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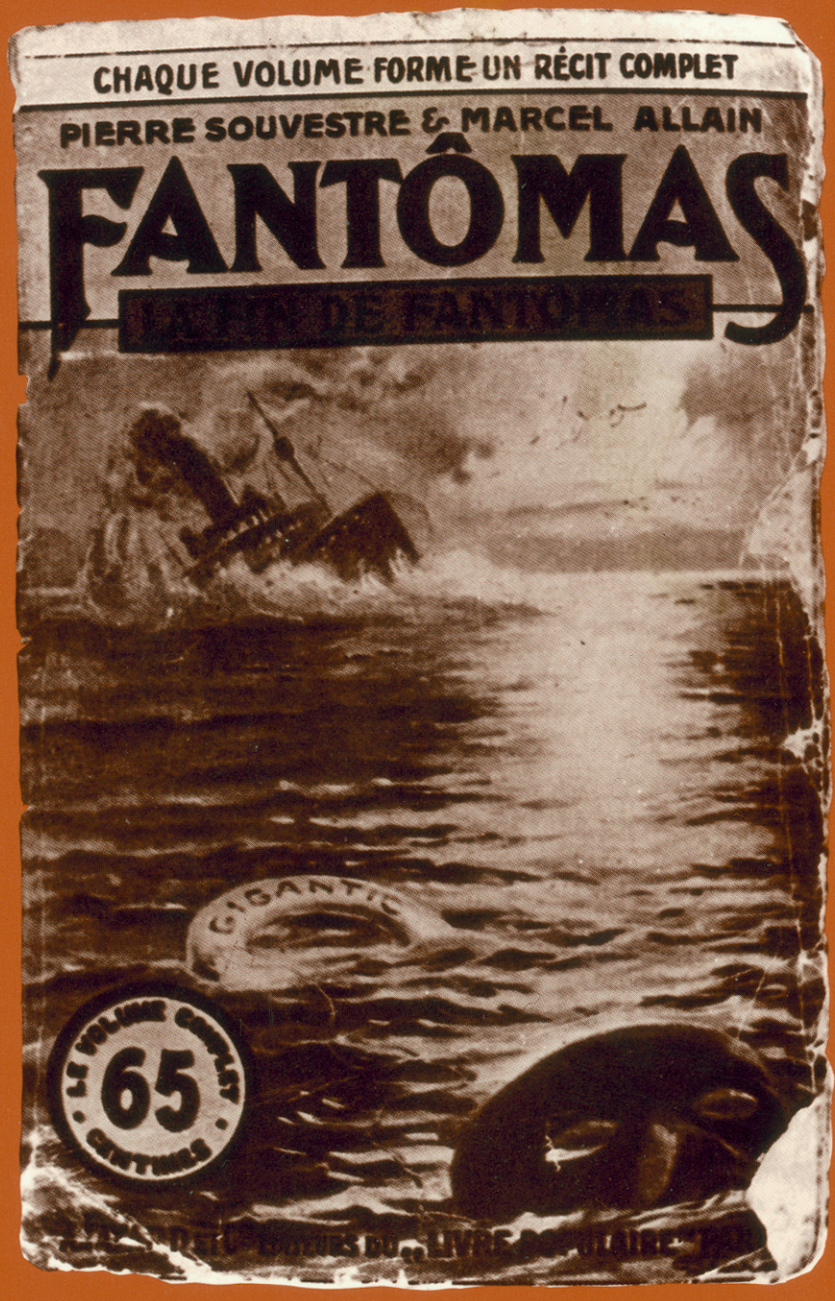

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Feuillade and the French Serial

La Nouvelle Mission de Feuillade; or, What Was Mise-en-Scène?

DAVID BORDWELL

AS LADY BELTHAM WATCHES APPREHENSIVELY from her box, the actor Valgrand performs in a play that depicts the hours before the criminal Gurn is executed (figure 1). Later in the scene, Lady Beltham's maid brings her a message, and the two women depart at precisely the moment that the curtain in the distance parts to show Valgrand taking his last bows (figure 2).

This sequence from the first episode of *Fantômas* typifies what we might call the post-Bazinian understanding of Feuillade. Primed by Andre Bazin's analyses of *profondeur de champ* in the sound cinema, many cinéphiles discovered deep-space staging in the master of the serial. "This beautiful shot," writes Tom Milne of the Lady Beltham scene, "[is] one which Gregg Toland, that arch-priest of deep-focus composition would have been proud of."[1] Seen from this standpoint, Feuillade becomes a forerunner of Welles, Wyler, Renoir, and the Italian Neorealists.[2] Even Jean Mitry, who considers Feuillade technically backward, praises Lady Beltham's visit to the theater as one of the first sequences to exploit the dramatic value of depth staging.[3] Interestingly, Bazin himself found the sequence not idiosyncratic but typical: any director of Feuillade's day, he argued, would conceive this shot in depth, since cutting within the scene was not yet a salient option.[4]

As this shot has became a minor locus classicus of the silent cinema, so has Feuillade become an acknowledged master of mise-en-scène. But of what, we might ask, does this mastery consist? How does Feuillade characteristically compose his shots in relation to setting, camera distance, and the blocking of the actors? What functions does his depth staging fulfill? How might we explain the emergence of his mastery? At this point we do not have good answers to these questions.

We also do not yet know how to answer a broader question: How do we describe and explain stylistic continuity and change during the 1910s? Within the historiographic literature, the persistent presumption has been that it is fruitful to contrast the rise of analytical cutting, or classical *découpage*, with that more conservative tendency to stage a scene within the single-shot *tableau*. The earliest generation of film historians weighted this dichotomy toward the "progressive" directors who exploited editing (Porter, Griffith, and their peers) and castigated the single-shot tradition as old-fashioned and theatrical. Bazin played a central role in redeeming the *tableau* aesthetic, treating it as a necessary predecessor for the more sophisticated work of Renoir, Welles, and Wyler. More recently, Noël Burch has reevaluated such staging. For Burch, Feuillade typifies the resistance of certain "petty-bourgeois" directors of the 1910s to continuity editing. According to Burch, their staging in depth retained basic features of primitive cinema: "frontality, distance, centrifugality, autarchy of the tableau."[5]

The *découpage/tableau* duality has been recast by other researchers.[6] They attribute the rise of intrascene editing principally to filmmakers in the United States while positing that Russian, Scandinavian, and Western European filmmakers elaborated an alternative system predicated upon depth staging. These scholars have suggested that while there are some continuities between the depth shot of the 1910s and the flat, distant "primitive" *tableaux*, the differences may be significant enough to warrant considering the years 1909 to 1918 as not simply a prolongation of primitive cinema but instead a major transitional phase, perhaps even a distinctive stylistic period.

We still do not know enough to answer the big question about the teens, but the pages that follow are devoted to taking Feuillade as one source of insight into the problem. By teasing out some key strategies he employs, we may better understand what options were available to a director of the period. My evidence is drawn from his five most famous serials/series of

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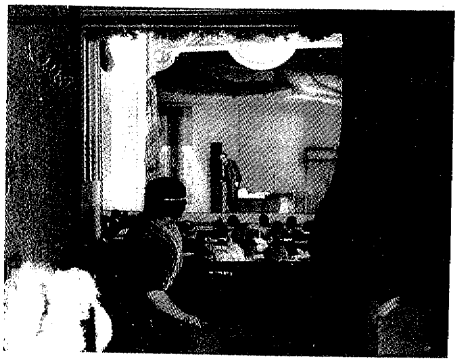

Figure 1. *Fantômas* (1913–1914)

Figure 2. *Fantômas*

the era: *Fantômas* (released 1913–1914), *Les Vampires* (1915–1916), *Judex* (1916), *La Nouvelle Mission de Judex* (1917), and *Tih Minh* (1918).

