-equipped to depict spectacle on a broad scale, and filled with people we no longer recognise. There were many such short films made of the procession, and some twenty-five survive, but they are all disappointing – when viewed individually, and in isolation.

What we did, therefore, was to recreate the experience of that day, and to position the films within that recreation. We traced a map of the route, then researched the documentation of the period to determine where the cameramen were positioned, or calculated these positions from the films themselves. In particular, we were guided by a chapter on the Jubilee procession in volume two of John Barnes' *The Beginnings of the Cinema in England* series, which had done much of the groundwork research. We also traced photographic evidence, and eye-witness testimony. Thus we took the audience on a tour around London on 22 June 1897, through photographs, accounts of those who were there at the time, and the moving picture records themselves, put into geographical and cultural-historical context. The films had their meaning returned to them. It was a particularly successful show, and a useful example of the value of creative programming for films of this period.

Around this time, Frank Gray spoke to me about creating a film programme, perhaps a tour of some kind, which would embrace the world of 1900. He had in mind comparable multimedia tours constructed by exhibitionists such as G.A. Smith, where magic lantern images from around the world could be brought to a Brighton auditorium, and the audience could become imaginary tourists of the world. Just how many films were there in the National Film and Television Archive for the year 1900, he asked me, and what sort of a picture of the world could we make out of them?

From this start, and over a number of conversations, we evolved the idea of THE WORLD IN 1900. We soon realised that, as good as the NFTVA's collection was of films from 1900, it was too limiting for our needs, and we would have to choose earlier films as well. We developed the conceit of a theatrical impresario, let's say in Brighton, reacting to the death of Queen Victoria in January 1901 by putting together a film programme of all the film that he could find made up to that point in time, which would illustrate that world she now left behind. This gave us films from 1894 to the end of 1900, and around 600 titles from which to select.

The selection process turned into an early film buff's parlour game. Say that you start in London, how would you journey to the coast? Why, by a film of a train journey. And now that you are at Southampton, well there are those films of British troops embarking for the Boer war. Then there's that Georges Melies film showing a crossing of the Channel, and you can arrive in France just in time for the Paris Exhibition of 1900, filmed by Cecil Hepworth. And so it went on, taking us around the world. We decided that our route had to be a rational as possible, and so although we had film of Russia in 1900, it would have taken our imaginary traveller too far out of their way to make such a diversion from the heart of Europe, and then back. We were limited, inevitably by the films in the NFTVA collection, so that we could not go to Japan because the Archive had no films of Japan of that date, although they do exist in other archives. Furthermore, we could not visit those countries where little or no film had been taken at such an early period, hence our token visits to Africa and India. More on this selectiveness by survival and by film history later.

We made it a rule that every film was to be shown complete. Films of the 1900 period seldom strayed over a minute in length in any case, but we were quite purist about this, stressing to audiences that each film they were seeing was exactly as it had been one hundred years ago. Some films are a little shorter than they were in 1900, because they have survived only in an incomplete state; others are part of larger series, such as the Georges Melies film of the Dreyfus case, where it seemed legitimate to extract what was always seen as an individual scene or tableaux. We also wanted very much to mix fiction and non-fiction, bringing together different sorts of realities. Thus from the Melies recreation of Dreyfus' wife visiting him in prison we cut to the real figure walking away from the prison building. And in China we cut from the troops marching through Beijing at the time of the Boxer rebellion, to the thrilling recreation of a Boxer attack, produced by James Williamson from the comforts of Hove.

We went through three or four versions of the compilation before we found a combination that worked for us. Motion became essential. The first version of the programme was far too static – a series of disconnected scenic views, with no true sense of a journey undertaken. We therefore added as many scenes with a sense of motion as possible, carrying our traveller by train or ship

wherever possible. Probably no other kind of film so thrilled early film audiences as the 'phantom ride', films taken from the front of a moving train, the screen turned into a journey through time and space, the audience sensing as much the scenery coming towards them and engulfing them as any sense of forward motion. It was a virtual reality experience, as we would now have it.

