CAMERA DISTANCE AND MAX LINDER AT PATHÉ-FRÈRES

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Abstract

This article surveys staging practices in a sample of films from Pathé-Frères featuring the comedian Max Linder. The examination concerns the distance between camera and actor, and particularly the tendency in cinema by 1910 to reduce the distance in ways that enable the naturalism of actors' performances. This tendency, which was a transnational development involving the main production companies in Europe and the U.S. at around the same time, is approached through a comparative framework, with a focus on similarities between staging in the Linder films (Pathé-Frères) and in the films directed contemporaneously by D.W. Griffith (Biograph). The analysis employs statistical methods in combination with conventional practices of film-historical research to show that Linder's films devoted more running time to shots featuring a reduced camera distance than Griffith's, and that the difference can be explained with reference to Linder's persona as a comic performer.

This article examines changes in staging in cinema over the late aughts/early teens through a focus on Max Linder's work for Pathé-Frères. The analysis emphasizes one change specifically: the reduction in distance between camera and actor that became evident around 1909, when actors increasingly appeared in framings too tight to capture their entire bodies.[1] Until then, producers in the motion picture industry ordinarily required that actors appear full-figure, and at mid-decade it was standard practice to place the camera far enough to ensure visibility of the actor's whole body. Distance was determined by physical barriers, with twelve feet the minimum for tall actors. At the same time, actors occasionally crossed the so-called frontline to come closer to the camera, and in 1909 a close camera placement – a camera positioned at nine feet rather than twelve, which framed actors from the knees up, in the manner of what became known as the *plan américain* – became common at Vitagraph and soon at Biograph, Pathé-Frères, and other companies.[2]

This article examines the move toward the reduced camera distance relative to the films of screen comedian Max Linder. The method is comparative, with a focus on similarities between staging practice in the Linder films made at Pathé-Frères versus that in the films directed by D.W. Griffith contemporaneously for Biograph. The comparison involves the use of statistical methods of film analysis, which allow for stylistic comparisons across a large body of films. The reduced frontline was a transnational development involving the main production companies in Europe and the

U.S. at around the same time. Statistical methods, when supplementing conventional approaches to film analysis, provide a way of bringing out the transnational dimension of staging technique, while also allowing for relatively precise comparisons of one filmmaker's staging practice to another's.

The new frontline

The widespread adoption by around 1910 of the nine-foot camera placement was crucial to cinema's evolving status as art and entertainment, enabling acting performances more scaled-down, interiorized and psychologically inflected than what motion picture viewers were accustomed to. In 1911, Victorin Jasset, director of the Nick Carter series at Éclair, linked current innovation in acting to a new "American school" exemplified by Vitagraph, whose films of the past few years had drawn critical acclaim in Europe. In the Vitagraph productions, Jasset observed, tight framings in which actors remained stationary allowed the actor's physiognomy to become an expressive resource:

> *Les Américains avaient remarqué l'intérêt que pourrait donner le jeu de physionomie dans les premiers plans, et ils s'en étaient servis, sacrifiant le décor, l'ensemble de la scène quand il le fallait pour présenter au public les figures des personnages qui restent à peu près immobile. Le jeu rapide les avait effrayés et le jeu était absolument calme, d'un calme exagéré.*[3]

Jasset's praise for American motion picture acting signaled a shift in the early 1910s in the direction of influence for artistic innovation in cinema. European films had made up some seventy percent of the films shown in the United States during the nickelodeon boom of the late aughts, when films from French companies, and Pathé-Frères specifically, proved highly popular with American audiences.[4] Routinely commended in *The Moving Picture World* and *The New York Dramatic Mirror* for their artistic quality, the Pathé pictures set a standard for artistic quality for American producers. By 1910, however, the balance of power shifted, as Pathé's share of the film market in the United States began declining and critics there started comparing American films favorably to prestigious European films such as the Pathé-sponsored Film d'Art productions. A major figure in this regard was D.W. Griffith, who began experimenting with nine-foot framings in 1908, within months of becoming a director at Biograph.[5] Here as at Vitagraph, the adoption of the close frontline boosted the naturalism of the actors' performances in ways that drew popular acceptance and critical acclaim. In the United States by 1910, American-made films from Biograph, Vitagraph and other companies had "displaced Pathé's as exemplars of verisimilar acting," reports Richard Abel.[6]

