

## **Title of the Module:**

### **Louis Lumiere and His Early 10 Films**

The word 'cinema' is derived through a linguistic process known as 'backformation'. In the linguistic process of backformation, a shorter word is invented by cutting short a longer word. The shorter neologism, 'cinema', was created by cutting short a larger lexeme, Cinematographe. Cinematographe was the new motion-capture-cum-motion-projector device invented by the French brothers, Auguste Lumiere (1862-1954) and Louis Lumiere (1864-1948), in 1895. So, let's salute the Lumiere Brothers for paving the way for the arrival of the new word 'cinema' which has been remaining the most exciting word world over for the last 120 plus years. Interestingly, it has to be noted that the cultural produce, cinema, got its name from the name of the machine, Cinematographe, which was used to make the product!

Though there were simultaneous efforts by various inventors like Pierre Janssen (1874), Edward Muybridge (1878), Jules Marey (1882), Augustin Le Prince (1888) and Thomas Edison (1894) who tried to capture and show motion pictures; it was with the arrival of Cinematographe only there was a definite scientific invention which addressed effectively all technological issues of motion capturing and motion projecting. If we accept the invention of Cinematographe as the definite technological milestone in the history of motion pictures, then we can definitely say that the first ideal motion picture in the history of cinema is *La Sortie de l'Usine Lumière* (Workers Leaving the Lumiere Factory), which was screened on 28 December 1895. Cinematographe could capture and project 16 frames per second. On 13<sup>th</sup> February 1895, the Lumiere brothers got the patent for their Cinematographe. It is believed that the first ever shooting of motion picture, with the newly invented machine Cinematographe, occurred at the gate of the Lumiere Factory, at Lyon, on 19 March 1895. The duration of the first ever captured motion sequence was less than a minute. The factory workers, who were leaving the factory after their days shift, were the subject of the first ideal motion picture, *Workers Leaving the Lumiere Factory*. Two dogs, including a street dog, three horses, pulling carts, and a pedestrian small girl also had accidental chance to act in the first ever ideal film in the history of world cinema! The French word cinematographe means 'writing in movement'.

According to Robert Curley Manager, the editor of the book, *The 100 Most Influential Inventors of All Time*, it was Louis Lumiere who invented the Cinematographe ultimately, though both the brothers were trying to invent a machine that would overcome the limitations

of Thomas Alva Edison's peephole projector, Kinetoscope (162). Edison invented Kinetoscope in 1891 and had started commercial exhibition of his films in 1894 in New York.

The Lumiere factory in Lyon, which was known as Societe Antonine Lumiere et Fils, was a world leader in the production of photographic plates. The factory was started by the Lumiere brothers' father Charles Antonine Lumiere. "Antony had begun his working life as a sign-painter.... In his early twenties, he taught himself photography and set up business as a 'portraitist' in Besancon. In the 1870s, he moved to Lyon, then as now France's second important commercial center after Paris, where he continued portrait work and later set up a factory for the production of the new "dry" photographic plates then coming into widespread use" (Williams: 21).

Robert Curley Manager notes that, "The Lumiere apparatus consisted of a single camera used for both photographing and projecting at 16 frames per second. Their first films (they made more than 40 during 1896) recorded everyday French life—e.g., the arrival of a train, a game of cards, a toiling blacksmith, the feeding of a baby, soldiers marching, the activity of a city street. Others were early comedy shorts. The Lumiere presented the first newsreel, a film of the French Photographic Society Conference, and the first documentaries, four films about the Lyon fire department. Beginning in 1896, they sent a crew of innovative cameraman-projectionists to cities throughout the world to show films and shoot new material" (163).

Richard Abel, says that, by early 1896 about two hundred pieces of Cinematographe were manufactured to produce nearly one thousand short films or actualities, primarily as a means for publicizing the company and its products. However, though the Lumiere "cameramen resumed making actuality films between 1899 and 1901, in a second wave of publicity, the Lumiere company took no interest in the commercial exhibition of films, ... and by 1905, abandoned film production altogether" (11). Hereafter, believing that "cinema is an invention without future", from 1907 onwards the Lumiere brothers focused on the production of their new invention, the autochrome films which ruled colour photography scene till next three decades. Many historians who write about cinema say that it was to Georges Melies (1861-1938), a contemporary country man of Lumiere brothers, Louis Lumiere confessed that "cinema is an invention without a future".