How typical of 1910s filming is Feuillade? In the space available here I cannot survey a range of his contemporaries, but investigation of several other films by French directors, as well as works from Denmark, Sweden, Germany, Russia, Italy, and the United States, suggests that the principles undergirding his staging practice are not unique to him, however unusual may be his skill in exploiting these principles.[7] Indeed, one advantage of focusing on Feuillade is that his films display common mechanisms of staging with an almost diagrammatic sobriety. He is far less flamboyant than Léonce Perret, Victor Sjöström, Yevgeni Bauer, and Georg af Klercker. Feuillade is largely a director of straight lines, uniform illumination, squared-off sets, and sparsely decorated walls. In his works, strategies of staging stand out in particularly bold relief, however much they are enhanced by factors such as lighting or costume.

In any event, I hope that examining even so plain a style may enrich our vocabulary for discussing staging, a technique far more difficult to describe than cutting or camera movement. Further, an analysis of Feuillade points up some ways in which to nuance that editing-versus-staging schema that has become so central to our thinking about the 1910s. Finally, and more polemically, it may be that Feuillade's mise-en-scène reveals some of the limits of one currently popular approach to understanding early film.

Choreographing the Shot

Like most directors throughout the history of cinema, Feuillade seeks to direct the viewer's attention to important elements in the shot. Without going into the psychophysics of eye movements, we can say that the filmmaker prompts the spectator to scan the frame and fixate on key dramatic elements.[8] Narrative factors assume great importance here: the development of the story encourages us to concentrate on characters, props, and other salient material. But there are pictorial cues to guide scanning as well. The director can manipulate size within the frame, differences of tonality, overall composition, movement, character glance, and informative features of human bodies (such as faces, eyes, and hands).[9]

The assumption that directors direct not only actors but viewers formed the bedrock of Bazin's analyses of *profondeur de champ*. It was also fundamental to those apologies for editing mounted by the previous generation of stylistic historians. The importance of directing attention within the frame has been played down in recent years, however, largely because of certain points raised in Noël Burch's discussion of what he calls the "primitive mode of representation." Burch has claimed that nonclassical cinema characteristically displayed "decentered" or "centrifugal" compositions, with a corresponding scattering of the viewer's attention and a loss of narrative intelligibility.[10]

This argument, however, seems to me problematic. What is a decentered composition? Is it one which puts its salient information elsewhere than in the geometric center? Such compositions are common in painting, photography, and cinema, early or recent. Moreover, our specimens from Lady Beltham's theater visit suggest that Feuillade is perfectly capable of tidily, even obsessively, centering his action. This famous sequence is strikingly "centripetal" and thus does not betray a debt to primitive cinema as Burch conceives it.[11]

Burch also intends "decentering" to indicate that the shot packs the frame with material of equal narrative significance, all difficult to take in at once. Such

shots present "signs [in] all corners of the screen in their quasi-simultaneity, often without very clear or distinctive indices immediately appearing to hierarchise them, to bring to the fore 'what counts,' to relegate to the background 'what doesn't count.'"[12] Burch's prototypical example of decentering, the opening shot of Porter's *Tom, Tom the Piper's Son*, exemplifies this nonhierarchical strategy: Tom steals the pig while a quarrel takes place, and the theft is partially obscured by other figures.[13]

Certainly we occasionally find dense and distracting compositions in early film. Recall the entry of the Snapper Kid while the gangster dopes the Little Lady's drink in *Musketeers of Pig Alley*.[14] Yet such shots are quite rare, even in the earliest cinema. Charles Musser has pointed out that *Tom, Tom* has a much more "legible" organization in the shots that follow the opening tableau.[15] (It seems likely that the director of *Tom, Tom* simply failed to make the opening shot's action plain.) Furthermore, we also find compositions with conflicting points of interest in sound cinema, as Bazin showed in his discussions of the kitchen scene in *The Magnificent Ambersons* and the piano playing in *The Best Years of Our Lives*.[16] This sort of "decentering" seems a long-standing artistic resource of fictional filmmaking, used on relatively few occasions at any period.

Such truly distracting shots are rare, I think, for one major reason. Even when significant elements are spread across an image, a skillful director can guide our attention among them.[17] Consider another shot from *Fantômas*.

In Moche's office the doorbell rings in the upper right corner of the shot (figure 3). Decentered this bell certainly is, but does it make the shot less intelligible? The bell swings jerkily in an otherwise static frame, and when Moche turns sharply to stare, both his movement and his glance steer our attention to the bell. Then he turns away, thoughtful (figure 4). Even though the doorbell jerks again, it is much less an event the second time; now Feuillade emphasizes Moche's reaction and sharpens our expectation about how he will act. By tucking the bell into the corner of the image, Feuillade has set himself a problem—he must direct the audience's eyes to the ringing bell and back to Moche—and solved it by the straightforward expedient of obliging Moche to look at it and then turn to us.

Simple as this example is, it offers a rebuke to equating long takes (the "autarchy of the shot") with *tableaux* and "centrifugal" compositions. The single-take long shot of the 1910s does not automatically involve decentering, if that implies a composition too scattered to be intelligible in a single viewing. In that era, as today, an image need not be strictly centered if it harmonizes elements across the frame.

Moreover, we can absorb several distinct items across the expanse of the shot if they participate in an intelligible design. Feuillade is typical of directors of his time in being keenly aware of the demands of shot composition. He wrote in 1910:

> In reality, the cinema proceeds as much, if not more, from the art of the painter than from that of the stage director, since cinema addresses itself to our eyes by combinations of light and changing tonalities [*virages*], and by qualities of composition. Why have films not given us sensations of beauty comparable to those aroused by a painting by Millet or a fresco by Puvis de Chavannes?[18]

By 1910 a director could conceive the film image as requiring the same kind of organization to be found in late-nineteenth-century academic painting.[19]

It is thus not surprising that, as in our first examples from *Fantômas*, Feuillade draws upon age-old principles of visual design. Most of his shots more or less center the primary objects of attention. In fact, he may use geometrical centering quite dramatically. In a breathtaking shot during the final chase in *Tih-Minh*, all five of our heroes clamber into a frighteningly tiny cable car (figure 5). The camera pans slightly as they slide off into the distance, riding far above a vast river; as their car dwindles, the cables converge to make it the vanishing point (figure 6). Less flamboyantly, Feuillade utilizes the frame center to introduce startling new material, as when in *Les Vampires* the supposedly dead bank courier reappears in the office and flabbergasts Irma Vep (figures 7-8).

The last example suggests, moreover, that a little variance from geometric centering may be cogent and expressive. In terms of eye movements, no great saccadic sweeps are required to move off center from the resurrected "Spectre" to Irma, or, in figure 9, from Fantômas to the mysterious face in the train car just above him and slightly to the right.

When Feuillade does leave the center of the image vacant, he will often organize the frame by balancing competing centers of attention. Thus, a woman lying on the floor in the lower left foreground is countered by movement in the upper right (*Tih-Minh*, figure 10). The more extreme composition showing Moche's doorbell (figure 3) operates according to a similar principle.