This insistence upon motion, and particularly the connecting theme of train rides, was the making of THE WORLD IN 1900. The next stage came in the presentation. We wanted to reproduce the lecture format of the period, our words offering guidance to the significance of the images. We decided upon the two of us, standing either side of the screen. We also decided quite swiftly not to dress up as mock-Victorians. This was a show ostensibly made in January 1901, but in reality constructed for the year 2000. We would mix theatrical recreation with aspects of social and cinematic history – pointing out W.K-L. Dickson in the crowd at Southampton, giving a potted history of the Dreyfus trial, explaining the presence of British Empire troops in China, praising Alexandre Promio's artistry with his virtuoso tracking shots of Irish scenery. We knew, from experience, to say something over such films, but not too much – the images had to tell their own story.

In presenting such films, one certainly learns a great deal about the art of the lecturer of one hundred years ago. There is the need to inform, but not to say too much. There must be breaks in the flow of words, chances for the audience to take in what they see. One soon learns the necessary pacing, telling the audience that something is about to happen just before it does, always giving them something to look out for. One develops both a relationship with the audience, sensing what jokes will go down well (hopefully), but there is also a relationship that develops between lecturer and the moving image. What is being shown integrates with your delivery, an intertwined narrative develops. It is an improvisory state, not unlike music that accompanies the show.

For, of course, there is the music. Every silent film programme had its musical accompaniment, factual films as well as fiction, and live piano accompaniment was always an essential part of our plans in creating the programme. This was not simply a case of putting together the films and then hauling in a pianist. Working with our partner musician, Neil Brand, became an essential means by which we developed the programme. The images suggested motion, but it is the music that imparts this. In rehearsal and then in performance, the music has grown with the show as themes have developed, while the main performance remains improvised. It is worth noting, to those that may not be familiar with silent film performance, that the piano music is generally improvised, and frequently by a pianist who has not seen the film before. This was the case today. Neil Brand could not be with us, but John Sweeney is a more than able deputy, yet he had

seen none of these films prior to today's performance. Moreover, for the pianist there is the added trial of trying to accompany a film without narrative, or more accurately without emotion. A fiction film will offer, scene by scene, a basic guideline to the appropriate music accompaniment, the emotional rise and fall, the development of events and dramatic denouement. Silent non-fiction films offer no such help, and a programme of very short films, with no connection to one another except geography, and with two speakers talking over the top of them, is quite a challenge for the musician.

THE WORLD IN 1900 had a rehearsal screening at the British Silent Cinema Weekend, held in Nottingham in April 2000, and then its formal premiere at the Brighton festival in May of that year. Since then it has featured at the London Film Festival, before an audience of several hundred at a silent film festival in Italy, and has played in Cambridge, Edinburgh, Dundee and now London again. Two months from now it will be playing in Hastings, and I hope there remains life in the show for some time to come.

It was not conceived of as an academic exercise, or something chiefly for film studies students or early cinema buffs. It is meant to be a popular show, that puts the films of this period into a readily-comprehensible context. It demonstrates, of course, the world-wide spread of moving pictures at this time, the range of films that were being made, the skill that went into films that too many dismiss as being 'primitive', and the depth of information that they contain.

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Thus far I have covered the development history of THE WORLD IN 1900, one example of the programming of Victorian cinema. Now I need to broaden the argument, and start to ask some questions? Why these films? Why this route around the world? What has been left out? What do the films, by themselves, actually convey? Surely the truths they contain, if any, lie deeper than plain factual information on who shot what, where and when? What is meant by programming Victorian cinema, and what do the films of the late Victorian period have to say to us today?

Film history is made, predominantly, by those films that survive. There is nothing unusual in this – art history is fundamentally a history of those works we can see, the history of music embraces that music which is available to us, which we still wish to hear. There are those who research the history of films that no longer exist, and for early films this can often be a necessity, but it remains the preserve of the specialist. For most of us, we need to relate historical understanding to the survival and availability of the medium itself. It is a commonplace for the history of silent film that 80% of what was produced in the first thirty years of film production no longer survives, thrown

away when silent films became commercially valueless with the arrival of sound. Proportionately, it may be that rather more films of the very earliest years survive, kept on account of their very first-ness. There are, as I said, some 600 films in the National Film and Television Archive that date before 1901. There are perhaps five or six times that number that survive worldwide. Many more films were made that do not exist for that period – when films were only one minute long, it was simple enough to produce hundreds of them.

