

# The Cinema of Attractions as *Dispositif*

Frank Kessler

## I.

Raymond Bellour once characterized Christian Metz's *Grande Syntagmatique* as an "*opérateur théorique*," a theoretical operator, because to him this widely discussed model of a cinematic code actualized the possibility of a semiotics of cinema "by bringing its virtualness onto a material level."<sup>1</sup> In a similar, though obviously different manner, the concept of "cinema of attractions" has become such a theoretical operator by creating a framework thanks to which early cinema could be seen as an object different from classical narrative cinema, as something which was not just *early* cinema, that is an earlier form of what cinema was to become, a primitive forerunner of film as an art form, interesting only in the way it already "announced" the immense possibilities of the new medium.<sup>2</sup> By contributing to its constitution as an object *sui generis*, defined by a certain number of distinctive traits, the concept of "cinema of attractions" helped to profoundly change the study of the early years of cinematography.<sup>3</sup>

For whoever has followed the developments in research on early cinema since the late 1970s, this certainly is a fact that can hardly be denied. But it is a much more complex question to determine what exactly the theoretical status of this concept is. In the entry he wrote for the *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema*, Tom Gunning in fact stresses two different aspects of this term:

The phrase "the cinema of attractions" [...] characterized the earliest phase of cinema as dedicated to presenting discontinuous visual attractions, moments of spectacle rather than narrative. This era of attractions was followed by a period, beginning around 1906, in which films increasingly *did* organize themselves around the tasks of narrative.<sup>4</sup>

According to this definition, "cinema of attractions" firstly refers to a certain period in the history of cinema, and secondly it describes a mode of (re)presentation where visual attractions and spectacular moments dominate, followed by another period centered on narrative. Thus it serves two purposes: it produces a periodization, and it defines a mode of representation by establishing an opposition between attraction and narrative. Both these points have been contested by Charles Musser, stating that the period of a genuine "cinema of attractions"