Pierre Janssen, another early inventor of the prototype motion picture, who was present in the French Photographic Society Conference at Lyon in 1895, called the Lumiere Cinematographe demonstration "the big event of this session" (Williams, 26).

Alan Williams records that only Antonin Lumiere had understood the commercial potential of their Cinematographe, because Auguste and Louis had some misgivings about it. Finally, “Louis and Auguste let their father organize the machine’s commercial debut in Paris. And so neither son was in the capital on December 28, 1895. It was Antonin Lumiere who rented the hall, had programs printed, and set the guest list for the inaugural preview that afternoon. Though that show was very well received, Papa Lumiere had neglected to arrange any publicity for the general screening that followed, and at the end of the first evening only 33 people had paid one franc each to attend the Birth of Cinema” (26). However, the ‘father’ of proper cinema, Louis Lumiere was not there in the town to witness the nativity of cinema.

However, in the weeks to come after the debut, on some days, for their cinematic entertainment shows (each having a duration of about 30 minutes, with the accompaniment of live orchestra), screened in the “Indian Room” of Grand Café on the 14 Boulevard des Capuchines, in Paris, “the revenues were 2,500 francs, and policemen were posted to keep order in the lines of waiting customers” (Williams 27).

Alan Williams lists the ten films, with their titles in English translation, in the schedule, arranged in the order of their screening at the first public exhibition:

*Workers Leaving the Lumiere Factory*

*Horseback Jumping*

*Fishing for Goldfish*

*Debarcation of Photographic Congress Members at Lyon*

*The Blacksmiths*

*A Little Trick on the Gardner*

*Feeding the Baby*

*Blanket Toss*

*The Place des Cordeliers at Lyon, and*

*The Sea*

At times, there are minor changes in the English translations of the titles of these films. All these films were made by the younger brother Louis Lumiere. The elder brother, Auguste Lumiere managed to make only one film, *Mauvaises herbes* (Burning Weeds, 1896), because

in 1895 only one Cinematographe machine was manufactured and Louis Lumiere guarded it jealously, even from his elder brother, Auguste Lumiere, who was two years older than Louis.

What are the most important qualities of Lumiere Films?

Alan Williams says that, “The most obvious virtue of Lumiere films is their careful composition. Louis Lumiere was a devoted amateur photographer and the son of a professional one. The images are balanced without being mechanically symmetrical. One of his favorite compositional technique might be called the Lumiere diagonal, which is as well as a means of structuring an image, is a way of suggesting depth. Often the diagonal component will be an axis of motion as in the *Arrival of a Train*” (28).

The second quality of Lumiere films, to Alan Williams, is the care given to lighting and exposure values in the films. Another quality of their films, to Allan Williams, is that the Lumiere brothers took multiple takes of a scene and selected the best of such takes and others were discarded. “As well as being composed in space, the Lumiere works were often carefully structured in time” (Williams, 28).

Marshal Duetelbaum argues that strong “structural patterning” marks many of the Lumiere films. For example, *Workers Leaving Lumiere Factory*, begins with the Lumiere factory doors opening and ends with their closing, an action which returns the image to precisely its initial configuration” (qutd. in Williams, 28).

“One of the ways to sum up the basic formal characteristics of his films would be to say that Louis Lumiere was the first great exponent of the strong French tradition of the integrity of the shot, which would continue long after he and his operators ceased filming” (Williams, 30).

Terry Ramsaye notes that before the first ever public exhibition of Cinematographe and the screening of films, “a little exhibition was given in the Lyon plant of the Lumieres on 2 March 1895. The second exhibition of the machine was given on June 10 following at the Congress de l’Union Nationale des Societies Photographiques de France, and two days later, on 12<sup>th</sup> June, at the closing of the congress two films showing the members of the gathering taken the day before were shown” (165). So, altogether, three private exhibitions were held before the Cinematographe was presented before the public on 28 December, 1895.

Now let’s look at some of the other salient features of these early Lumiere films.

We can call the early Lumiere films as one-reelers which lasted from 40 to 50 seconds only, because the Lumiere Cinematographe could be loaded with a maximum 70 meters of filmstock or probably, the maximum length of the then available celluloid was 70 meters.

