

Show and Tell: Photography, Film and Literary Naturalism in Late Nineteenth Century
America

by

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Introduction

The explosion of reality-based entertainment within the last several decades suggests that the desire to know someone else's "true story"—however inspiring, revolting or dull it may be—is as keen as ever. The realistic fictions that dominated the visual and literary cultures of late nineteenth century America proclaim a similar desire: novels and stories; photographs of all kinds; and early films all catered to an audience that seemed eager to know—or at least to see—what it might be like to be someone else. By the turn of the twentieth century, however, readers, spectators, authors and filmmakers were well aware that sight and knowledge were not the same thing, and the fictions that occupied them are trenchant commentaries on the richly varied consequences of knowing the difference.

The relationship between the naturalist literature of the American 1890s and the era's ever-evolving technologies of visual representation highlights the obsessions, threats and inescapable paradoxes associated with representing another person's "true" story. My dissertation traces the vexing complexity of this relationship, emphasizing how the oddities and extremes of naturalist literature interrogate rather than imitate the kind of accuracy associated with photographic representation. The years between 1888 and 1900 marked a high point for both naturalist literature and photographic technologies. Along with the publication of such "classic" naturalist texts like Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), Frank Norris's *McTeague* (1899), and Theodore Dreiser's

Sister Carrie (1900), the introduction of flash technology (late 1880s); the invention of the instantaneous camera (1888); and the emergence of film (1894) greatly expanded the possibilities for who and what could be represented photographically. During these final two decades of the nineteenth century, the growing numbers of the urban poor—largely made up of immigrants and African-Americans—were eagerly observed and documented by photographers, film makers and naturalist writers alike. Both their shared subject matter and their claim to an accuracy grounded in exhaustive visual detail and an unflinching commitment to depict even the grittiest of realities led to frequent comparisons between naturalist literature and the era’s emerging photographic technologies: in contemporary reviews and the commentaries of the authors themselves, a distinctly “photographic” accuracy was repeatedly invoked¹ as the standard by which naturalist literature was judged.

Seeing The Story and Telling The Truth: Narrators, Photography and Film

My project argues that naturalist authors responded to the potential of photographic representation with far more complexity, skepticism and anxiety than we might guess from the now-familiar invocation of the photograph as the ideal model for the naturalist novel². My first chapter suggests that the uncomfortable shifts between

¹ As Miles Orvell notes in *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1888-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), both contemporary readers and naturalist authors themselves perceived an analogy between the photograph’s unique accuracy and the meticulous, lifelike details of the naturalist novel. Orvell cites contemporary reviews of Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* that favorably compare the novel to photographic representations, praising its “photographic description” and its accuracy as “a photograph of life in a large city.” (125) Orvell also notes Frank Norris’s assessment of Stephen Crane’s *Maggie* as “scores and scores of tiny flashlight photographs, instantaneous, caught, as it were, on the run.” (126) and Harold Frederic’s comparison of Crane to “a Muybridge, with his instantaneous camera, show[ing] that the real motion is entirely different.” (127)

² For contemporary considerations of naturalism and photography, see Carol Schloss’s *In Visible Light* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) and, more recently, Donald Pizer’s essay, “Naturalism and the

narrative intimacy and distance in Frank Norris's *McTeague* mirror the promise and the threat offered by the kind of documentary photography epitomized in the work of the photographer-reformer Jacob Riis. The photographs and text of Riis's widely published and popular photographic text How The Other Half Lives (1890) announced itself as a newly accurate and penetrating document of "real life" among the poorest of New York's urban dwellers. Riis's images of cramped, dark tenement interiors; hidden flophouses and basement bars—enabled largely through the newly available photographic flash technology—were a newly intimate and unsettling image of a population whose lives inspired a voracious curiosity among the middle and upper class readers of both the magazines that initially published Riis's work and naturalist novels alike. By the end of *McTeague*, Norris's hapless characters look very much like Riis's subjects, but the narrator who tells their story ultimately shrinks from the kind of physical closeness with them that a mode of representation like Riis's photographic practice would demand: the threat of becoming complicit in the reprehensible acts he witnesses, or worse, becoming indistinguishable from their perpetrators proves too great a risk for the reward of producing a representation as accurate as the documentary photograph.

Norris's *McTeague* was subject to its fair share of criticism on the grounds of its lurid content, but in terms of its narrative engagement with the bodies and minds of its characters, it was hardly as sensational as it might have been. In my second chapter, I argue that the narrator of Stephen Crane's novella *The Monster* (1899) confronts the possibilities of a story that elicits the kind of visceral thrills, flinches and shudders that Norris's narrator implicitly rejects. Crane tells the story of a man made monstrous in both