Usually, however, such balance is not achieved by planting the figures in one spot for the duration of the shot. One of the inexhaustible appeals of Feuillade's films, and indeed of the cinema of his

Figure 3. *Fantômas*

Figure 4. *Fantômas*

Figure 5. *Tih-Minh* (1918)

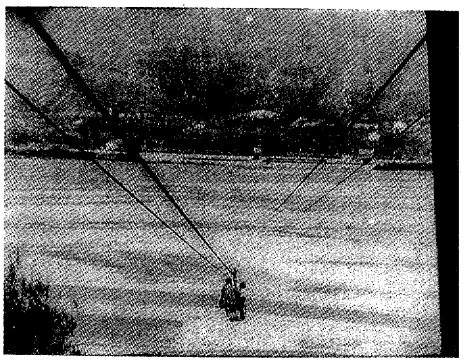

Figure 6. *Tih-Minh*

Figure 7. *Les Vampires* (1915–1916)

Figure 8. *Les Vampires*

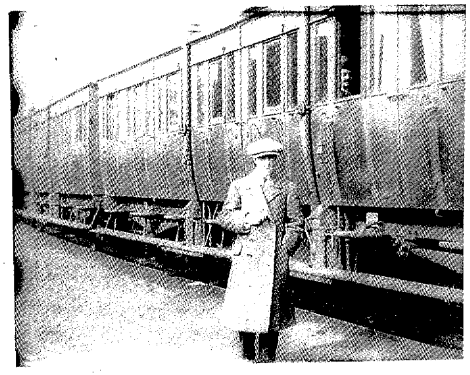

Figure 9. *Fantômas*

Figure 10. *Tih-Minh*

epoch, is the fact that when a director avoids cutting or camera movement, composition of the image creates not a snapshot but a dynamic flux whose stabilities and instabilities unfold over time. Feuillade and his contemporaries show that in the cinema centering, balance, and other pictorial strategies find their most subtle fulfillment instant by instant. An apparently "decentered" image may simply be one which plays dynamically with centering. An element may move out of center, arousing a spatial tension which is relieved or developed by a new element's arriving in the vacant spot. At such moments decentering may be only a prelude to recentering; directing the audience's attention to one element often prepares for shifting attention to another item.

Our study of Feuillade's choreography can start with a comparatively simple example from, again, *Fantômas*. Lady Beltham has lured the actor Valgrand to her home while Gurn (aka Fantômas) is lurking behind the curtain. The plan is to call the police and induce them to mistake the actor for the escaped convict he has portrayed on stage. The action starts with Lady Beltham seated on the left and Valgrand on the right (figure 11). He reacts to the drug she has put in his drink, and she walks to the right side of the frame. As she passes the center of the frame, the curtains part and Gurn starts to peek out (figure 12). Once Lady Beltham arrives at Valgrand's side, Feuillade has her look leftward, directing our eye back to Gurn, who obligingly widens the curtain's gap (figure 13). The revelation of Gurn would not have been so vivid an effect if Lady Beltham had not cleared his zone of the shot by going to frame right.

The frame dynamic is soon inverted. Lady Beltham strides leftward, turning to Valgrand at about the center of the frame. This clears a space on frame right for the prison guards, who enter almost immediately. Gurn closes the curtain (figure 14). After the guards have arrested the groggy actor and departed, Lady Beltham sees them out on the right while Gurn emerges, creating a neatly balanced composition (figure 15). Throughout the scene, decentering serves only to resettle the shot and to direct attention to key elements.

This example is instructive in another way. It reminds us that directors of the 1910s do not have to assume that every viewer must notice every item at the same instant. Part of the director's art is to stretch out the phases of the action long enough for viewers to notice. For instance, perhaps some viewers do spot Gurn at the moment Lady Beltham starts her rightward stroll across the frame (figure 12); by the time she turns to look at him as he peers overtly out of the curtain, I suggest, most viewers register his presence. The director can only prompt, not force, the viewer's attention; but the director can prompt it through a cascade of fairly redundant cues.

Directing with voice augmented by whistling, Feuillade synchronized the actors' movements precisely, guiding them through smooth transitions into short, sharp moments of stasis.[20] The most memorable results are those when gang members draw their guns or fling up their hands at the same instant. Similarly, it is exactly when the "Spectre" turns away to be led to the background that Irma Vep swings back to us so that we can register her reaction (figure 8). A more subtle and sustained case occurs in *Fantômas* when Fandor follows Valgrand and his accomplice through an underground passage over a canal; Feuillade brilliantly orchestrates the characters' silhouettes leaping from side to side, pursuing each other in a gentle oscillation across the central axis that blends moments of poise with symmetrical motion (figures 16–17).

Feuillade's balancing acts get more complicated when the distance between foreground and background increases. Robust depth staging had been common in exterior shots since the beginning of cinema, and within interiors it became steadily more common in the transitional era. Kristin Thompson has traced how American directors worked to fill the empty foreground area of interiors by designing sets with rear entryways and by locating furniture downstage so that figures are motivated to approach the camera.[21] But depth staging also poses compositional problems. Given players of comparable height, to put one closer to the camera is to unbalance the shot.

There are three common ways of solving this problem. The director can push the more distant figure to the geometrical center of the format, compensating for its lesser size by its prime location. In our two frames from *Fantômas*'s theater scene, Valgrand gains saliency simply because he is more centered than Lady Beltham. Second, in the cinema, as in painting, frontality is a magnet for the viewer's eye, so a foreground figure can compensate for its size by turning its, and our, attention to a more frontal figure in the distance. This is what happens when Lady Beltham watches Valgrand's performance in figure 1 and when the bank manager swivels to call attention to the disguised courier in figure 8. Finally, cinema has movement. We can add visual weight to the smaller figure by letting it change position while the foreground actor stays comparatively still (again, as in our theater scene from *Fantômas*).[22] All three strategies allow depth staging to achieve compositional balance around a central zone or axis.

Figure 11. *Fantômas*

Figure 12. *Fantômas*

Figure 13. *Fantômas*

Figure 14. *Fantômas*

Figure 15. *Fantômas*

Figure 16. *Fantômas*

Figure 17. *Fantômas*

In addition, the shot unfolds in time. From the very beginning of cinema, directors displayed a strong urge, at least in exteriors, to pull distant figures downstage to meet their counterparts in the foreground. This tactic not only permits performers to interact on the same plane, but it also promotes compositional stability by spreading roughly equal masses across the frame. Thus diagonal interplay in depth often becomes only one moment in a larger suite of activities that culminate in horizontal interaction. Since the foreground area is by optical necessity narrower than that of the background, characters coming forward are squeezed closer together.[23] With its effect of enlarging the characters, preparing for a confrontation, and narrowing the gap between the figures, the movement from background to foreground became the norm for initiating the scene's action or developing the drama to a higher pitch of intensity.

Feuillade pursues exactly these implications of forward-thrusting action. Again a fairly simple example from *Fantômas* will illustrate. The crooked prison guard calls on Lady Beltham preparatory to the substitution of Valgrand for Gurn. He arrives far back in the shot while she stands downstage, but by turning away from the camera, she grants him some saliency (figure 18). Moreover, instead of having him simply walk to the vacant foreground chair on the right, Feuillade has her cross to sit in the chair as he comes diagonally forward to her previous position (figure 19). By passing through the central zone of the shot, he momentarily heightens his significance before he sits on the love seat on the left, rebalancing the image.

During one scene of *La Nouvelle Mission de Judex*, the foreground figures pile up so rapidly that Feuillade must juggle them very carefully. At his desk, Judex tells Cocantin that Primerose and his son have vanished (figure 20). From the doorway in the rear, Roger bursts in (figure 21) and rushes to the foreground to announce that the dogs have been poisoned. Roger is given a central position, framed by the doorway. Immediately, Dr. Howey enters from the same doorway (figure 22), and this poses a problem for Feuillade: where to put him? The solution is to let Cocantin look behind Roger (figure 23), who then moves aside to let us see the doctor's approach (figure 24) before creating a new, fairly balanced composition of the four men (figure 25).