All of the early Lumiere films are summer films. What could be the reason for this? Obviously, the Lumiere brothers shot all their films outdoor, in daylight. So, dependence on natural sunlight prompted them to shoot during summer. If we watch their early films closely, we can see the shadows created by the sunlight on land and under the figures that are captured cinematically. Most of the early Lumiere films, especially those picturing the members of his family, were showcasing the comfortable care-free bourgeois private life for public consumption.

The Lumiere camera, in all the early films, remains immobile. There are many reasons for this fixed camera position. As it was the early stage of their experiments with their newly invented machine, any effort to jerk, move, or shake the camera would prove catastrophic, spoiling the shot.

Movies never were silent, right from the time of Lumiere brothers. Of course, sound track was not an integral part of the photographic film then. However, a public show, even if it is a film show, always would be boring without some accompaniment of music. Therefore, right from the first public screening of films, the projectionists engaged an orchestra to play right tunes according to the scenes shown. So, in the early history of cinema, both the visual and the audio existed together, but had not yet been wedded. That eventful wedding happened only in 1927 when the first talkie, *The Jazz Singer* was released. With *The Jazz Singer*, the sound track was wedded with the celluloid.

Realism was another feature of Louis Lumiere's early films, which distinguishes them from Thomas Alva Edison's early films that predate Lumiere films. Edison's films were staged movies, shot inside the studio. So, fictionality was the major feature of Edison's films. Louis Lumiere captured everyday lives around him. Of course, some of those films were preplanned, but set in realistic backgrounds with real life occurrences. Keith Withall states that "The growing Lumiere catalogue constituted over 2000 titles by 1903. An important factor in the Lumiere success was their position as established businessmen with ready access to capital. Thus, they were able to carry the cost of research and development as they established their new venture. The bulk of the catalogue were actualities, which were records of real-life events

as they happened. The Lumieres are often seen as the founders of what we call realism; moving images of a world that we recognize and assume is more or less accurately recorded” (12).

### ***Workers Leaving the Lumiere Factory***

In this 35mm silent actuality film, the scene of action is the gate of the Lumiere Factory, at Lyon. The camera is placed opposite to the factory gate, about 10 meters away. As Cinematographe at that point had no lenses which could change the focal lengths, we can call the shot used in this film as long-shot. It has to be noted that the natural sunlight is now in the direction of the factory gate, and coming from the same direction where the camera was fixed. This positioning of the camera ensures clarity to the shots. The workers are shown coming out of the factory both through the large and small gates simultaneously. Definitely, it's a staged sequence as the workers rush out en-mass immediately after the gates were opened, as if they had been instructed beforehand to do so. And everyone seems to be aware of the fact that they are being shot with the cinematographic camera, because none of them come straight to the camera. Instead, obediently each one of them either move to the left or right of the frame. To bring in more realism to the shot, Louis Lumiere stages a couple of dogs and a few horse pulling carts to come out of the factory. But one of those horses comes too close to the camera, but then led towards left by the horseman riding the cart. The presence of a couple of bicycle riding workers and a carefree street dog giving a short chase to a worker rushing out of the factory, give extra live action to the scene. The existence of multiple versions of this film with minor variations points to the fact that Louis Lumiere had captured many takes or re-takes of the same scene. In some versions, only a single horse drawn cart is seen, in another version a cart pulled by two horses is seen coming out of the gate. In the third version of the film, there is no horse-cart at all. Therefore, the popular way of distinguishing these three versions are: no-horse version, one-horse version and two-horses version. In the one-horse version, there are two bicycle riding employees, in the two-horse version there are three bicycle riding workers, and in the no-horse version, there are five bicycle riding employees coming out of the Lumiere Factory gates. Therefore, we can rename these three versions as two-bicycle version, three-bicycle version and five-bicycle versions, respectively. And each version shows more than 100-140 workers coming out of the gate.

However, in all these versions, female employees outnumber male employees. And, it is also interesting to note that these women, unlike the factory employees of the time, were dressed to

the occasion; most probably they had been provided with prior information of the shooting schedule by the Lumiere brothers.