Visual Arts" [463-482], in the *Oxford Handbook of American Literary Naturalism* (Newlin, Keith, ed. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

body and mind with a voice pitched to evince both sensational thrills and an anxious wish for the kind of rational, knowing mediation of the naturalist narrator. During the 1890s, the practice of the moving picture lecturers who showed, told and otherwise mediated experience of early film³ epitomized the same sort of narrative balancing act between sensation and knowledge that Crane's narrator performs. As a figure poised between the era's didactic culture of genteel entertainments and an emerging culture of film that was frankly more interested in thrilling than in edifying its audience, the moving picture lecturer embodies precisely the kind of paradoxical mediation that makes the narrative of *The Monster* so difficult to interpret. Of all the stories and characters that populate Crane's characteristically amoral fictional universe, those in *The Monster* are among the most resistant to satisfyingly ethical interpretations. My reading of *The Monster* suggests that what seems like the novella's defiant amorality has more to do with its narrative than its subject matter: the novella's frustrated explorations of a mediating practice that attempted to master both the bodies and the minds of its audience suggests that even the most powerful of mediators is too weak to channel the embodied and mental energies of a modern audience towards a reassuring moral resolution.

Living The Story and Knowing The Truth: Embodied Seeing and the Naturalist

Brute

³ For more information on the contributions of moving picture lecturers to the early film experience, see Niver, Kemp R., comp., and Bebe Bergsten, ed. *Biograph Bulletins, 1896-1908* (Los Angeles: Locare Research Group, 1971), and Charles Musser's *Edison Motion Pictures, 1890-1900, An Annotated Filmography* (New York: The Smithsonian Institutions Press, 1997). *Biograph Bulletins* provides many detailed accounts from local and national newspapers of audience responses to films mediated by lecturers, while Musser's extensive catalog of Edison's films provides the "scripts" intended to be read by a lecturer that were included with some films.

In my first two chapters, it is the narrators of naturalist novels who explore and challenge the kinds of representational possibilities afforded by photography and film: the narratives of *McTeague* and *The Monster* dwell on the promises and threats that new visual technologies represented for the kind of privileged, knowledgeable voices that tell naturalism's stories. My last two chapters investigate the consequences of newly accurate visual technologies from a somewhat different perspective, namely, that of the purportedly inarticulate naturalist brute, that hapless subject unable to either know or tell the reality of his own story. Much as our own 21st century stories are seen and told by photographic and video technologies that make it possible for nearly anyone to document a slice of real life—and what's more, to make it instantly available to a worldwide audience—the emerging photographic and filmic technologies of the late nineteenth century made it possible for a greater and more diverse group of people to see something like a representation of their “real” lives—and even more significantly, to represent those lives for themselves.

The ethical, epistemological and aesthetic dilemmas associated with both our own and with the late nineteenth century's cultural moments of heightened visibility are embedded in the narrative structures and defining preoccupations of turn-of-the-century literary naturalism. June Howard's classic formulation of the naturalist text as a perceptive, articulate spectator's vexed attempt to tell the story of an ill-fated, unselfconscious brute remains the most insightful articulation of naturalism's predominating concern with the consequences and possibilities of a particular way of observing the lives of other people. In Howard's formulation, the brute poses a persistent but largely inarticulate threat to the spectator-narrator's position of distanced observation

and knowledge; in other words, the act of telling the brute's story threatens the spectator with a speechless paralysis not much different from the brute's inability to make sense of his environment.⁴

Howard's emphasis on the anxiously symbiotic relationship between spectator and brute is vital to my project's re-evaluation of the naturalist brute as the embodiment of a distinctly modern sort of narrative privilege.⁵ In Howard's reading, the brute is an embodied, visceral re-imagining of social and political anxieties as a distinctly "natural" phenomenon, an attempt to "understand individual destiny in terms of biology, social problems in terms of the evolution of the species—in short, the historical as the natural." [93] The concept of the "natural" to which Howard here refers imagines the body as an unruly force unto itself, distinctly opposed to a Cartesian ideal of rational, objective thought as a privileged means of understanding and managing the natural and social world. And while it's true that naturalism's brutes are most often marked by an extreme physicality and/or sensuality, I read this sensory vulnerability as a version of the period's emerging notions of sensation and bodily experience as usable epistemological tools, equal to—or perhaps even greater than—rational, analytic thought.

The notion of the individual's body as a volatile but powerful site of perception and knowledge was part of a broader intellectual interrogation of the kind of objective, rational observation that had long shaped the era's scientific and aesthetic endeavors. In *Techniques of the Observer*, historian Jonathan Crary acknowledges this intellectual shift

⁴ For Howard's complete elaboration of this concept, see *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), especially chapter 4: "Slumming in Determinism: Naturalism and the Spectator," 104-141.