But now Judex's wife enters from the same doorway! Just as Judex has sworn the men to secrecy, Feuillade cuts in to a medium shot of her (figure 26). We then return to the original setup, which now puts her at the center, two men squarely on each side like bookends, each pair turned and looking in somewhat symmetrical directions (figure 27). Naturally, the wife comes forward. The foreground becomes jammed with people (figure 28), with the flanking characters turning away from us so as to heighten the conversation between the central figures. Again, Feuillade sets himself a visual problem and then solves it by simple but elegant rules of thumb: line the figures up in planes, two in each. Given an even-numbered group, balance them around the frame's vertical axis. With an odd-numbered grouping, keep one figure in the center.

Also, we might add, alternately block and clear a central avenue for upcoming dramatic developments. At intervals Roger conceals the doorway, which is revealed at just the right moments when he swings aside (figures 24, 27). This tactic of blockage and revelation is one of the most useful tools in the *metteur en scène*'s kit. Throughout the 1910s, many directors explored the possibility of drawing the viewer's attention to a zone of the frame by letting a downstage character occupy that area, before moving away to reveal an important figure which is en route to the foreground.

Another scene in *La Nouvelle Mission de Judex* provides a graceful integration of frame balancing with this blocking and clearing of background action. Judex traps two crooks in a cellar and materializes behind them. The most rudimentary staging would have put the two men in the right or left foreground, with Judex emerging from the opposite side in the rear plane. Indeed, the shot begins with the two men on the far right (figure 29). But when they hear Judex shout, "You're prisoners! Throw down your weapons!" they move forward and leftward as they drop their guns and raise their hands (figure 30). There's now a problem of visibility: the man with the cap blocks the doorway. While his partner stops, he continues leftward just as the door opens (figure 31) and Judex is revealed (figure 32). The crook continues his easterly drift until Judex stretches his arm commandingly across the doorway (figure 33). The man's foreground movement wiping across the doorway draws our attention to the center while also delaying and intensifying the revelation of Judex. The crook's final freezing in place gives the climax of the shot a nicely triangulated stability.

One can find many scenes in which Feuillade manipulates shot development so as to conceal and reveal an area of interest in background planes. The opening scene of *Les Vampires*, a virtuosic play with visibility, is a sustained instance. Since I would need a score of frame illustrations to do it justice, I merely highlight some major moments. The journalist Philippe Guérande comes in to his office and finds his dossier on the Vampires missing; he accuses the clerk Mazamette, who confesses. Apart from some titles and inserts of written matter and a photograph,

Figure 18. *Fantômas*

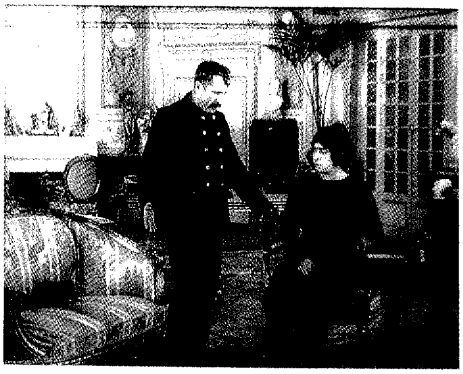

Figure 19. *La Nouvelle Mission de Judex* (1917)

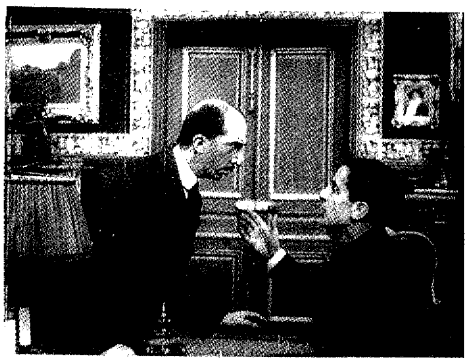

Figure 20. *La Nouvelle Mission de Judex*

Figure 21. *La Nouvelle Mission de Judex*

Figure 22. *La Nouvelle Mission de Judex*

Figure 23. *La Nouvelle Mission de Judex*

Figure 24. *La Nouvelle Mission de Judex*

Figure 25. *La Nouvelle Mission de Judex*

Figure 26. *La Nouvelle Mission de Judex*

Figure 27. *La Nouvelle Mission de Judex*

Figure 28. *La Nouvelle Mission de Judex*

Figure 29. *La Nouvelle Mission de Judex*

Figure 30. *La Nouvelle Mission de Judex*

Figure 31. *La Nouvelle Mission de Judex*

Figure 32. *La Nouvelle Mission de Judex*

Figure 33. *La Nouvelle Mission de Judex*

Feuillade plays out the four-minute scene within a single camera setup.

Philippe enters through the rear door, an aperture which, throughout the scene, will frame foreground elements and provide a channel for entrances and exits (figure 34). In the frontmost plane, Philippe bends to investigate the drawer, and his body blocks the central journalist (figure 35). This allows attention to shift to Mazamette's worried response, given in a fairly frontal view: we may already start to suspect that he is the culprit. Philippe rises as he discovers the robbery, and Feuillade further calls our attention to Mazamette by having him rise in synchronization on frame left (figure 36). Philippe interrogates his colleagues, and Mazamette tries to sneak out in the distance. Philippe's body blocks our view of him (figure 37), accentuating the moment when, clearly if distantly in view on the threshold, Mazamette is halted by Philippe's question (figure 38). Thereafter, as Philippe interrogates Mazamette in the foreground, the pair alternately block the other journalists and reveal their reactions.

Flexible centering, the use of architecture to mark out zones of action, the balancing and rebalancing of the frame, the pivoting of characters toward and away from the camera, and slight shifts which conceal and reveal background action—in this sequence all these strategies mesh smoothly to create a dynamic, intelligible presentation of the scene's action. About all that this scene has in common with the "primitive tableau" is its reliance on long takes. Otherwise, it is something quite different: a subtle choreography guiding our vision to the key dramatic material.

Cutting as a Supplement to Staging

This sort of choreography instantiates what many scholars see as the Russo-Scando-European alternative to Hollywood *découpage*. Yet we should probably take this duality as only a first approximation. For one thing, many American films in the period 1910 to 1915 exploit depth staging along Feuilladean lines. Moreover, the European and Russian films rely on editing to some extent. Throughout the 1910s Sjöström, Bauer, and other accomplished *metteurs en scène* gradually assimilated analytical editing devices.[24] In a careful study of Feuillade's pre-1913 work, Richard Abel has traced his employment of cut-ins, changes of angle, and point-of-view shots.[25] All of the films I am considering here display a gradual adoption of continuity devices, from the occasional cut-ins of *Fantômas* to the eyeline-matching and shot/reverse-shot cutting of *La Nouvelle Mission de Judex*.

Must we then follow Abel's conclusion that Feuillade, like most of his contemporaries, is a somewhat in-between director, with his films providing "a model of negotiation" between "primitive" qualities (long takes, "non-centered compositions") and "institutional" ones such as editing?[26] I want to suggest a somewhat different way of considering the matter. Once we give up the idea of "centrifugal" or all-over staging, we can recognize that both staging and editing are tactics for guiding our attention. Suppose then that we treat cutting during this transitional period not as a pure and exclusive alternative to staging in depth but rather as a complement to it, even an instrument of it.

That is, classical *découpage* subordinates staging to editing, so that the master shot establishes and orients; the space will be articulated primarily through closer views, matches on vision or movement, and the like. Alternatively, we can think of the mise-en-scène directors as generally subordinating editing to staging. Cuts will not only enlarge details (such as the ubiquitous letters, photographs, and visiting cards which cannot be read in the master shot), but a cut may also accentuate an action. We no longer need to see editing as a blemish on the beauty of the unbroken scene or as a concession to Hollywood's colonization of our vision. As Feuillade's works show, continuity cutting is not necessarily antithetical to a "depth aesthetic."

