

Amusement Park Sequences in Late Silent-Era Films

Joywheels and Gyration

BY CARTER MOULTON

In the late 1920s, a number of Hollywood filmmakers took their cameras to the amusement park. Given the robust, intertwined threads that tie the amusement park to the cinema, this act of filming the ferris wheel constitutes a kind of self-reflexive gesture, one that harkens back to the birth of cinema. These aforementioned threads are far too numerous to fully account here, but, most obviously, cinema and the amusement park were born within one or two years of each other—1894 to 1896—and early films were often exhibited at the fairground. Movies, according to Lauren Rabinovitz, figured prominently in over 75 percent of the nation’s amusement parks by the turn of the twentieth century.¹ Tom Gunning’s notion of the “cinema of attractions” reminds us that early cinema was—like the thrill ride—an attraction in and of itself, with the lure being to “see machines demonstrated (the newest technological wonder) ... rather than to view films.”² Gunning also links early cinema aesthetics to those of the fairground through what he calls “shock aesthetics” and “aesthetics of astonishment.” Through aesthetics of outward or inward motion and display, this cinema worked to create “the particularly modern entertainment form of the thrill, embodied elsewhere in recently appearing attractions of the amusement parks (such as the roller coaster), which combined sensations of acceleration and falling with a security guaranteed by modern industrial technology.”³ This desire to thrill and astonish led to an intimate interplay—one which still exists—between cinema and the amusement park. In the early 1900s, for instance, *Hale’s Tours and Scenes of the World* utilized a “phantom ride” perspective—achieved by placing

the camera at the front of a moving vehicle—to mimic the experience of being aboard a moving train. Audiences or “passengers” viewed these moving images on moving platforms that were furnished as railway cars.

In her book *Electric Dreamland: Amusement Parks, Movies and American Modernity*, Rabinovitz makes another set of interesting connections between the two entertainment forms:

More than other types of available contemporary commercial leisure, amusement parks and movies represented new kinds of *energized relaxation* that also functioned to calm fears about new technologies and living conditions of an industrialized society ... They [both] represented uniquely modern mechanized responses to turn-of-the-century American culture.⁴

Here, Rabinovitz’s emphasis is twofold. First, both early cinema and the amusement park constituted a controlled shock, one that ultimately soothed anxieties amidst a rapid technological modernity. Second, they both provided new perceptions of movement through electric, mechanical means. This combination of rapid movement—either of the image or of the body—and mechanization inspired many early filmmakers to treat the amusement park as their subject. Rabinovitz observes that films such as *Rube and Mandy at Coney Island* (1903), *Shooting the Chutes* (1903), and *Bamboo Slide* (1904) are simple studies of motion and the human body—movement as attraction. Lucy Fischer also notes the high number of early films that present electricity as an attraction (*Panoramic View of Electric Tower From a Balloon* (1901), *Electrocuting an Elephant* (1903), *The Electric*



Hotel (1905), among others). Electricity, she writes, was the “crucial tie to both the birth of the modern city and to the cinematic medium”—and, of course, to the possibilities of the amusement park as well.⁵ Cinema and the amusement park, then, were able to present new perceptual experiences of movement and light, features which have placed them in larger conversations about urban and technological modernity.

While these connections between early cinema and the fairground are indeed crucial to our understanding of American history, culture and modernity, I’d like to call attention to a number of amusement park sequences in late-silent films—*It* (1927), *Sunrise* (1927), *The Crowd* (1928), *Lonesome* (1928), and *Speedy* (1928)—because I feel they have an equally important voice in these conversations. Fischer and Rabinovitz do touch on these sequences, but the two are more invested in other, broader projects. Fischer, for instance, analyzes the amusement park sequences in *The Crowd*, *Lonesome*, and *Sunrise* in the context of electrification. She suggests that these sequences, through their uses of natural and synthetic lighting, revel in the “joys of urban life of the 1920s ... made possible by modern electrification.”⁶ Rabinovitz, though, suggests that by 1920, and thus by the time of these late-silent sequences, the electric spectacle of the amusement park was “no longer a topic of novel excitement.”⁷ She contends that the amusement park in late-silent film became merely a “backdrop” for romantic expression, a site for character development, and even “a geographic counterpoint to the chaos, alienation, and geometric architecture of the modern industrial city.”⁸

In what follows, I re-position these sequences by suggesting that they constitute more than an ode to electricity or a narrative “backdrop for romance and courtship

and between sweethearts.”⁹ Although Caitlin McGrath focuses on a different batch of films including *Cœur fidèle* (1924), *Hindle Wakes* (1927), and *Possessed* (1931), she too calls for a re-positioning, writing that “the amusement park functions as more than simply a vehicle for the plot, but encapsulates the tension between fear and exhilaration of this particularly modern urban space.”¹⁰ I too have been intrigued by a snarled sort of discordance in these sequences, one which seems entangled in both cinematic and urban modernity.