### ***Horseback Jumping or Horse Trick Riding***

Louis Lumiere's film with these titles are available in two versions. The 1895 version and 1896 version. The first version is set in the backdrop of a tile-roofed shed, which probably is a horse stable. Three men, a male trainer in black suit, a jumper in white dress and a horse-keeper in white dress, and a black horse which is made to stand in the midground are featured in this film. The jumper looks like a trainee because he was able to successfully jump and sit on the horse in the seventh attempt only. But it looks like that he fails deliberately, to keep up the humour of the action. A bemused small white dog that bears witness to the failed jumping attempts by the man is seen running to the camera and back once. Of course, the dog-acting was not directed by Louis Lumiere. Anyway, in the second film of Louise Lumiere also, a dog attracts substantial attention of the spectator. Rather than realistic, this film looks like a pre-scripted spectacle performed before the camera. There are three planes in the shot: the level ground of action, the floor of the shed and the roof top of the shed in the background. It looks like that there are at least a couple of blurred onlookers who are standing under the left part of the shed.

The 1896 version of *Horseback Jumping*, or *Horse Trick Riding* is probably shot in a garden in the background of which traces of a big mansion is seen. Two black horses, along with six white-clad men, are featured in this early movie. However, only three men are shown, repeatedly, at least 20 times, trying to jump on the back of a black horse which is made to stand in the left foreground. The second black horse in the background does not participate in action. Naturally, the selection of the colour of the horses and the selection of the colour of the dress of jumpers was a deliberate decision by the filmmaker to give contrast to the scene, to make it look clear and distinct in the black-and white film. Apparently, these jumpers are trained horsemen. Everyone seems enjoying the moment. This film could be described as one of the earliest silver screen 'sporty-comedies'. Here too, the scene is set against the sunlight.

### ***Fishing for Goldfish***

*Fishing for Goldfish* is another family movie album featuring two members of the Lumiere family. A baby wearing a white skirt and a white hat, is shown standing atop a table and trying to catch the fish from a transparent glass aquarium jar on the table which is put outdoor. The man in black suit and holding the baby, is Auguste Lumiere, and the baby girl is Andree

Lumiere, his daughter, probably less than two years old. She is very much excited both by the small goldfish in the jar as well as with the strange machine, the camera, which was shooting her. Intermittently she looks at the fish in the jar and at the camera which was fixed to her left side. The same baby girl appears in another early Lumiere film, *Feeding the Baby*, also. The high portability of Cinematographe made it possible for Louis Lumiere to carry home the machine and shoot many home movies like *Fishing for Goldfish*. The Lumiere family was a closely knit one where the brothers lived in the two sections of a large house. It is obvious from the film that the girl was aware of the strange machine that was looking at her; and for six times, she looks straight to the camera or towards the man standing behind the camera, who was non-other than her father's younger brother, Louis Lumiere. However, she looks back at her father only once. The film is shot with a mid-shot, with the baby on table top in full view and the father is shown waist upwards. Auguste Lumiere too casts a passing glance at the camera towards the end of the short film. From the tone of the film, it can be assumed that it was shot when there was bright sunlight as the white dress of the girl is glaring too much. It also has to be noted that, here the centre of focus is not the baby actually, but the transparent glass jar which is half the size of the baby girl. Unlike many other early Lumiere films, *Fishing the Goldfish* has only one version in existence. That means Louis Lumiere finished the film in one take.

### **Debarcation of Photographic Congress Members at Lyon**

The most important feature of this silent movie is that it features a very important innovator of early cinema. That was none other than, Pierre Janssen, the French astronomer, who, using his revolver photographique, had captured the movement of the Venus across the Sun, as far as back in 1874. In the film, *Debarcation*, Janssen makes a cameo appearance. This film had its private premiere on 12 June 1895 at the Congress of the Photographers at Lyon. So, by all probability, Janssen's cameo appearance here could be the first ever cameo in the history of cinema. Auguste Lumiere's cameo appearance in *Fishing for Goldfish* happened probably a few months later, though the film was screened as third one in the first ever public screening.