For instance, even conventional uses of analytical cutting can guide the eye in fairly subtle ways. In *Judex*, while old Kerjean waits for Judex and Roger to return from their secret prison, he picks up a mounted photo from the desk (figure 39). An inserted close-up reveals that it shows Favraux's daughter (figure 40). He correctly infers that Judex has fallen in love with her. But now we must remember the photo and watch how other characters interact with it. When Judex and Roger enter from the rear, Kerjean gestures toward the photo (figure 41). After he leaves, Judex broods longingly over the picture while Roger averts his eyes tactfully as he comes to Kerjean's conclusion as well (figure 42). A single cut to the picture has assured that we will make the photo a target in the dynamic of glances played out in the full shot.

Throughout the scene the photograph of Mlle Favraux sits quite visibly in the foreground right of Judex's desk, and we have plenty of time to become aware of it. By contrast, cutting can be used to pick out elements of the frame that cannot be sufficiently stressed by composition or movement. In *Tih-Minh*, the Marquise Dolores is stealing Sir Francis Grey's wallet, but she hides herself when he enters. Grey bends over his drugged valet, alongside a full-length mirror (figure 43). A sharp-eyed viewer may spot, in

Figure 34. *Les Vampires*

Figure 35. *Les Vampires*

Figure 36. *Les Vampires*

Figure 37. *Les Vampires*

Figure 38. *Les Vampires*

Figure 39. *Judex* (1916)

Figure 40. *Judex*

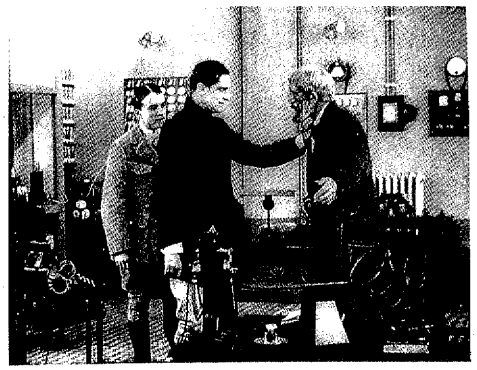

Figure 41. *Judex*

Figure 42. *Judex*

Figure 43. *Tih-Minh*

Figure 44. *Tih-Minh*

Figure 45. *Tih-Minh*

Figure 46. *Tih-Minh*

Figure 47. *Tih-Minh*

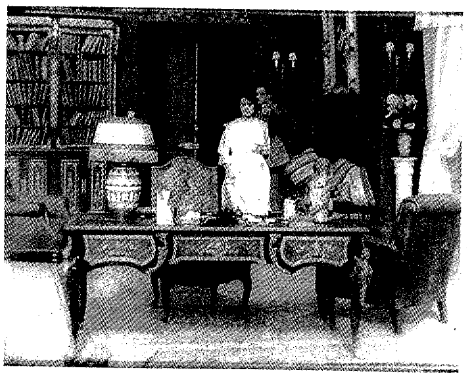

Figure 48. *Tih-Minh*

Figure 49. *Tih-Minh*

the bottom of the mirror's reflection, Dolores's face peering out from under the bed. Feuillade could have seized our attention by letting Dolores make a big movement, but instead he cuts in to the reflection at the moment she pokes a revolver out (figure 44). More boldly, a return to the initial framing shows the pistol firing (figure 45) and Grey ducking aside (figure 46) before he hurls himself onto the offscreen bed, an action revealed in the upper part of the reflection (figure 47). The close-up has allowed the viewer to attend to a slice of space available in the mirror. Far from being a retreat from the integrity of staging, the cut has allowed Feuillade to keep the narrative action intelligible while also leading us to notice activity around the bed, an adjacent region of reflected depth.

Cuts can complement depth compositions in another way. Our example of characters clamoring toward the foreground desk in *La Nouvelle Mission de Judex* has shown that the blocking-and-concealment strategy can be combined with editing: when Mme Judex comes into the room, Feuillade cuts in to her (figure 26) before returning to the master shot (figure 27). In this case, Feuillade stresses the character whose reaction will be most important. (Judex has just insisted that she not be told of the danger facing her family.) But the more general principle seems to be that when a foreground figure blocks something in depth, that action may motivate a cut to the figures which are momentarily concealed. Early in *Tih-Minh*, when Jeanne comes forward to a desk, she is followed by her husband, Jacques (figure 48). Feuillade cuts in and she turns, obscuring him (figure 49). Feuillade then supplies a closer view of him before cutting back to the master shot. Curious though this practice may seem today, it suggests that Feuillade stubbornly adheres to a precept that he will provide a close-up only if something is not fully visible in the long shot because it is tiny (printed matter, a cameo), peripheral (a hand under a bed), or blocked from view.

But this way of putting the matter makes cutting seem only a last resort. In fact, cuts can also reaffirm depth more actively by relocating scenic elements in varied spatial relations. During the famous gun battle among the barrels in *Fantômas*, changing camera positions yield a variety of foreground/background configurations, all anchored in adjacent space by the skiff moored in the distance (figures 50–52). No less virtuosic, though more dramatically motivated, is the banquet scene in *Judex*. As the guests at banker Favraux's home await the clock's striking ten, Feuillade's analytical editing permutes the elements of the scene, preserving and refreshing the depth relations (figures 53–55). Too often historians have presupposed that cutting to closer views necessarily reduces and simplifies the perceptual field. Feuillade's crowded but crisply composed medium-shots remind us that guiding the audience's attention may still become necessary when the camera is fairly close to its subjects.

In some cases, certainly, directors' assimilation of continuity editing did lead to less imaginative staging. But films such as Feuillade's, as well as Bauer's *Child of the Big City* (1914) and Sjöström's *Ingmarssons* (1918), integrate depth and continuity editing in rich ways. If nothing else, Feuillade helps us see how the U.S./European dichotomy needs more nuancing if we are to account for the full range of stylistic practice during this period.

Culture and Stylistic Innovation

If we presuppose that 1910s directors are seeking to guide where we look within the shot, a great deal of Feuillade's practice, and that of his contemporaries, becomes intelligible. Instead of treating this style as a lingering adherence to primitive devices, we can see it as a repertoire of sophisticated tactics for creating overall compositions that, on a moment-by-moment basis, steer our attention to dramatically salient material. These tactics can also be understood as not simply opposed to editing but also often supplemented and strengthened by it.

A final question demands consideration, however. How might we explain the emergence of this style at this moment in history? I am far from offering a full-blown answer, but I think that some currently popular explanatory frameworks will not avail us.

While scholars of early film initially focused on questions of industrial organization and stylistic change, several in the last few years have sought to locate early cinema in distinct cultural contexts. Whatever the virtues of this approach, I want to suggest that it does not furnish answers to every question we might ask. Specifically, the three most commonly invoked explanatory frameworks offer very little help in trying to understand stylistic processes of the kind I have been considering.

Most broadly, there is what we might call the "history of vision" approach. Adherents of this view pursue Walter Benjamin's suggestion that over long periods "the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence."[27] Scholars have therefore proposed that early film corresponds in some ways to changes in ways of seeing within the advanced industrial societies.