On the one hand, these scenes feature a number of experimental, disorienting aesthetics. Rabinovitz passes over these aesthetics when she writes of the “waning of interest in cinematically figuring the amusement park’s amelioration of the shocks of modernity ... and its optically dazzling electrified spectacle.”¹¹ By studying the aesthetics that constitute 1920s cinematic representations of the amusement park, I hope to recast these sequences as containers of kinesthetic spectacle and investigators of cinema’s perceptual capacities. Rather than provide a “geographic counterpoint” to the chaos or alienation of the city, these moments, through their defamiliarizing and kaleidoscopic aesthetics, amplify the perceptual thrills of the theme park, showcase the modern cinematic moment, and celebrate the sensations of a rapid urban modernity.

On the other hand, placing these sequences into their respective narratives reveals a deep anxiety toward that same rapidity. In *Speedy*, Harold Lloyd’s character is from “an old-fashioned corner of the city” that has “never acquired the pace of the rest of New York”;¹² in *Sunrise*, The Man and The Wife are small-town farmers who are almost killed after strolling through city traffic; in *It*, *Lonesome*, and *The Crowd*, the main protagonists live within the space

of the city but are either from a “small town” (*The Crowd*) or are alienated workers (*It, Lonesome, The Crowd*), discontented and at odds with the flow of urban life. While there are certainly dangers in conflating the amusement park and the city, the films I am considering undoubtedly situate the amusement park in the contexts of urban modernity. *Lonesome*, for instance, begins with the following intertitle: “New York wakes up—the machinery of life begins to move.”¹³ In *The Crowd*, Johnny arrives to New York accompanied by the message: “When Johnny was twenty-one he became one of the seven million that believe New York depends on him.”¹⁴ *Speedy* begins: “New York, where everybody is in such a hurry that they take Saturday’s bath on Friday so they can do Monday’s washing on Sunday.”¹⁵ These intertitles introduce the city of New York as a cold, swift, automated machine—like an amusement park ride, one that spins regardless of its passengers’ security.

By examining these sequences in their respective narrative contexts, I argue that these films create clear juxtapositions—between new and old, modern and tradition, fast and slow—and place their protagonists in unfamiliar territory. Through the admittance of outsiders and alienated bodies, then, the amusement park becomes a fertile space for thinking about the negotiation of bodily, mechanical, and cultural rhythms as they relate to urban modernity. For this conversation, I draw from E.P. Thompson’s “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism” and Henri Lefebvre’s *Rhythmanalysis*. While Rabinovitz warns us against thinking in binaries—specifically “urban vs. rural”—Lefebvre’s model for the study of rhythms embraces juxtaposition as a useful mode of analysis. For him, “rhythmanalysis” necessitates direct comparison: “rhythm is slow or lively only in relation to other rhythms.”¹⁶ Through Harold Lloyd’s repeated physical blunders in *Speedy*, Mary’s fainting in *Lonesome*, and the peasant dance in *Sunrise* (among other examples), the fairground becomes a space where rhythms collide and overwhelm one another. Because of these rhythmic interactions, I conclude, Coney-Island style amusement parks—and their 1920s cinematic representations—threaten individual rhythm but also provide a space for the repositioning of identity.

Neurological Modernity and the Amplification of the Amusement Park

As theorists, studio executives, and producers debated the place of sound in cinema, many filmmakers were busy exploring the cinematic apparatus’ capacity for capturing movement. *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927) and *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929) exemplify this fascination with cinematic and urban movement—in many ways, movement is their only subject.¹⁷ “Like the city,” Giuliana Bruno writes, “motion pictures move, both outwards and inwards: they journey, that is, through the space of the imagination, the site of memory and the topography of affects. It is this mental itinerary that, ultimately, makes film the art that

is closest to architecture.”¹⁸ So close, in fact, that descriptions of the modern city often double as descriptions of the cinema. Gunning’s phrasing of the changes in perception during the early 20th-century simultaneously delineate the cinema, the city, and the amusement park: “a new mastery of the incremental instants of time; a collapsing of distances; and a new experience of the human body and perception shaped by traveling at new rates of speed and inviting new potentials of danger.”¹⁹ Georg Simmel, in his seminal work “The Metropolis and Modern Life,” describes the city as a “rapid telescoping of changing images.”²⁰

This analogous relationship between cinema and the city allows us to situate what Ben Singer calls a “barrage of stimuli” into both an urban and a cinematic context. Singer uses this phrase when synthesizing the work of Simmel, Siegfried Kracauer, and Walter Benjamin to describe the new perceptual experiences that accompanied the “radical transformations of space, time, and industry” around the turn of the 20th century. This transformation, what he calls “neurological modernity,” is “understood in terms of a fundamentally different register of subjective experience, characterized by the *physical and perceptual shocks of the modern urban environment*.”²¹ Early cinema certainly provided a set of new perceptual shocks, but Rabinovitz suggests it constituted a new physical experience as well, one that “threatened to overwhelm the body of the spectator” by “subjugating all senses to a hyperbolic field of visual information.”²² Through this lens, the city dweller and the early cinematic spectator are both engaged in Singer’s notion of neurological modernity, a new way of seeing and experiencing.