The location of this documentary film is a river bank in Lyon in the backdrop of a modern iron bridge. The delegates of the Photographic Congress are seen coming out of a big boat in the background of modern bridge across the river. There are about 55 delegates, including five women. At least, seven of these delegate-photographers are visibly carrying photographic camera with tripods attached. Interestingly, while coming out, a photographer pauses for a



while to take the snap of Louis Lumiere shooting their arrival at the jetty with his Cinematographe. That was none other than Pierre Janssen. Obviously, all these delegates might have been given prior information that they are being filmed. As a result, very obediently, the delegates move either to the left or to the right of the camera and walk away. No one ever comes straight to the camera on the jetty. Some offer salute to the Cinematographe by lifting their hats. This is probably, the first ever cinematic capturing of a modern cityscape with its boat jetty and iron bridge across the river, caught in the luxury of bright morning sunlight. All the delegates were dressed very decently, each one wearing a gorgeous cap too. The boatman recedes into the boat after ensuring that the all the delegates have disembarked the deck safe on to the jetty and then to the river bank. This diagonal shot is rich in depth, vibrant with disciplined human movement, a rich scenario with stone laden steps and the wooden jetty in the foreground, neatly decorated boat on water in the midground, and the large iron bridge atop of the frame where visible human movements can also be spotted. Later filmmakers like Sergei Eisenstein and Walter Ruttmann might have been inspired by this film to capture the dynamism, depth and multilayered topography of the cityscapes in their films like *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis* (1927), respectively.

### ***The Blacksmiths***

The Blacksmiths is the first film on a workplace. It features two blacksmiths busy in their workstation. However, we cannot say that this film was shot indoors of their forge or smithy. A dark shadow of one of the blacksmiths is seen on the wall in the background. It suggests that, to ensure sunlight, Louis Lumiere might have requested the smiths to shift their equipment to outdoor temporarily. One of the blacksmiths is seen wearing a spotless white shirt. This could also be a directorial suggestion, in order to bring in more contrast to the frame and to make the back-and-while film look clearer. In many other earlier films also, Louis Lumiere seems to have instructed his subjects to wear black and white dress so as to distinguish them from other subjects in the frame.

The smoke from the forge while triggering the fan, the thick vapour emitting out of the water container while quenching the hot metal, the color of hot iron rods, and the powerful hammering of the hot iron rod on the anvil etc., make this film very engaging with different tonal variations each second. This is a rudimentary example of a process film, which was later perfected by Dutch documentary filmmakers like Bert Haanstra in his films like *Glass* (1958). Charles Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) is also a classic example of a factory-film. At the end

of the film, a third man was partially shown pouring a glass of wine to the hammer wielding blacksmith. The rich thick white vapour emanating from the container, when the red-hot iron rod was put into it, reminds one of the dust-filled frame in Louis Lumiere's another later film, *Demolition of a Wall* (1896)

### **A Little Trick on the Gardner**

The Gardener, Sprinkler Sprinkled, Tables Turned on the Gardner, The Waterer Watered are the other alternative English titles given to the same Louis Lumiere film.

This is the first ever comedy in the history of cinema. And this is the first fiction film in the oeuvre of Louis Lumiere. It is a perfectly pre-scripted comic drama film with a beginning, a middle and an end which was decided before the shooting took place. The Sprinkler Sprinkled, even now evokes laughter, that is, even after a century of its production. In this fiction film Lumiere turns a mundane action of a gardener watering garden plants with a hose, into a hilarious comedy, created by the prank played on the gardener by a naughty boy who sneaks into the scene. It is set in the Lumiere garden and it features the gardener of the Lumiere house and a young boy. Though the frame limits were pre-detailed to the 'actors', towards the end of the film, the boy was running almost out of the camera frame and the gardener had to bring him back to the frame's focus, in order to beat him in front of the camera. The immobility of the fixed camera demanded such a measure from the performers. Tommy Gustafsson makes the following remarks on the film. "The fact that L'arroseur arose [The Sprinkler Sprinkled], perhaps the first fictional film production ever, depicts an incompetent adult man and a mischief-making boy reveals something about film as a medium, about the comic preferences of the period, and about expectations concerning the behavior of men and boys" (3). This film also establishes the cultural stereotype of the dull-adult and bad-boy which is still continuing in contemporary cinematic narratives often.