The case of Max Linder

Max Linder (1883-1925), the screen comedian, is an intriguing figure in connection with the new staging practices. Linder began appearing in films as early as 1905, when he occasionally played walk-on roles while also performing on stage.[7] In 1907, Linder began featuring in lead roles in comic films from Pathé-Frères directed by Louis Gasnier and others, and he became involved

in writing and directing, two activities that he undertook officially in 1911.[8] By then Linder had achieved worldwide fame through his film roles, which led historians to declare him the world's first international movie star.[9] Linder's contributions as a director and filmmaker remain unclear, and have been overshadowed by his status as a major star and his association with comedy, a low-prestige genre. A further factor behind the critical neglect of the style of Linder's films may be the apparent simplicity of Linder's film technique. Motivated by considerations of visual intelligibility and narrative clarity, Linder's films were less conspicuously "artistic" than the productions of Film d'Art and "high class" films from Vitagraph and Biograph. In any case, from early in his career Linder had experimented with shots taken from a camera positioned at nine feet and less, with extra-tight framings appearing in his films as early as 1907 – as in, for example, *Les Débuts d'un patineur*. Moreover, these framings imply purposes that were somewhat novel in cinema at the time.

Linder's recourse to the reduced camera distance can be seen as a function of the personality-based comedy that he had pioneered. While other comedians had appeared in recurring roles in series of films, Linder's character "Max" was rendered with unusual sociological precision. A "*rentier*," as Richard Abel describes him, Max was a specific social type, an idle, bourgeois dandy living off his family's money, and perpetually searching for a wealthy woman to marry.[10] Conforming to the social stereotype were the character's personal traits. "A svelte and handsome young boulevardier, with sleek hair, trimmed moustache, and impeccably shiny silk hat which survived all catastrophes," as David Robinson puts it,[11] Max's blend of social and personal characteristics conditioned the nature of the comedy, shifting it away from the circus-clown acrobatics and knock-about slapstick endemic to the early screen and toward the sentimentality of genteel drama.

Staging in cinema circa 1909

Linder's departure from the contemporaneous norm for motion picture comedy is said to have anticipated Chaplin's Tramp of the mid-1910s, an assessment endorsed by Chaplin himself.[12] Linder's status today as a precursor to Chaplin raises a familiar danger in the study of cinema prior to 1915: the anachronism of defining the early films from the standpoint of the narrative cinema that developed later, in the mid-1910s, with the rise of the feature film and Hollywood's emergence as the world's main motion-picture producer and distributor. In light of later developments, it can become difficult to see staging practices in early cinema as anything but a primitive antecedent for the narrative cinema of the late-1910s. To counteract the tendency toward anachronism, André Gaudreault advises the use in film-historical analysis of terminology contemporaneous with the period in question, which can reveal important aspects of the object of study that might otherwise go unnoticed.[13]

The relevance of questions of terminology to staging practice is suggested by the history of the term "close-up," whose meaning underwent a transformation in the early 1910s. Initially, from 1907 to around 1912 – the period of concern in this article – the close-up referred not to a shot revealing a detail of the action but to cases in which an actor physically approached a stationary camera.[14] It was only later that the term acquired the meaning it retains today, as the designator for a shot isolating a significant narrative element, typically a face. In acknowledgment of how the close-up was understood circa 1910, my analysis of Max Linder's films employs a terminology

based on camera distance. Thus, instead of designating the principal shot categories with the familiar labels of long shot, close-up, and medium shot, whose current meanings postdated Linder's tenure at Pathé, I instead use the terms "nine-foot" and "twelve-foot," along with two variations thereof, i.e., "less-than-nine-foot" and "more-than-twelve-foot."[15]