However, Simmel observes in 1903 that because the city is filled with “things which stimulate the individual to the highest degree of nervous energy,” a desensitization can occur in the perceiver. In other words, overexposure to “violent stimuli” can cause a numbing in the individual toward said stimuli. Simmel calls this numbness the “blasé metropolitan attitude.”²³



Lonesome

There is perhaps no psychic phenomenon which is so unconditionally reserved to the city as the blasé outlook ... Just as an immoderately sensuous life makes one blasé because it stimulates the nerves to its utmost reactivity until they can finally no longer produce any reaction at all, so less harmful stimuli, through the rapidity and the contradictoriness of their shifts, forces the nerves to make such violent responses, tear them about so brutally that they exhaust their last reserves of strength, and, remaining in the same milieu, do not have time for new reserves to form.²⁴

For Simmel, there is an act of “adjusting ... to the content and form of metropolitan life by renouncing the response to them.”²⁵ Singer traces this idea, writing that for Simmel and other scholars, “Modernity ... prompted a kind of reconditioning of the individuals sensory apparatus.”²⁶ This process of adjustment paints neurological modernity as a fleeting experience, fading with time and potentially re-emerging in the form of shocks and thrills. Without knowing it, Simmel comments on the cinema, explaining why Gunning’s cinema of attractions “goes underground.”²⁷ As audiences adjusted to the perceptual experience of early cinema, the attraction of the apparatus became subsumed into the practice of telling stories.

Yet, the amusement park sequences in *It, Sunrise, The Crowd, Lonesome*, and *Speedy*, work to unearth a neurologically modern perceptual experience by intensifying the aesthetics of astonishment found in the early cinema of attractions. McGrath outlines the continued relationship between the amusement park and the cinema of attractions: “While the cinema of attractions lost out to the cinema of narrative integration, moments of spectacle persisted in films of the late-silent era, which speaks to the continued relevance of these spaces of display.”²⁸ Singer too notes the correspondence between neurological modernity and the “increasing intensity of popular amusements.”²⁹ The idea is simple enough: to intensify is to challenge a perceiver’s calibration, and thus to open up a potential for a neurologically-modern experience.

With lighter, more durable cameras and a cultivated understanding of cinema’s visual power, the directors of the films in question returned to the birthplace of movies, using it as a stage on which to display the capabilities of cinematic motion and form. It comes as no coincidence that these five sequences feature images reminiscent of the early cinematic views in films such as *Coney Island at Night* (1905) and *Pan-American Exposition by Night* (1901). In these early films, long shots and slow pans establish the vastness of the amusement park while presenting a spectacle in the form of massive, moving light displays. As Bruno notes, these views represent the amusement park “as a mere black surface decorated with lights, flashing and dancing across the texture of the screen. As the camera pans across this electrical landscape, the screen itself becomes a permeable

surface. The electrifying experience of the city is reflected in the film as the screen itself becomes a surface encounter with the energy of urban culture.”³⁰

In *Sunrise* and *Lonesome*, this energy is enhanced by a mobile camera. In *Sunrise*, we enter the amusement park through a long, grandiose traveling shot that privileges the spectator’s perception of movement over the movement of the onscreen bodies. Put simply, the cinema spectator is allowed to cut in line. In *Lonesome*, the early cinematic “view” is also complimented by a moving camera. But first, we get two establishing shots void of movement—a static camera, a static frame. This recalls exhibition practices of early cinema, wherein “the films were initially presented as frozen unmoving images, projections of still photographs. Then, flaunting a mastery of visual showmanship, the projector began cranking and the image moved.”³¹ In a similar gesture of showmanship, *Lonesome* director Paul Fejos quickly cuts to a swooping crane shot, and movement is made: “the picture stirs to life.”³² However, here it is the unhinged camera—and not the unfreezing of the onscreen image—which is the object of display.

Fejos continues his show as the sensations of flying into the amusement park from above are met and defamiliarized by superimpositions of other moving images. Suddenly, we are disoriented, lost within four competing rhythms: the inward, swooping movement into the space of the park, the slow-moving cycle of an illuminated ferris wheel, the rapidly-revolving joywheel (also known as a human roulette wheel), and the unsystematic flailings of the bodies of fairgoers. In another notable moment of superimposition, Mary and Jim, the lovers in the film, dance to Irving Berlin’s “Always.” The fifteen seconds that introduce this dance sequence are pure superimposition, with images of a banjo, the bell of a trombone, a large crowd of dancers, a singer, a band conductor—who is captured by a roaming camera—a small section of horn players, a frantic drummer, and a dancing trumpeter colliding underneath the song’s lyrics and musical notation. Here, again, the cinematic apparatus is brought to the fore and displayed as a maker of once-unimagined movement imperceptible elsewhere.