### **Feeding the Baby**

Feeding the Baby is yet another silent short film set in the courtyard of the Lumiere house. It features, Auguste Lumiere, his daughter Andree Lumiere, and his wife Marguerite Lumiere. This cinematic narrative is yet another example of early home-movies in the history of cinema. It's a common domestic moment of feeding a baby by her parents, but it was deliberately set

to unfold before the camera. *Baby's Breakfast* and *Baby's Lunch*, *Baby's Meal* are another alternative English titles given to this film.

Anat Pick offers an elaborate class-reading of the film in the following words: "Not only is Louis Lumiere's *Baby's Lunch*, arguably the earliest depiction of eating in a film, it illustrates the divergence in cinema of two orders of looking: looking-as-eating, and looking-without-devouring... It is said that audience were attracted not by the culinary drama at the centre of the frame, but by the motion of leaves in the background. .... As an image of consumption, the bourgeois dining ritual at the heart of *Repas de Bebe* stands in for other domestic pursuits that the film would reflect back at its growing middle-class audience, and more decisively, for the ways in which cinema itself would become an object of mass consumption, with eating and drinking integral to the commercial movie-going experience" (130). This mid-shot straight angle film is rich with movements of various kinds. The baby is very active, her parents try to feed her one by one, the mother too is having her breakfast and the leaves of the pants in the background catch the blowing wind and flutter beautifully. The baby was well aware of the presence of the camera here too, and she casts straight look at the camera at least a couple of times. Not only that, obviously she was offering a piece of biscuit to her uncle-cameraman-director who is standing behind the camera.

### ***Blanket Toss***

*Blanket Toss* is another early sports-film from the Lumiere camera. It features six adult men; four holding tight the corners of a thick dark blanket, the fifth one in black suit looks like a trainer and the sixth one, clad in white dress, looks like a trainee. From their dress it can be assumed that all, except the trainer, are labourers. In an available version of the film the trainee tries to jump on to the blanket, six times and becomes successful in four rounds. Apart from this, the holders of the blanket try to toss the trainee up and down and off the blanket like a ball. Each attempt is comically presented, though he gets hurt in some attempts. The location is outdoor with bright sunlight, in the background of a well-built mansion on roadside where we could see a street lamp post. Interestingly again, here too a small bemused street dog makes his appearance on the right corner in the background. It is obviously enjoying the animalistic behavior of human beings!

### ***The Place des Cordeliers at Lyon, and***

The film provides us a wonderful spectacle of a very live and vibrant city scape as it existed in 1895. The time could be a brightly sunlit early winter morning. The movements of horse-pulled

vehicles of different sizes and shapes give us a visual historical document on metropolitan life of Lumiere's times his home city of Lyon. It's a film which is captured in an aesthetically appealing diagonal angle which gives us a perfect perspective of the city scape with its multi storied beautiful buildings, a well laid wide modern city street where middleclass people commute to their workplaces. Pedestrians move briskly in the street and some are seen carrying heavy loads on their shoulders. These could be the labourers in the market. The overcrowded double-decker Abadie public transport bus, drawn by two horses, and private horse-drawn carts pulled by single horse, offer a real treat to the eye for spectators of the movie, especially in the present context. So, this documentary film offers a true slice of life of the time. The human and animal subjects and other objects are caught by Louis Lumiere without their knowledge. Unaware of the presence of camera, a human figure holding an open umbrella, and a horse pulling a car are seen coming very close to the camera. The splendid architecture of the city is the highlighted by the film. It's the buildings in the background that attract our primary attention, after the double-decker bus.

### ***The Sea***

*La Mer*, The Sea or Bathing in the Sea features five children, including a girl who enjoy a bath in the sea on bright sunny day. They are shown jumping into the sea many a time from an elevated wooden diving platform. The movement of the children and the movements of waves make the film very rich as far as in-frame motion is concerned. The composition of the frame is wonderful. The camera is again put in a diagonal position giving us a clear view of the land, sea and the sky with human beings engaging all these natural elements. The Sea is yet another sport-film from the pioneer of cinema.

To sum up, through his early films Louis Lumiere gave the posterity a very precious visual record of the lives of the cross section of the French people, of course the bourgeois life gets predominant depiction. The topography, the domestic life, public spaces, entertainments, workplaces etc. were captured by Louis Lumiere turning these films into historical documents.

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**Web Links:**

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