So, the film record of the period 1894 to 1901 is an incomplete one, but what survives largely forms our picture of the Victorian moving picture film world. The films that survive determine what we view as innovative, formulaic, unconventional, drab or beautiful about the medium in its formative years, and they give us our only moving picture window on the Victorian world.

But it is worth noting that THE WORLD IN 1900 was compiled from the collection of one film archive only, and with greater resources we could have produced a far more thorough world tour. We saw films taken with the Lumiere Cinematographe taken in Britain, France, Switzerland, Palestine, Australia and Ireland. But by the end of 1900 Lumiere cameramen had visited Mexico, Japan, Cuba, Venezuela, Russia, Sweden, Egypt, and Vietnam, among many other lands. Many of these films still survive. Local production had begun in many countries, and our programme could have incorporated medical films from Rumania, cycling films from Uruguay, surgical operations from Argentina, comedies from Prague, and Kabuki theatre films from Japan. These pre-1901 films all survive. It should be clear that by Victorian film we do not mean fleeting images of Queen Victoria herself, or people passing by in top hats. Victorian cinema was vigorous, inventive, inquisitive, and embraced an enormous range of human activity – sport, science, medicine, exploration, politics, war, crime, propaganda, news, actuality, travelogue, dance and drama. These are tiny fragments of a world, of course, but each has its story to tell, and in combination they bring forth riches, and an encouragement to an understanding of that late Victorian world. The film record needs always to be a stimulus to finding out more.

It has been our wish that THE WORLD IN 1900 could find its fullest expression in the form of a DVD-ROM. Imagine being presented with a map of the world. You choose your starting point, which will be your ending point as well for a tour around the world. A number of routes are offered to you, though you can construct your own, so long as it agrees with railway lines and shipping routes that existed in 1900. At each country or place you can click on an image and view the film there, with accompanying background detail, and of course a commentary – a choice of commentary, Frank or myself. And you can select the music of course. Some countries you may visit will have no films, because film had not made it there by 1900, and this will be explained. Editing software could allow you to piece together the films and run your own version of THE

WORLD IN 1900, with commentary, music and background data to match. You become the programmer. You could even add your own commentary. There could be parallel moving images from one hundred years, a WORLD IN 2000. Somebody give me the budget, and I'll make it.

The serious idea behind this is that any film, as with any creative artefact or other aspect of our cultural life, does not exist in isolation. THE WORLD IN 1900 shows the world brought together by this new medium, this new technology, be it through the same film company such as Lumiere filming across the earth; or similar thematic concerns, such as trains arriving at stations worldwide. An incident in China may be recreated in Hove; the battlefields of South Africa reappear on the hills outside Blackburn. Personalities are commodified, so the dancer Loie Fuller becomes exportable to far more venues than ever she could have visited physically. Paul Kruger becomes an internationally recognisable figure, to be cheered at or booed according to national audience prejudice. The world passes before our eyes, and armchair tourism is born.

So, what is it to programme Victorian cinema? It is a privilege, first of all, for an enthusiast such as myself. It is a blessed nuisance for a good many other people. There are sixty-seven films in THE WORLD IN 1900, each with separate titles, separately preserved and located in the archive, each needing to be transported and then spliced into the compilation. Silent films run at a variety of speeds – there are films in this compilation which should run at 16 frames per second, while others ought to run at 24 or even 30 frames per second. We simplified the configuration for today's performance, but it is nevertheless a complex task for the projectionist.

The sixty-seven titles that go to make up the compilation are a logistical problem, but they demonstrate the considerable opportunities for live presentation that these films offer. Quite simply, with each film telling a story, you can tell many stories. Minute-long films can be combined into an endless variety of programming ideas. Silent films have no soundtrack – you can talk over the top of them. In talking to the films, you fall naturally in to the form of presentation that best suited such films, which is to have an accompanying lecturer. In live performance the films *become* alive, a lived-through experience.