In *Speedy*, superimposition is deployed when Speedy (Lloyd) and his love interest Jane enter the “Barrel of Fun,” a revolving cylinder through which fairgoers attempt to walk without falling down. As popcorn kernels vibrate along the barrel’s floor and Speedy and Jane lose their footing, an animated hypnosis circle appears. It spins both clockwise and counter-clockwise, conveying the discombobulation of the onscreen bodies. This superimposition, which appears four times, also serves as a transition, connecting shots of Speedy and Jane tumbling on the Barrel, speeding down a slide, and consuming cotton candy, ribs, and corn on the cob at the food stand. The circle spins more rapidly with each appearance, eliciting a “visual queasiness”—to borrow McGrath’s words.³³ These nauseating stimuli are worked into a gag as Jane appears to comfort a puking Speedy, whose bodily motions are soon explained to be part of a



“Test Your Lungs” game.

A more understated method of creating and displaying a cinematically amplified sensation of movement is through the use of close-ups. In *It*, Betty Lou and Mr. Waltham, like Speedy and Jane, climb aboard the Barrel of Fun. As it throws the two characters every which way, a close-up disorients the viewer by denying any establishment of space. Pieces of Betty Lou and Mr. Waltham are thrown in and out of the frame, and gravity is seemingly nonexistent. A similar technique is used on the joywheel. The circular platform begins to spin, and the two protagonists, along with a crowd of other riders, hang on for dear life. The camera moves in close, which simultaneously distinguishes Betty Lou and Mr. Waltham from the crowd and intensifies the sensation of movement around them. *Speedy* and *Lonesome* achieve this same disorienting effect by placing the camera on the moving wheel. It is common practice in these sequences for the camera to be attached to the ride, whether it be a carousel (*The Crowd*), an airplane swing (*Speedy*, *Lonesome*), a slide (*The Crowd*), or on the floor of the Barrel of Fun (*Lonesome*). In these shots, close-ups and mounted cameras centralize the main protagonists in the frame and spin the world around them at a furious speed—a speed unrepresentable through the long shots of early Lumière and Edison films.

One final aesthetic to consider is the intensification of the phantom-ride perspective. King Vidor, director of *The Crowd*, takes the perspectives of *Hale's Tours of the World*, reverses them, and unbinds them from the train. In an

amazing sequence, Vidor pushes the camera down a bumpy slide backwards. As the camera falls down the slide, the viewer sees a vertical tilt from the slide up to the ceiling, and back down again with each bump. The bodies of Johnny and Mary appear and disappear—they too are riding the slide, not far behind the camera. *Lonesome* puts the camera not on a train or a slide but on a roller coaster: The Jack-Rabbit Racer. Positioned right above the tracks, the camera dips and ascends, providing a set of sensations similar to the bumpy slide in *The Crowd*. This phantom-ride aesthetic is intercut with a warped return to the early cinematic “views” mentioned earlier. Here, Fejos spins the camera in a circle at such a speed that the lights of Luna Park seem to streak across the sky.

1920s cinematic representations of the amusement park deploy various techniques (crane shots, superimpositions, close-ups, phantom-ride perspectives, etc.) to present the viewer with a “barrage of stimuli,” an intensification of the aesthetics found in the cinema of attractions. They provide what McGrath calls “intense perceptual experience[s] produced by modern urban spaces full of movement.”³⁴ In doing so, they open up a space for late-1920s viewers to experience a certain neurological, spectatorial modernity—while at the same time showcasing the modernity of the cinematic apparatus. These important gestures, though, are just a few of the many contained within these sequences. To begin thinking about these moments in relationship to urban modernity, I turn to the image of a spinning disc.

Rapidity, Repetition, and Rhythm

As examined by McGrath, *Sunrise* introduces the viewer to the amusement park through the image of a rapidly-spinning disc in an otherwise-empty frame. The disc slowly recedes, and the amusement park comes into view. *The Crowd* features a shot of the joywheel filmed from above, which creates a similar spinning disc; *Lonesome's* spinning circle arrives via superimposition, wherein the spinning lights of a billboard border the bell of a trombone; and, I have already highlighted *Speedy's* hypnosis wheel. Whether expressed explicitly through images of circularity or implied by the revolving rides, the spinning circle signifies both rapidity and repetition, two distinct characteristics of the city's sensory environment.