Why replace the familiar terms close-up, medium shot et al. with the old frontline vocabulary? In some cases, the difference is unimportant, with the terminological change producing no effect on the analysis. Put another way, in these instances, a "twelve-foot shot" corresponds to what Richard Abel, in the analyses performed in *The Ciné Goes to Town*, calls a "full shot," i.e., a "shot of a person from the feet up," and my "nine-foot shot" corresponds to his "American shot" or "shot of a person from the knees up."[16] In other cases, however, the use of the camera-distance language alters the way the shots are categorized. The frontline confronted filmmakers as a material reality, a physical barrier, staked out on the floor of the set, and constraining the actors' mobility. The material conditions of early staging practices ensure that the frontline had been in the minds of filmmakers at the time. Around 1910, the space of the shot, the choreography of the actors' movements, was organized around the frontline, with many shots in the films of the mid-aughts constructed so that the bulk of the acting – the main, narratively significant interaction between the actors – ends up occurring there.

The terms nine-foot and twelve-foot are not meant to imply that the camera is necessarily placed at those exact distances, since retaining an actor's full figure depended on the actor's height. More to the point is the difference between shots containing the actor's entire body (which, in my analysis, involve a twelve-foot or more-twelve-foot placement), versus shots that don't, which I classified as either nine-foot shots or less-than-nine-foot. My practice was to categorize shots according to the site of the principal narrative action, regardless of how deep the shot's space is, or where the actors enter or exit the frame. The common pattern circa 1910 is for the action to start out on the twelve-foot line or further back, with the actors' entire bodies visible, and then move up to nine feet, where the main interaction happens in *plan américain*, from the knees on up. In my system, such shots are counted as nine-foot shots rather than as long or full shots.

A sense of how close the actors come to the camera in Linder's films relative to Griffith's is suggested in the following chart (fig. 1). The chart reports the findings of my use of the cinemetrics interface to track the shift over 1908-1913[17] toward closer framings in samples taken from two bodies of films: the Max Linder films made for Pathé-Frères and the Biograph productions directed by D.W. Griffith. To sharpen the comparison I counted only the Linder films released over 1908-1913, the years coinciding with Griffith's tenure at Biograph.

A notable feature of the chart is the sameness of the profile for the two samples, especially for the nine-foot and twelve-foot shots. Despite the substantial differences between these two filmmakers, in both cases, roughly half of the running time per film, on average, is assigned to shots whose main action is staged on the twelve-foot line and roughly one-fourth of the running time goes to the nine-foot framings. Also striking is a difference between the two samples: the percentage for the less-than-nine-foot shots is far lower in the Griffith films than in the Linder. Griffith became famous for bringing his actors close to the camera, for inventing the close-up, as he had boasted; but Linder and his co-workers at Pathé-Frères, fig. 1 suggests, pushed further in this respect than had Griffith, devoting, on average, more than four times the screen time to action staged for an extra-short camera distance.[18]
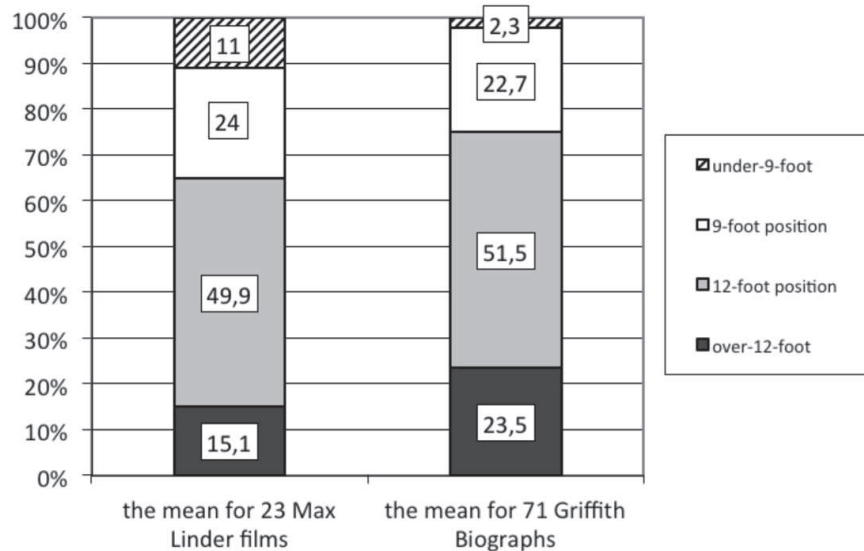
Fig. 1 – The mean running time percentage devoted to shots involving specific camera placements for Linder's films relative to Griffith's for the years 1908-1913