Programming Victorian cinema is the same as any other film programming – simply the knack of combining information with entertainment. You hope that the picture that you draw puts individual films into context, each contributing to a greater whole. Its particular Victorian aspect comes from the nature of the films themselves. Films were never so silent or so short again. We see the birth of the modern age in these first fragmentary views on our forebears, a dividing line drawn between a past we can look back on in motion, and the past beyond it where all is still. We see a key progression from that crucial point where photography showed people a form of immortality

through technology. From 1894 onwards, motion pictures come to life, and the dead begin to walk again.

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There is a curious comment, made by Queen Victoria, after she had seen moving pictures for the first time, in November 1897. The film was of a royal family gathering at Balmoral, taken a month earlier. Tsar Nicholas and Tsarina Alexandra of Russia had been her guests, and the film was taken by the royal photographers Downey. Her diary records:

> After tea went to the Red drawing-room, where so-called "animated pictures" were shown off, including the groups taken in September at Balmoral. It is a very wonderful process, representing people, their movements and actions as if they were alive.

The curious aspect of this diary entry is those words, 'as if they were alive'. All of the subjects in the film were, of course, still very much alive – some of them were watching the film performance with her. Victoria's reaction on seeing film was as if she was imagining them dead, then brought back to life through the process of re-animation. It was commented on by several observers of early film shows that the motion picture record would provide what a later writer described as "living pictures of the dead". But Victoria had not waited for death to come before she could saw her family in some kind of spirit form.

This is fanciful, of course, but there is in Victoria's casual remark an unconscious understanding of how the film record kills yet brings to life what it holds. It is a moment of time, brought to a stop, then to be played again. It breaks up time itself, and so is like a death; but gives us the illusion of time created, and so confers upon its subjects a spurious immortality.

This cycle is replayed every time the films are run. They have to be run in some form; a film that remains in its can is certainly dead to the world. Run through a projector, played on a video machine, run through a computer, the late Victorian age twitches again into life. The Russian writer Maxim Gorky famously wrote of the experience of watching a Lumiere film show in 1896, which he described as transporting him to "the kingdom of the shadows". Consciously noting what Victoria only unconsciously revealed, Gorky saw how cinema makes ghosts of its subjects.

Do we still see Victorian ghosts in THE WORLD IN 1900? Advances in moving image technology, and the wear and tear visited upon the films of a hundred years ago, both make the films of 1900 seem very remote indeed. As we get more and more historical television programmes which use

colour film to stimulate in us a greater recognition of the past – I'm thinking of something like THE SECOND WORLD WAR IN COLOUR – who will find time for monochrome, and who will make the effort to recognise the people that lie behind the quaint mannerisms and indistinct photography that marks the films of the world in 1900?

Our solution has been to create a film journey, and to encourage understanding through entertainment. The creativity in the programming aims not only to make the art form comprehensible, but to show a little understanding of a past world as well.

I'll end with a proposition, something to think of at the end of this study day. *We are the films that we make of ourselves.*

Think of today. I don't just mean feature films, though certainly they are relevant, but all of the moving images we generate – news, commercials, home movies, cartoons, screensavers, CCTV, documentaries and dramas. It is huge and various, its form often overwhelming its content, making you wonder just what sort of substantial picture of us all it provides. It is a picture filled with talking heads and performances profoundly conscious of the camera. We are the compulsive communicators, to use David Attenborough's phrase.

And what of the world in 1900? It shows so little, and yet it shows something. It shows the modern world coming into consciousness. It shows a people with a new sense of themselves as belonging to the world *in toto*, a new sense of inter-connectedness. It shows that new development of self-interpretation and understanding through technology. The cinematograph was a machine, from that great age of machinery, that produced apparently nothing. So you have been to a film show – what do you take away with you? What can you do with a memory? Well, we can do a great deal with memories. Ideas are powerful, and the cinematograph was a powerful creator of ideas. The cinematograph brought forth moving pictures, a universal, unifying language. Our Victorian ghosts were compulsive communicators too. In THE WORLD IN 1900 we should recognise ourselves.