Exploring rapidity and repetition makes necessary a broader consideration of rhythm. Lefebvre proposes using rhythm as a means to analyze our social, biological, and cultural experiences. Given the rhythmic qualities of the amusement park, this approach seems useful. For Lefebvre, “everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is rhythm.”³⁵ The beautiful thing about Lefebvre's work is that it encourages a more meditative, reflective view of the world and its present condition. “One must let oneself go,” yet still retain a critical curiosity. Among the numerous categorizations in his book, he locates two which makeup all rhythms: cyclical rhythms (the sun rises and falls, the tides change) and linear rhythms (human activity, “the daily grind, the routine,” the metronome). To perform proper rhythmanalysis, we must not only look at the interactions between different rhythms but also recognize the distinct existence of each rhythm. In other words, we must work to “separate out, to distinguish the sources,” and to “bring them back together by perceiving interactions.”³⁶ Below, I suggest a number of distinct ways to think about rhythm: biological (repetition of gestures, intensification of perception, neurological collapse), mechanical (the spinning circle, city traffic, undercranking of the camera, the railroad, circularity), and cultural (public rhythms, traditional dance, task-orientation, time-budgets). I then “bring them back together,” a process through which rhythms can be seen to co-exist (what Lefebvre calls “polyrhythmia”), conflict (arrhythmia) or benefit one another (eurhythmia).

Singer speaks of rapidity when he writes that “modernity implied a phenomenal world—a specifically urban one—that was markedly quicker, more chaotic, fragmented, and disorienting than in previous phases of human culture.”³⁷ The rapid pace of urban life is explored most famously in F.W. Murnau's city montage in *Sunrise*, in which a mobile camera moves vertically, laterally, and inward as it records bustling city streets and spotlights. Murnau's montage is similar to the aforementioned sequence in *Lonesome* in that it constitutes a collage of superimposed images. These collages serve as visual representations of the “noise” of the city. For Lefebvre, noise is “chaotic” and “has no rhythm.”³⁸ It is only in dissecting the distinct rhythms of *Sunrise's*

montage (the repetitious movements of a marching band, two twirling banners, an antsy conductor, and a dancing crowd) that a eurhythmic relationship is revealed. This eurhythmia is cultivated by the mutually-beneficial relationship between musical rhythm, dance, and the public space of display. Additionally, eurhythmia is produced here through the use of undercranking. This technique renders the onscreen dancers and band members as well-oiled machines of rapid motion. In the narrative, these rapid representations of movement work together to strengthen The Man's temptation to the spectacle of the city.

Undercranking is mobilized in *Lonesome* when Mary and Jim scour the Coney Island beach for a lost ring. Through this practice of undercranking, polyrhythmia (the building of sand castles, the throwing of beach balls, the eating of peanut butter sandwiches, swimming, sleeping) is sped up, which in turn heightens the sensation of “noise,” of indiscernibility—this, of course, doesn't make finding the ring any easier. Fast-motion is employed in *Speedy* when Lloyd takes a job as a cab driver. With Babe Ruth in the backseat, Speedy swerves his way through oncoming traffic and crossing pedestrians to deliver Ruth to Yankee Stadium in time for the big game. “Step on it,” Ruth exclaims, “or you'll have me late!” Such a speedy delivery would be impossible in the horse-drawn trolley of Speedy's soon-to-be grandfather-in-law, Pop Dillon. Back in the “slow” side of town, Pop Dillon's horse-car—“a vehicle that has defied the rush of civilizashun [*sic*”—the last horse car in New York”—is in jeopardy of being run out of business by a railroad company.³⁹ To save the horse-car trolley, Speedy recruits a group of old-timers—who use the trolley as a clubhouse during the wee hours of the morning—to rebel against the railroad company. The tensions here between old and new, slow and fast, and tradition and modernity are explicit enough.

The casual, leisurely use of the horse-drawn trolley represents what E.P. Thompson calls a “task-orientation model” of living. Thompson uses this model to describe the tending to “natural” work-rhythms (“attending the tides,” tending sheep, milking cows, and, my favorite visualization, poking a fireplace to keep it alight).⁴⁰ Put simply, this model measures labour not by time, but by task. Thompson argues that this model leads to variability in the work day and a blurring between “work” and “life”—symbolized here by the trolley's use for both business and leisure. The railroad and Speedy's cab, on the other hand, constitute “labour timed by the clock,” by departures, arrivals, and distances. They function along a “time-discipline” chain, on which a “lacking of urgency”—“Step on it!”—is considered “wasteful.”⁴¹

In labour measured by the clock, time becomes currency: “it is no longer passed but spent.”⁴² Consequently, the workplace is often represented as a space of repetition and “monotony” because of the need to efficiently “budget” time.⁴³ While the Tayloristic rhythms of the assembly line are not quite realized in any of these films' representations

of the workplace, there is a clear acknowledgement of this time-budget and its oppressiveness. In *Lonesome*, for instance, Mary and Jim work as operators (telephone and punch press, respectively) under the weight of the clock. Fejos superimposes a clock-face over images of Mary and Jim at work, and his use of cross-dissolves conveys the slow passing of time. From 8:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., we see Mary and Jim perform a set of repetitive gestures with no break. Each hour's movements seem to mirror those of the last. In *The Crowd*, a camera flies through the city sky and ascends the side of a skyscraper. It enters through the window, revealing a massive room with hundreds of identical square desks. The desks are organized into distinct rows and columns, with empty, white floors intensifying the sense of order. Each desk is occupied by a body. As the camera moves inward, more identical desks are revealed. The onscreen bodies perform a set of repetitive gestures: grabbing a piece of paper with the left hand, marking it, and, with the right hand, placing the paper in a pile on the right side of the desk. These gestures, when combined with the aforementioned camera movement and mise en scène, strip the workers and their environment of personality and create an identifiable sense of repetition.