The statistics on shot length displayed in fig. 1 provide a sense of the relative prominence of particular framings. But assessing the framings raises the question of the function they perform, which was not necessarily the same in Linder as in Griffith. A key difference is that in Linder's films the closest shots are often reserved for the end, where they allow Linder to display his virtuosity as a performer through a series of facial expressions. Such shots function as what have been called emblematic close-ups, in which an actor's face is enlarged for expressive purposes related to the film's story but in a manner disconnected from plot causality. "[I]ntended to betoken the gist of the story rather than to present a part of it," as Yuri Tsivian explains,[19] emblematic close-ups introduce a level of abstraction, alluding to story events without fully belonging to them.

Emblematic endings are common in the films Max Linder made for Pathé-Frères. The gap between the narrative events of *Max lance la mode* (1912) and the concluding shot of the two children provides a strong, if atypical example of an emblematic conclusion. More characteristic of Linder's oeuvre is *Les Débuts d'un patineur* (1907), which concludes with a very close, less-than-nine-foot camera placement in which Max, facing the camera while sneezing and shuddering, suffers the result of his winter adventure. Later films in the Max Linder series feature similar concluding shots but typically with even tighter framings, as in *Max ne se mariera pas* (1910) (fig. 2), which concludes with a super-close framing of Max struggling to remove glue from his face but only aggravating the mess.

Fig. 2 – A frame from the final shot of *Max ne se mariera pas*

In showcasing the actor's repertoire of facial expressions, tight shots like these can be said to offer an attraction in excess of the narration. Adding to the autonomy is the extent to which such shots recalled a popular early film genre, the "funny face" films featuring vaudevillians, which trace back to the earliest motion pictures, such as Edison's *The Sneeze* (1894) and *May Irwin Kiss* (1896).[20] The composition from *Le Premier Cigare d'un collégien* (1908) reproduced in fig. 3 has been identified by Richard Abel as a re-creation of a tableau from an earlier Pathé film with the same title (1903) starring music-hall comedian Félix Galipaux.[21]

But if the facial displays in Linder's films count as a vestige of early cinema practice, they also, in certain cases, imply a more complex function. In depicting the consequences of Max's latest (mis)adventure, concluding shots like the one in fig. 2 exhibit a degree of narrative integration that exceeds what the category of the emblematic shot requires. Adding to the story relevance of these shots is the high degree of expressive coherence of the performance, the consistency of the actor's ensemble of "performance signs."[22] The facial contortions notwithstanding, Max remains in character throughout, thus allowing the concluding shots of *Max ne se mariera pas* and other Linder films to come across as sentimental in tone rather than farcical. The understated naturalism of Linder's interaction with the dog in the concluding shot of *Max et son chien Dick* (1912) offers a case in point. Such examples appear early in Linder's work, as is the case in *Le Premier Cigare d'un collégien*, which ends at nine feet with the pietà-like tableau of Max's mother comforting him on the sofa.

Shots similar to the concluding, emblematic shots in Linder's oeuvre also appear within the body of the film rather than at the end. In *Le Premier Cigare d'un collégien* (1908), for instance, less-than-nine-foot framings occur throughout the film, and are used in ways that anticipate the close-up as understood later – a shot of an actor's face or a detail in the action. The main example occurs about halfway into the film's running time, when Max approaches a café to sit at an outdoor table, the action staged on the twelve-foot line. Max's act of taking out a cigar and lighting up motivates the cut to the next shot, a one-minute take staged much closer to the camera, in which Max reacts to the novelty of smoking.