If true, Benjamin's claim would have stunning implications, but there seems no good reason to accept it. For one thing, he offers no argument or evidence

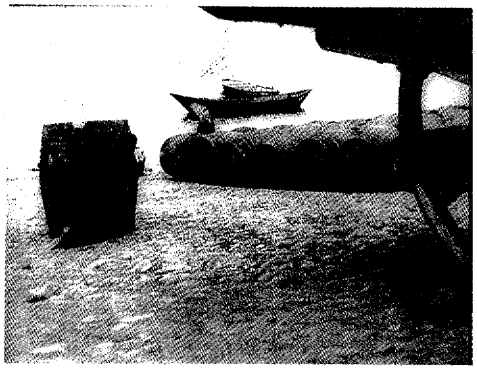

Figure 50. *Fantômas*

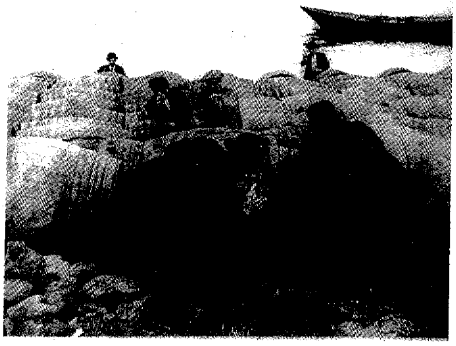

Figure 51. *Fantômas*

Figure 52. *Fantômas*

Figure 53. *Judex*

Figure 54. *Judex*

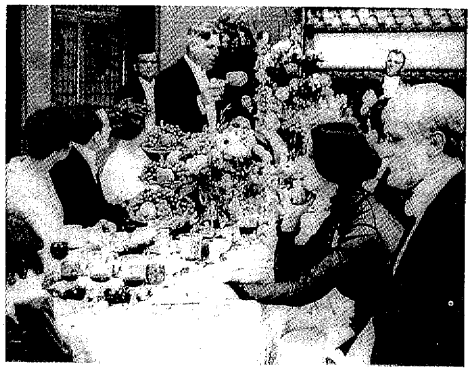

Figure 55. *Judex*

to support it as a general conclusion.[28] Furthermore, since "human sense perception" has evolved over millions of years, we would need a remarkably full story to explain how social factors arising in fifty years or less could alter biologically hard-wired mechanisms. Visual perception is the process of construing the world as a layout of three-dimensional surfaces and volumes, full of movement and furnished with objects and persons. It is not just "physiological," a word which humanists like to apply to any mental activity that lies outside psychoanalysis; perception also involves optics, neurochemistry, anatomy, and psychology. As such, it is highly unlikely that visual perception has changed over recorded human history. It is flagrantly implausible that sensory systems, those mechanisms that transmit energy from the sense organs to the nervous system, should have altered significantly in response to culture.

Note further that no history-of-ideas exposition of various ways in which vision was *theorized* by scientists, tinkerers, and philosophers, let alone ways in which it was *represented* in literature or the visual arts, provides any evidence that there was a corresponding change in sensory perception itself.[29]

The two are often conflated, but discourse cannot change optics, neuronal firings, or the expectation that sunlight comes from above. I have a hunch that when humanists talk about a "history of vision," they are often talking not about visual perception but rather about something much more ill defined which we might call "visual experience."

Even if this approach could be made theoretically tenable, it doesn't help us much with the stylistic matters which our analysis has revealed. For in assuming that image composition can draw attention to this or that element, Feuillade was relying upon very old artistic traditions. Centering, balance, comparative size, foreground/background relations, and the like are centuries-old strategies for composing images. The history-of-vision theory, being very general, does nothing to explain how at this time certain filmmakers adopted these techniques.

Having floated the very broad history-of-vision thesis, Benjamin added a second, somewhat more specific one. He asserted that Western capitalism, roughly since the mid–nineteenth century, had altered the human "apperceptive apparatus" in specific ways. Out of the fragmentation of social life and the rise of the city, "modernity" produced a mode of "distracted perception" quite different from the contemplation which he holds to be characteristic of prior artistic traditions.[30] For Benjamin film becomes the prototypical modern medium because it induces "shock"—bursts of information or emotion like the disconnected stimuli which assail the person in the street. Benjamin, writing in the late 1930s, seems mainly to have had the cinema of the 1920s in mind, while scholars influenced by German sociology and Frankfurt School theory have applied his ideas to pre-1910 film.[31] Can this approach be adapted to films of the 1910s?

Again, we can question the theoretical plausibility of the "fragments of modernity" thesis.[32] Weren't there "fragmented" and "ephemeral" experiences before modernity? Didn't taverns and churches and picture galleries afford some sanctuary from the roaring metropolis of rapacious capitalism? Can we be confident that audiences concentrating on the images before them in a nickelodeon in 1910 were actually and inwardly recoiling from a barrage of perceptual shocks? Isn't it more likely that they were simply taking what they were given, attending to its design, making sense of it as best they could?

Moreover, by assuming that before capitalism people had a more direct (Benjamin would say "auratic") grasp of a work of art, we risk succumbing to the common error of thinking that contemporary life is radically different from all previous experience. The epigraph to Benjamin's essay, taken from Valéry, commits this mistake in almost self-parodic form: "For the last twenty years neither matter nor space nor time has been what it was from time immemorial."[33] This is a gaseous, all-purpose assertion. Utter it in any year since 1850 and you will evoke solemn nods of assent. The success of the ideas of modernism and postmodernism is partly traceable to the persistent belief that our now is drastically different from all their thens.

In any event, it is not clear that the modernity framework helps us much at the level of stylistic analysis. True, we could study *what* Feuillade represents—the city as an endless maze of false appearances and sudden revelations—and interpret it as exemplary of modernity. To scholars already committed to the Benjaminian line this will be an obvious avenue of inquiry. But to explain how Feuillade represents this material, modernity theory has to stretch a fair amount. It would, once more, need to show why these resources are exploited in just these manners of staging, at this time and not at others. This is no easy task, since Benjamin's case for the shock inherent in cinema may not be relevant to mise-en-scène at all. He appears to assume that film instantiates modernity by virtue of editing, not staging.[34]

A third currently popular sort of culturalist explanation might be invoked here. What of the immediate circumstances of reception? Perhaps something in the context of exhibition, or even the wider social matrix, governs the pattern making within Feuillade's shots. Having proposed the hypothesis, I am at a loss to provide any backup. The painting and literature of high modernism came accompanied by a critical and cultural initiative explaining how to consume experimental works, but I do not believe that we have any records that would show that the conditions of reception somehow initiated Feuillade's spectators, let alone their peers in other countries, into an understanding of these films' mise-en-scène. Moreover, there seems to be no need to assume that the principles of shot design I have invoked, so common in visual arts of many cultures and periods, would have needed a special highlighting for cinema audiences of the era. Since this is an empirical matter, I cannot produce a decisive argument on this score; the best I can do is to invite someone to show that the particular image-making strategies at work in the films can be explained through reception conditions. In the course of the conversation that constitutes scholarly research, such an explanation could be a rival to the one I am about to sketch.

At this point, anyhow, there is some reason to think that "culture" in these various guises is an answer that doesn't fit the questions we are asking. If we abandon the hope that some cultural theory will

provide the answer to every question we might pose, we can outline a case that, however tentative, looks somewhat plausible. We can tell a general story that accounts for the stylistic features I have picked out and accords pretty well with our knowledge of the 1910s. And don't worry about "formalism." For one thing, it's not all that horrendous. For another, in this story culture does have a role to play.

E. H. Gombrich has suggested that many changes in the history of visual representation can be understood as efforts to adapt inherited visual forms ("schemata") to new purposes or functions. One example is the growth of realistic painting in Europe around the thirteenth century. The Christian Church, Gombrich argues, sought to dramatize sacred stories for the unlettered faithful. In order to fulfill this purpose, artists experimented with ways to portray figures and locales with greater expressivity and spatial realism. Painters were obliged to adapt from the schemata available to them, not only in the narrative painting of the Greeks but also in the Hellenistic traits that persisted in Byzantine art. Once artists had discovered new means of realistic and expressive depiction, those very means became ends in themselves, and artists competed to find ever richer and more virtuosic ways to render the appearance of the visible world.[35]

Imagine a similar process at work in film around 1909. Since the beginning of the medium, there was a tendency for films to grow longer. One-shot films became multiple-shot films; multiple-shot films became one-reelers; films expanded to several reels and then to feature length—all in response to industrial and cultural demands. There was a concomitant pressure on films to tell longer and more complicated tales.[36] At the level of plot construction, several strategies were pursued: multiplication of lines of action, increasing complications, creation of more complex characterization, and the like. At the level of style, directors were faced with the task of guiding the audience's attention to the most important factors in increasingly intricate stories. Since the individual film was becoming longer, directors had to find ways to intensify the audience's emotional involvement—to make the extra time spent on the film a satisfying investment.