When the bell tolls and the workday comes to a close (at 4:00 p.m. in *The Crowd* and 1:00 p.m. in *Lonesome* (due to the holiday)), crowds of workers are seen sprinting out of the work place. It's almost as if the source of the city's rapidity is the simple desire to escape from the notion of clock-ascurrency. Unlike the task-orientation model depicted by the horse-car in *Speedy*, these images of sprinting toward leisure illustrate a clear division between "work" and "life."

Susan Currell suggests that the line separating work and leisure began to shift in the late 1920s due to an "increasing availability of leisure time." President Coolidge, she writes, saw this increase "as a sign of machine-made progress, for where technology had 'steadily reduced the sweat in human labor' the 'hours of labor have lessened; our leisure has increased.'" Paradoxically, though, this leisure time made possible by machine-labour is then "spent" on the "machine-made pleasure[s]" of the amusement park.⁴⁵ In other words, mechanical rapidity and repetition simultaneously makes possible and consumes the leisure time of many of these characters.

What happens, then, when these workers enter the amusement park? What sorts of rhythmic interactions unfold? While the genres of these films range from melodrama (*Sunrise*, *Lonesome*, *The Crowd*) to romantic comedy (*It*) to overt slapstick (*Speedy*), correlations between genre and type of rhythmic interaction are hazy with the exception of slapstick. In *Speedy*, arrhythmia is produced when the lifestyles of the "old-fashioned corner of the city" collide with the rhythms of Coney Island. Chuck Wolfe observes that Buster Keaton's slapstick in *The High Sign* (1921) and *The Balloonatic* (1923) also "translates the concept behind some modern amusement park attractions ... into comic events." And while I don't want to conflate Keaton and

Lloyd, it is true that Lloyd in *Speedy*, like Keaton in *The High Sign*, crafts "comedy out of an experience of dislocation."⁴⁶ In *Speedy*'s case, the unique sensations that accompany entering and being set free in an unfamiliar space lead to a set of accidental collisions.

Time and time again we see *Speedy* suffer from his inability to register the spatiotemporal rhythms (a cramped, quickened polyrhythmia) of the amusement park. Early in the sequence, *Speedy* is sprayed by a water fountain, splattered with ink, and nearly run over by a bicycle. A few gags involving a crab and a dog also speak to *Speedy*'s incompatibility with the space of the park. Later, we see *Speedy* playing a game of "Baseball Throw" (also called "Milk Bottle Knockdown"). Focusing intently on the milk bottles before him, he throws. Not even close. He tries again, this time barely checking behind him—missed again. As he winds up for a third throw, *Speedy* is completely unaware of the world around him; his senses, to return to Rabinovitz, are fully subjugated "to a hyperbolic field of visual information." Suddenly, a man with an ice cream cone walks through the frame. *Speedy*'s arm hits the cone, and ice-cream squishes into the man's plump face. These gags exemplify the arrhythmia found not only in *Speedy*'s interactions with the external rhythms of the amusement park, but also in the neurological and anatomical rhythms of *Speedy*'s body.

In *Sunrise*, another "Baseball Throw" sequence depicts the game's ability to suck up the senses. The Man throws ball after ball, ignoring his wife and her desire to dance. However, The Wife's desire is later realized in the famous "peasant dance" sequence. Here, an eurhythmic interaction unfolds between the rhythms of traditional dance and the amusement park's rhythms of display, performance, and spectacle. The dance sequence is made possible when The Man and The Wife return an escaped pig to the fairground. As a crowd of well-dressed bodies applaud The Man and The Wife, a fairground worker instructs the conductor to play "Midsummer (Peasant Song)." Dancing, their movements become wrapped up in what Lefebvre calls the "public rhythm" of "ceremonies and celebrations."⁴⁷ The two dance within a circle of spectators, publicly displaying a set of rhythms which, to them, are familiar and natural.