Fig. 3 – A frame from *Le Premier Cigare d'un collégien*

The blacked-out background in this less-than-nine-foot framing suggests the isolation of a studio set, which is somewhat mitigated by the presence in the mise-en-scène of the table top, the glass, and the bottle, which invoke the café setting of the preceding establishing shot. When the shot concludes with Max becoming nauseous from the cigar, the scale of Linder's acting, as always, is matched to the camera placement, favoring facial expressions that are comic but not

manic or grotesque. The seamless transition from the tight framing to the next shot, a twelve-foot framing in which Max, overdosed on tobacco, stumbles down the street in a stupor, makes the shot seem less emblematic and more like a close-up in the sense understood today, as an enlargement of an actor's face for storytelling purposes.

The filmmakers' awareness of the effects of framing is implicit in a further close-up shot in *Le Premier Cigare d'un collégien*, which occurs when Max, a moment later, returns home, enters his hallway, and finds that he can't open the door. His trial-and-error struggle to insert cigars and other objects into the key hole is captured in a lengthy take. Linder (or perhaps Gasnier or someone else) seems to have regarded the manner in which the framing isolates the motion of hand and arm as comedic in its own right. Here the comedy derives as much from the nature of the framing as from the actor's performance.[23]

In comparison to the Linder comedies, the Film d'Art productions exhibit a more conservative staging. In *L'Assassinat du duc de Guise* (1909), the first and most famous of the Film d'Art films, actors periodically freeze into tableau-like poses in the manner of a high-end stage play, with the camera positioned at more than twelve feet from the action. The one exception is the twelve-foot moment that happens around two-thirds of the way into the film, when the Duke, just prior to the assassination, enters the room of conspirators through the doorway at the rear and then proceeds forward up to the twelve-foot frontline, the act underscored by the actor's brief look into the camera. The reliance in *L'Assassinat du duc de Guise* on a camera positioned at a distance greater than twelve feet suits the film's frequent replication of historical tableau. The painterly shot compositions, with their rendition of the actors' full figures, signaled artistic quality of a traditional sort, in line with the representational norms of bourgeois theatre. But narrative technique in cinema was evolving quickly, and in ways divorced from stage-entertainment precedent. My project here has been to outline the role played by Linder in this evolution.

Conclusion

Linder's exploration of the possibilities for motion picture acting enabled by the short frontline was inseparable from the nature of his comedy. In establishing Max as both a fictional character and a star actor/personality, the reduced camera distance played an essential role. In this regard, Linder's films differ from the output of Biograph and Film d'Art, neither of which foregrounded the performers' personalities in the same way. The emphasis on personality in Linder's work at Pathé-Frères points to Linder's status as a prototype for what American cinema would become in the late 1910s, with the emergence of star-oriented Hollywood as the world's major film producer and exporter. The characterization of Max Linder as the first movie star raises the danger discussed earlier in this article of imposing on Linder's body of work an anachronistic conceptual framework. To counteract this possibility, Linder's films can be examined in contexts contemporaneous with them, which I've tried to do in the preceding pages relative to questions of staging.

1   On staging practice in early cinema, see the valuable survey of period reports in Jean-Pierre Sirois-Tra-han, *Le Passage de la barre: transformation de la mise en scène dans le cinéma des premiers temps*, in Laura Vichi (ed.), *L'uomo visibile/The Visible Man*, Proceedings of VIII Convegno Internazionale di Stu-di sul Cinema/International Film Studies Conference (Udine, 21-24 March 2001), Forum, Udine 2002, pp. 33-40.

2   On the importance of the reduced frontline to acting in American films, see Roberta Pearson, *Eloquent Gestures. The Transformation of Performance Style in the Griffith Biograph Films*, University of Califor-nia Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles 1992, pp. 93-94, 126-127, 162n; and Barry Salt, *Moving into Pictures. More on Film History*, *Style, and Analysis*, Starword, London 2006, pp. 111-113.

3   Victorin Jasset, "Le cinéma contemporain," in *Ciné-Journal*, 21 October 1911; quoted in Jean-Pierre Sirois-Trahan, *Le Passage de la barre: Transformation de la mise en scène dans le cinéma des premiers temps*, cit., p. 38.