One possibility was pursued by Griffith and others: employ editing so as to complicate the narrative but also to pick out salient details and arouse the viewer through delay and suspense. Another, not necessarily incompatible, alternative was to direct the audience's attention by means of more intricate staging, but this entailed expanding the compositional repertoire so that the audience could follow a more complicated action and enjoy a stronger emotional response. From this perspective, Philippe's discovery of the rifled dossier in *Les Vampires* (figures 34–38) and the piling up of figures in the foreground desk of *La Nouvelle Mission de Judex* (figures 20–28) constitute elegant solutions to the problem of conveying a rapid flow of story events while also maximizing curiosity and excitement.

Another goal may have governed filmmakers' efforts. As films became longer and moved into dedicated venues, apologists for the new medium sought to justify film's cultural credentials. The prestige of literature and theater could legitimize cinema.[37] Filmmakers borrowed plots and players from the stage, and perhaps the sort of elegant ensemble acting we have found in Feuillade served to display the theatrical resources of moving pictures. Moreover, as we've seen, Feuillade broached the idea that artistic cinema would borrow from tasteful salon painting. Feuillade's efforts to balance the frame, to create an overall visual dynamic that lets each narrative element stand out cleanly at the proper moment, may constitute another means of differentiating the new, more self-consciously dignified cinema from its comparatively crude predecessors.

Any new means which Feuillade and his contemporaries might devise could build upon presumably universal perceptual predispositions: the eye is attracted by contrast, movement, and the like.[38] At the same time, the filmmakers could modify certain visual devices already available in their milieu. A great many such devices, I think, were already in place in earlier filmmaking.[39] Some schemata, such as the tendency to balance the figures within the playing space, probably came from the theater as well.[40] Other schemata were doubtless available from academic painting, particularly realist and narrative traditions of the late nineteenth century. Consider, as just one example, the English painter William Frederick Yeames's painting *Defendant and Counsel* (1895; figure 56). In this fairly "decentered" image, the dark counsel balance the brightly lit defendant, with the men's wigs and profiles forming a wedge pointing to the pale, frontally positioned woman on the right. The task for Feuillade and his peers was to shift actors into and out of such harmonious compositions, extending to the moving image principles of visual design already canonized in academic art.

Gombrich also points out that "each gain or progress in one direction entails a loss in another."[41] Thus the Renaissance painter had to reconcile the commitment to a new realism of detail with the demands of clear and harmonious composition.[42] Similarly, Kristin Thompson has suggested that editing was a mixed blessing for early film, with the cut

Figure 56. William Frederick Yeames, *Defendant and Counsel.* 1895. Oil on canvas, 52 1/2" x 78". City of Bristol Museum and Art Gallery.

promising a freedom of time and space but also threatening a loss of narrative clarity.[43] From this standpoint, the mise-en-scène of the Russo-Scando-European tradition can be seen as a conservative, low-risk strategy; directors, it seemed, had more confidence in their ability to guide the viewer within the sustained shot than in their power to build a scene from the newly emerging rules of continuity editing. But this conservatism in turn courted new problems, problems of pacing, of maintaining interest, and of keeping everything in proportionate significance as the action developed. Depth staging offered a neat solution. A more or less frontal foreground figure is an eye-catcher, a key point of orientation for the rest of the action in the frame. By making other figures also frontal but more central or engaged in more vigorous movement, the director could balance the shot and encourage a scanning that would pick out the salient elements. Furthermore, as we've seen, the powerful advantages of carrying the players downstage coordinate naturally with the rising tension of a scene's action.

Yet depth staging poses new problems. Once characters move closer to the camera, they occupy more frame space and they may blot out important action behind them. Hence the need to vary the staging in the course of the scene: diagonal layouts of figures become lateral ones in the foreground (figures 18–19), lateral arrangements rotate or hopscotch around the central axis (figures 11–15), impulses thrusting directly to the camera hit the foreground and spread out (figures 20–28).

A great deal more research would need to be done to test these hypotheses. Still, this emphasis on means and ends, function and form, seems a promising way to make some sense of how filmmakers found innovative solutions to the problems they encountered. I should add that this sketch would not exclude other explanatory factors. For instance, economic causes might have a role to play. A cinema dominated by editing requires fairly careful planning, if not full-blown shooting scripts; but staging-based shooting can get by with less blueprinting. (Feuillade apparently did, relying only on a sheet of jottings.[44]) If the

director has authority in the studio and works with the same cast and crew from film to film (as Feuillade did), a style based on long takes can be very efficient, turning out many minutes of footage per day.[45] Part of the reason that directors in Europe and Russia continued to rely on master scenes for so long may have been that they did not set much store by the pre- and postproduction control afforded by editing; they sculpted the action, in a phrase Minnelli used much later, by "pulling the scene through the camera."[46]

Nonetheless, we ought to stress the aesthetic consequences of any pertinent factors we might ascribe to the mode of production. The admirable choreography developed by Feuillade and his contemporaries constitutes a sustained effort to shape the viewer's attention by a more refined control of composition and depth than had been common in cinema before 1909. Cultural and economic factors played an important role, but once the incentive to innovate was in place, artists had a formal problem: to modify existing schemata in order to solve problems of narrative legibility. As they gained mastery, filmmakers appear to have set themselves new difficulties, often sheerly for the sake of overcoming them (figures 43–47). In the process, these filmmakers refined several staging techniques that remain with us today. Re-cast for purposes of continuity storytelling, these schemata found further development in the hands of Renoir and Mizoguchi, Hawks and Preminger, Antonioni and Jancsó, Angelopoulos and Hou Hsiao-Hsien.

There are general lessons here. First, not all questions call for the same sorts of answers; one doctrine, no matter how awesomely comprehensive (e.g., a "history of vision"), cannot fruitfully be applied to every case that might interest us. Second, one can do history without making cultural factors the most pertinent and proximate cause of every happening; again, the questions shape the range of plausible answers. Finally, those who seek to dissolve the study of style—or more generally, the films as formal constructs—wholly into matters of particular conditions of reception may well miss many of the most intriguing things about those films.

More particularly, and in answer to our initial questions, we can suggest that one mission of Feuillade and his peers was to find a more complex staging adequate to longer films displaying more twists of action and emotional complexities. The new mission of Feuillade—the one we can choose to assign him—might be to stand as an emblem of the elegant intricacy of 1910s cinema. That intricacy springs from artists' ingenious exploration of resources of the film medium, an exploration not wholly reducible to the machinations of Culture.

NOTES

This essay is indebted to Noël Carroll, Don Crafton, Charlie Keil, Kristin Thompson, Tom Gunning, and Lea Jacobs for comments and suggestions. I thank Gabriel Claes and the staff of the Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique for facilitating my access to the Feuillade films.

Yeames's *Defendant and Counsel* is reprinted by kind permission of the City of Bristol Museum and Art Gallery.

1. Tom Milne, "The Real Avant-Garde," *Sight and Sound* 32.3 (1963): 149.

2. For other examples, see Francis Lacassin, *Louis Feuillade* (Paris: Seghers, 1964) 101, and Richard Roud, "Louis Feuillade and the Serial," *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary: The Major Film-Makers, Volume One: Aldrich to King*, ed. Richard Roud (New York: Viking, 1980) 350.