The most potent arrhythmic interaction between a dislocated character and the amusement park occurs in *Lonesome* when Mary and Jim climb aboard the Jack-Rabbit Racer. This sequence bundles intensified "aesthetics of astonishment" with the neurological breakdown of an onscreen character. As the roller coaster speeds along, Jim notices that one of the wheels is smoking. This smoke becomes fire, and Jim yells out to Mary. In this moment, hyper-rapidity and the malfunctioning of mechanical repetition produce an arrhythmia in the roller coaster. This arrhythmia then extends to Mary's body. Upon seeing the smoke and flames, Mary's bodily rhythms begin a process of recalibration. But, unable to "adjust" to this bombardment of "violent stimuli," Mary faints. As the ride ends, swarms of bodies rush to Mary's side, and she is carried away. Mary



The Crowd

bodies are stimulated, thrown around, tested, and overwhelmed, engineers and invites socialization. Rabinowitz notes that the amusement park—as a sort of social blender—produced anxieties not merely about the loss of individualism but also about the morality of society. She writes that many viewed the theme park as a sinful space, one that encouraged "reckless behavior, intermingling of classes and ethnic groups, and loosening of sexual propriety."⁵⁰ It is this social possibility, though, that makes the amusement park a desirable space for the alienated protagonists in *Lonesome* and *The Crowd*. As one intertitle in *Lonesome* puts it, "There's nothing like the hurly burly of a carnival to help recover from the stress of daily routine."

By means of immersion, Mary, Jim, Johnny, and Mary hope to lose themselves, to forget their alienation. The narrator in

Lonesome reminds us: "In the whirlpool of modern life, the most difficult thing is to live alone." *The Crowd*, as illustrated in the workday sequence analyzed above, explores the notion of being "lost" in a sea of bodies, which consequently makes aware the uncontrollable aspects of lived experience and the limits of agency. "All alone, I'm so all alone," Johnny sings on the beach. Similarly, Jim tells Mary in *Lonesome*: "Gee, it's funny how lonesome a fella can be, especially with a million people around him." In another moment: "I'm so tired of being alone that I can't even stand my own company." And this is precisely why Jim heads to the fairground; he literally tries to "lose"—to get rid of—himself. Yet, this temporary loss-of-self seems dangerously intertwined with the losses of alienation and dislocation. While Jim and Mary's love is made possible by the space of the amusement park—as Rabinovitz observes—it is also threatened by it when Mary is literally "lost" to the crowd. We can say that through their attempt to remedy the loss of identity (alienation) through the loss of self (immersion), they become both lost in the moment (Jim and Mary's first dance, during which Fejos transports them to a fairytale land by removing the carnival crowd, enlarging the moon, and erecting a castle) and literally lost in the crowd (only to re-unite in the private space of the apartment). Many moments in these late-silent era sequences align with Simmel's idea of being "swallowed up in the social technological mechanism": a lost pig in *Sunrise*, lost opportunities for necking in *The Crowd* and *It*, and Mary's lost ring, lost consciousness, and lost body in *Lonesome*.⁵¹

Rather than linger on these moments of loss, let us return to the spinning disc one last time to think about what happens when bodies climb aboard it. In *It*, as Betty Lou and Mr. Waltham ride the joywheel, a banner reading the name of the ride spans across the bottom of the frame: "The Social Mixer." This simple idea of social mixing allows us to think about repetition in a different light. Lefebvre

and Jim, knowing only each other's first names, are separated due to these arrhythmic interactions within Mary's biological rhythms and the mechanical rhythms of the amusement park.

Although this final example is indeed violent, I am not arguing that the amusement park is a symbol for the dangers of urban rapidity; rather, it is a space that magnifies the negotiations of different rhythms—some fast, some slow, some biological, some mechanical, and so forth. This way of thinking about the amusement park calls into question its function as a form of popular leisure. Why engage in these intense negotiations after a hard day's work? Currell writes that the flocking of "crowds of workers ... to the commercial amusements of Coney Island" was seen as a "cause for concern rather than celebration." She continues:

As the number of vacationers and day-trippers increased, so did ... fears that standardisation, passivity, and conformity would lead to a breakdown in democracy and social order. Writers like James Truslow Adams argued that free time should be a space in which individualism and freedom was stimulated and crowds rested, for the 'road of conformity is merely the road back to savagery.'⁴⁸

What I want to emphasize here is this anxiety toward the loss of individual rhythm—to be sucked up and assimilated into the rhythms of the crowd. It is precisely this "loss," though, that drives *Speedy*, Mary, Betty Lou, and Johnny, among others, to the amusement park.

Conclusion: Social Mixing and a Mode of Repositioning

John Kasson describes the space of Coney Island as a "laboratory for mass culture."⁴⁹ This public "laboratory," in which

embraces this light and warns us not to oversimplify the notion of repetition: “There is no identical absolute repetition ... There is always something new and unforeseen that induces itself into the repetitive: difference.”⁵² While he provides numerical examples to prove his point (the repetition of one equals two), the joywheel proves just as useful. Through its repetitive gyrations, the joywheel functions by sucking up and dispensing bodies. Bodies climb aboard and are ultimately shuffled at random. Through this redistribution (and thus difference) via repetition, a space is opened up for the recalibration of perception, position, and identity.