4   See the account of the importance of Pathé-Frères to the North American film market in Richard Abel, *The Red Rooster Scare. Making Cinema American, 1900-1910*, University of California Press, Berke-ley-Los Angeles 1999.

5   Griffith's staging is discussed further in my paper, *Staging and Acting in the Griffith Biographs*, in Frank Gray et al. (eds.), *Performing New Media 1890-1915*, Domitor International Early Cinema Association, John Libbey Publishing, Eastleigh, forthcoming.

6   Richard Abel, *The Red Rooster Scare. Making Cinema American, 1900-1910*, cit., p. 137.

7   On Linder's early career between stage and screen, see Frank Bren, "Ripple Effect: The Theatrical Life of Max Linder," in *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 3, August 2009, pp. 242, 253n.

8   On Linder's evolving position at Pathé-Frères, see Laurent Le Forestier, *Aux sources de l'industrie du cinéma. Le modèle Pathé, 1905-1908*, L'Harmattan, Paris 2007, p. 208.

9   See Jack Spears, "Max Linder Was the Motion Picture's First Truly International Star," in *Films in Re-view*, vol. 16, no. 5, 1965, p. 272.

10 Richard Abel, *The Ciné Goes to Town. French Cinema, 1896-1914*, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles 1994, p. 237.

11 David Robinson, *Max Linder,* in Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (ed.)*, The Oxford History of World Cinema*, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York 1996, p. 117. See François de la Brétèque, *Linder, Max*, in Richard Abel (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema*, Routledge, London-New York 2005, p. 390.

12 The key document regarding Chaplin was the widely reproduced photo, dated 12 May 1917, which is inscribed in Chaplin's handwriting with a dedication in which Chaplin refers to himself as Linder's "dis-ciple."

13 André Gaudreault, *Film and Attraction. From Kinematography to Cinema*, University of Illinois Press, Champaign 2011, pp. 32-47.

14 On the history of the term "close-up," see André Gaudreault, *Film and Attraction. From Kinematogra-phy to Cinema*, cit., p. 54; and David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA)-London 1997, pp. 121-123.

15 Regarding the terms, see the discussion of staging practice in the unpublished memoirs of J. Stuart Blackton, quoted in Roberta Pearson, *Eloquent Gestures. The Transformation of Performance Style in the Griffith Biograph Films*, cit.

16 Richard Abel, *The Ciné Goes to Town. French Cinema, 1896-1914*, cit., pp. xxiii.

17 An independent samples *t*-test performed with SPSS software revealed a statistically reliable difference between the mean percentage for the less-than-nine-foot shots in Linder (M = 11.85, SD = 15.82) and those in Griffith (M = 2.47, SD = 5.7130.6), $t(92)$ = 2.73, p = .012, α = .05. The same test did not reveal statistical reliability for the additional three shot categories; to achieve such reliability may require in-creasing the number of films in my sample.

18 On the invention of the close-up, see, for example, Robert Welsh, "David Wark Griffith Speaks," in *New*

York Dramatic Mirror, 14 January 1914, reprinted in Anthony Slide (ed.), *D.W. Griffith Interviews*, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson 2012, p. 9.

19 Yuri Tsivian, *Early Russian Cinema and Its Cultural Perception*, Routledge, New York-London 1994, p. 149.

20 Thanks to Frank Kessler for drawing my attention to the relevance of the funny face genre to Linder.

21 Richard Abel, *The Ciné Goes to Town. French Cinema, 1896-1914*, cit., pp. 220-221.

22 On expressive coherence as a dimension of acting performance in cinema, see Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts? Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic*, Columbia University Press, New York 1992, pp. 130-131.

23 The self-consciousness regarding staging practice is made explicit in *Mari jaloux* (1914), one of Linder's final Pathé-Frères films, which depicts a film shoot in which the crew is seen marking out the twelve-foot line in chalk. See the description in Richard Abel, *The Ciné Goes to Town. French Cinema, 1896-1914*, cit., pp. 417, 533n.