3. Jean Mitry, *Histoire du cinéma*, vol. 1 (Paris: Editions Universitaires, 1967) 418–19.

4. Bazin, "Pour en finir avec la profondeur de champ," *Cahiers du Cinéma* April 1951: 18–19. Bazin's suggestion that Feuillade was virtually obliged to avoid editing within the scene does not hold up; the scene does contain cuts closer to the stage. Moreover, reverse-angle cutting from a stage performance to an audience had been used intermittently some years before *Fantômas*; a frequently cited case is Griffith's *The Drunkard's Reformation* of 1909.

5. Burch, *Life to Those Shadows* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990) 74. Burch declares *Fantômas* a paradigm instance of the "Primitive Mode of Representation" (186).

6. See, for instance, the work of Kristin Thompson, Ben Brewster, Richard Abel, and Barry Salt. See also Tom Gunning, "Notes and Queries about the Year 1913 and Film Style: National Styles and Deep Staging," *1895 Hors Série* (1993): 198–204.

7. I hope to develop this case in greater detail in a forthcoming book on the history of film style. After this essay was completed, I learned that Yuri Tsivian is working along similar lines in analyses of Bauer, Hofer, and other directors, but as of this writing I have not seen the results of his research.

8. For a clear review of the issues, see Robert L. Solso, *Cognition and the Visual Arts* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994) 129–55. A superb application of eye-movement theory to the study of a single painting is Michael Baxandall's "Fixation and Distraction: The Nail in Braque's *Violin and Pitcher* (1910)," *Sight and Insight: Essays on Art and Culture in Honour of E. H. Gombrich at 85*, ed. John Onians (London: Phaidon, 1994) 398–415.

9. I need not claim that directors *determine* where spectators look or when they look there; the director cannot program the spectator's vision absolutely. We can turn away from the screen, close our eyes, or fixedly stare at the lower right corner of the frame. Nonetheless, directors create the conditions under which spectators are prompted (cued, encouraged) to concentrate on certain parts of the frame. Because of our predispositions, and all other things being equal, pictorial factors such as those I've enumerated oper-

ate as default values, a sort of "line of least resistance" that assumes that all other things are equal. I thank Don Crafton for pushing me to refine this point and Noël Carroll for suggesting some ways to explicate it.

10. Burch 17, 152–54. Burch also discusses "de-centering" as a psychological state; "centering" gives the spectator a sense of left/right phenomenological orientation, particularly by means of continuity editing techniques. See the section called "Centring" in the booklet *Correction Please* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1979) n.p. In this essay I am not concerned with "centering" in this sense.

11. Richard Abel has called attention to the expressive significance of empty frame centers in Feuillade's pre-1910 work. See "Before *Fantômas*: Louis Feuillade and the Development of Early French Cinema," *Post Script* 7.1 (1987): 12–13.

12. Burch 154.

13. Burch 152–53.

14. This shot is illustrated in David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993) 210, figure 6.85. Russell Merritt analyzes Griffith's use of decentering in "Mr. Griffith, *The Painted Lady*, and the Distractive Frame," *Image* December 1976: 26–30.

15. *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (New York: Scribners, 1990) 383.

16. Bazin, *Orson Welles: A Critical View*, trans. Jonathan Rosenbaum (New York: Harper and Row, 1978) 72–73; "William Wyler ou le Janseniste de la mise en scène," *Ou'est-ce que le cinéma?* vol. 1 (Paris: Cerf, 1969) 166–67.

17. Burch touches on this possibility in discussing Rodin's commentary on narrative sequentiality in Watteau's *Embarcation for Cythera*, but he assumes—too quickly, in my opinion—that the guiding of the spectator's eye was successfully accomplished only in the cinema of the "Institutional" mode at the end of the 1920s (153–54).

18. Cited in Lacassin 115.

19. The models to be emulated might seem only to confirm Feuillade's "petty-bourgeois" tastes. (If he had mentioned Courbet and Redon instead, he might be redeemable as a protomodernist.) Still, both Millet and Puvis de Chavannes exploit a clarity of outline and a purity of composition that are not wholly alien to Feuillade's cinematic style.

20. Lacassin 74–75.

21. Kristin Thompson, "The Formulation of the Classical Style, 1909–28," *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia UP, 1985) 200–23.

22. I adopt the term "visual weight" from Rudolf Arnheim's fine book, *The Power of the Center: A Study of Composition in the Visual Arts: The New Version* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1988).

23. Ben Brewster explores the effect of the "visual pyramid" on staging in his forthcoming book with Lea Jacobs, *From Theatre to Cinema*.

24. Tom Gunning suggests that 1913 may be the apogee of long-take deep staging in Europe, indicating that cutting comes to be more significant thereafter (203–04).

25. Abel 6–9.

26. Abel 9, 19.

27. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968) 222.

28. Benjamin simply cites Riegl and Wickhoff's study of "the organization of perception" at various periods, as reflected in art (222). In a broader sense, Benjamin seeks to revise the ideas about visual culture articulated by that purportedly "formalistic" German-language art historiography of the nineteenth century. Recall, for instance, that Heinrich Wolfflin's famous apothegm in *Principles of Art History* that "not everything is possible at all times" is followed immediately by the claim, "vision itself has a history" (p. 11 in the Dover reprint [New York, n.d.]). On the development of the "history of vision" argument within art historiography, see Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1982).

29. I have in mind here Jonathan Crary's *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT P, 1990). Crary's account of the history of vision is critically dissected by Margaret Atherton in her forthcoming paper, "How to Write the History of Vision: Understanding the Relationship between Berkeley and Descartes." I am grateful to Margaret for sharing this paper with me.

30. Benjamin 239–42.

31. Recent examples are Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1993) 97–100, and Tom Gunning's "'Now You See It, Now You Don't': The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions," *Velvet Light Trap* 32 (1993): 3–12.

32. I borrow the title of David Frisby's influential book *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmer, Kracauer and Benjamin* (Cambridge: MIT P, 986). This is a major source for contemporary culturalist accounts of modernity and early cinema.

33. Benjamin 217.

34. Film's "changes of place and focus . . . periodically assail the spectator. . . . No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed" (Benjamin 238). I presume that Benjamin here refers to cutting between scenes; if he were thinking of shifting movement within the single shot, nothing he says would not also apply to theatrical performance in all places and periods.

35. Gombrich has discussed this process on many occasions; an early statement is in *The Story of Art* (London: Phaidon, 1950) 131–208.

36. See Thompson 167–73. For an effort to study how Feuillade's narrative construction responded to the demand for complex films, see Nathalie Leplongeon, "*Les Vampires* de Feuillade, une strategie de cooperation spectatorielle," *Iris* 17 (Fall 1994): 167–82.

37. See William Uricchio and Roberta Pearson, *Reframing Culture: The Case of the Vitagraph Quality Films* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993).

38. For a speculative discussion of how visual conventions could arise from some such "contingent universals," see my "Convention, Construction, and Cinematic Vision," *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1995) 87–111.

39. I cannot develop this claim in detail here; I try to show it in a forthcoming book on the historiography of film style.

40. Still, Ben Brewster reminds us that we ought not to expect that the comparatively broad, shallow playing area of the stage has an exact equivalent in the narrow but deep playing space of cinema.

41. Gombrich 3.

42. Gombrich 190.

43. Thompson 162.

44. See Jacques Champreux, "Le Fantômas de Louis Feuillade," *Ecran* 15 October 1978: 44.

45. On Feuillade's troupe, see Champreux 49–50.

46. Minnelli is quoted to this effect in Eric Sherman, *Directing the Film: Film Directors on Their Art* (New York: Little, Brown, 1976) 128.