Rabinovitz suggests that “late 1920s movies had already done away with the depiction of amusement park geography as a site for transforming the body through interaction with the mechanical modern.”⁵³ Such a statement acknowledges the “sucking up” but fails to consider the way in which these characters are ultimately dispensed anew. The ring is found, and a romance is strengthened. Mr. Waltham and Betty Lou end up together, as do Johnny and Mary—there will be plenty of time for necking. The pig is

found, and a celebration occurs. Consciousness is regained, Mary (*Lonesome’s* Mary) is found, and the two lovers live happily ever after.

This is a pleasant thought, but a rather useless one unless we extend this model to the cinema spectator. Does the spectacular, the attraction, constitute a space of negotiation? If a neurologically-modern sensation of immersion is just a temporary state in a process of repositioning, when and where is the spectator dispensed? Do certain cinematic spectacles provide potentials for this re-calibration? Such considerations could radically alter our approach to the “attraction” within cinema studies. For now, we can say that in addition to serving as a romantic backdrop and an electric dreamland, the amusement park in late-silent era film provides a rich world for studying the oppositions and interactions of rhythms as they pertain to urban modernity; and by returning to the fairground in a way that amplifies, combines, and revises the aesthetics of the early cinema of attractions, these sequences speak to cinema’s birth, silent cinema’s peak, and a distinctly modern cinematic moment.

Notes

- 1 Lauren Rabinovitz, *Electric Dreamland: Amusement Parks, Movies, and American Modernity* (Berkeley, CA: 2004), 35.
- 2 Tom Gunning, “An Aesthetic of Astonishment,” *Viewing Positions*, ed. Linda Williams (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 116.
- 3 Gunning, 122.
- 4 Rabinovitz, 2, emphasis added.
- 5 Lucy Fischer, “The Shock of the New: Electrification, Illumination, Urbanization and the Cinema” in *Cinema and Modernity*, ed. Murray Pomerance (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 28.
- 6 Fischer, 28, 35.
- 7 Rabinovitz, 154.
- 8 Rabinovitz, 155.
- 9 Rabinovitz, 155.
- 10 Caitlin McGrath, *Captivating Motion: Late-Silent Film Sequences of Perception in the Modern Urban Environment* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 2010), 18.
- 11 Rabinovitz, 159.
- 12 *Speedy*, directed by Ted Wilde, 1928.
- 13 *Lonesome*, directed by Paul Fejos, 1928.
- 14 *The Crowd*, directed by King Vidor, 1928.
- 15 *Speedy*.
- 16 Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 2004), 10.
- 17 Note the release dates of these films.
- 18 Giuliana Bruno, “Motion and Emotion: Film and the Urban Fabric,” in *Cities in Transition: the Moving Image and the Modern Metropolis*, eds. Andrew Webber and Emma Wilson (London: Wallflower Press, 2008), 26.
- 19 Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” in *The Blackwell City Reader*, eds. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (Oxford and Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), 11.
- 20 Tom Gunning, “Tracing The Individual Body: Photography, Detectives, and Early Cinema,” in *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, eds. Leo Charney, Vanessa R. Schwartz, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 16.
- 21 Ben Singer, “Modernity, Hyperstimulus, and the Rise of Popular Sensationalism,” *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, eds. Leo Charney, Vanessa R. Schwartz, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 72, 73, 91, emphasis added.
- 22 Rabinovitz, 101.
- 23 Simmel, 11, 14.
- 24 Simmel, 14.
- 25 Simmel, 15.
- 26 Singer, 92.
- 27 Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde,” in *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Robert Stam and Toby Miller (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 230.
- 28 McGrath, 15.
- 29 Singer, 91.
- 30 Bruno, 17-18.
- 31 Gunning, “An Aesthetic of Astonishment,” 118.
- 32 Maxim Gorky, as quoted in Gunning, “An Aesthetic of Astonishment,” 118.
- 33 McGrath, 31.
- 34 McGrath, 15.
- 35 Lefebvre, 15.
- 36 Lefebvre, 27, 30.
- 37 Singer, 73.
- 38 Lefebvre, 27, emphasis added.
- 39 *Speedy*.
- 40 E.P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” *Past and Present* 38 (Dec. 1967), 60.
- 41 Thompson, 60, 81.
- 42 Thompson, 61.
- 43 Thompson, 62, 71.
- 44 Susan Currell, *American Culture in the 1920s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 172.
- 45 Currell, 169.
- 46 Charles Wolfe, “From Venice to the Valley: California Slapstick and the Keaton Comedy Short,” *Taking Place: Location and the Moving Image*, eds. Elena Gorfinkel and John David Rhodes (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 27, 28.
- 47 Lefebvre, 18.
- 48 Currell, 185.
- 49 John Kasson, quoted in Rabinovitz, 17.
- 50 Rabinovitz, 18.
- 51 Simmel, 11.
- 52 Lefebvre, 6.
- 53 Rabinovitz, 159.