⁵ In a recently published essay, "Sand In Your Mouth: Naturalism And Other Genres," in the *Oxford Handbook of American Literary Naturalism* (92-103), Howard herself suggests that the uniquely naturalist vision of the brute is a reason for the genre's ongoing relevance, stating that "it still seems to me that when novels concerned with causality and haunted by the problems of agency also mobilize the topos of the brute, foregrounding the category of naturalism becomes productive" (Howard 99).

as part of what he calls the late nineteenth century's "generalized crisis in perception." Crary locates the beginning of this crisis in the 1820s and 30s, when new technologies and physiological discoveries were making the notion of a uniform or objective relationship between observer and observed seem increasingly untenable. Crary argues that the concept of perception as a universal faculty that operated in a space cordoned off from external or internal forces was gradually replaced with a model of human perception as a function of an embodied, individualized observer, one whose perceptions were always influenced by an unpredictable set of subjective desires and physiological complexities. Along with an exhaustive consideration of the scientific and disciplinary implications of this new model of perception, Crary's work also shows how the work of artists like Georges Seurat and Edouard Manet experimented with the possibilities it suggested. Michael Leja's recent study of American art and skepticism argues that the kind of scientific and technological revisions that Crary traces underscored the era's characteristic habit of "looking askance," a profoundly skeptical habit of vision that recognized "the human eye" as a "dull tool" rather than a penetrating observer of profound truths. Through a consideration of both academic/ "high" art forms like the paintings of Thomas Eakins and more popular forms like tromp l'oeil and spirit photography, Leja illustrates a crisis of representation rooted in what seemed like an ever-widening gap between the visible and the knowable.

The works of Crary and Leja⁶ are persuasive accounts of a broad cultural skepticism about the instability of vision and, on the other hand, of the growing sense of

⁶ Other works that read popular American art forms as part of a larger culture of "skeptical looking" include Jay Cook's *The Arts Of Deception: Playing With Fraud In The Age Of Barnum* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001) and Karen Halttunen's *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study Of Middle-Class Culture In America, 1830-1870*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

the body more generally as a powerful site of perception and knowledge. The naturalist text's narrative anxiety about the potential of the brute as a powerful teller of his or her own story responds to both the representational crises that Crary and Leja identify and to more immediate concerns about how the period's emerging visual technologies multiplied the possibilities for seeing and being seen in the urban world. Then as now, the most popular technologies of visual observation and entertainment were notable not only for the newly accurate or detailed images they produced, but also—and even more significantly—for the new practices of observation and spectatorship they enabled. Snapshot photography made it possible for middle and even working class Americans to record and document their own lives, just as the growing presence of early films as an affordable, ubiquitous form of entertainment in both urban centers and small towns made it possible for this same population to see their own lives enacted from a distance—and, through the interventions of the film lecturer, tailored specifically to their own local concerns. Simply put, these technologies gave more and more diverse (whether in terms of class, ethnicity or race) groups of Americans than ever before the power to tell their own stories. My project suggests that naturalism's familiar trope of the brute is an index not only of broad cultural and social anxieties about the changes wrought by industrial capitalism, but also of the epistemological and ethical anxieties associated with the drive to show and tell the stories of an ever-more modern America.

The novels featured in my final two chapters—Henry James's *What Maisie Knew* (1897) and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899)—are not widely understood as part of the naturalist canon. However, each features a protagonist who could easily pass for one of the genre's ill-fated brutes, and each of these characters poses a distinct challenge to

the narrator's privileged point of view that is reflected by the era's emerging technologies of visual observation and entertainment. *McTeague*'s narrator leaves the final chapters of his characters' stories in the keeping of precisely the sort of brutish characters whose stories threaten his distanced, narrative privilege: McTeague's caged canary witnesses his final moments in Death Valley; and a group of little girls are the final witnesses of Trina's battered body. In my third chapter, I suggest that these scenes gesture toward an anxiety about the potential of naturalism's brutes to tell their own stories—an anxiety that I argue was also evinced by the rise of snapshot photography as a popular and affordable hobby. With the invention of Eastman Kodak's instantaneous camera in 1888, photography became a practice available to virtually anyone. Not much money and virtually no knowledge of photography were required: as Eastman Kodak loudly proclaimed in their ubiquitous advertisements, all you had to do was press a button—they would do the rest. Snapshot cameras allowed almost anyone to document and claim a piece of reality without knowing much about it—a possibility that represented a pointed challenge to the kind of one-to-one correspondence between seeing and knowing that was foundational to the era's cultures of both visual and literary realism. I argue that Henry James's *What Maisie Knew* investigates the consequences of a brute's discovery of her own story through a mode of observation much like that of snapshot photography. Like the "Kodak fiends" whose enthusiastically voyeuristic practice of photographing strangers was reviled in the popular press of the 1890s, the young Maisie sees far more than she knows. The sights that Maisie sees, however, ultimately becomes a kind of knowledge that exceeds the indexical accuracy that posed such a threat in *McTeague*: what Maisie learns through her Kodak mind affords her a power to control her own story

that far exceeds the limits of awareness and agency that define the sort of “brute” that Maisie’s guardians persistently mistake her for.

What Maisie Knew posits a potent epistemology that rejects naturalism’s assumption of an equivalent relationship between sight and knowledge. In my final chapter, I argue that, in *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin offers an even more radical revision of the notion that observation is the preeminent means of knowing another person’s reality. Edna Pontellier, marked as a brute by her sensory sensitivities; her sexual appetites; and her oddly passive way of apprehending her own life, is nevertheless the index of what emerges as a mode of narrative that finds accuracy not in the narrator’s objective descriptions or privileged knowledge, but rather in the embodied, subjective experience of individual subjects. The new “reality” that *The Awakening*’s narrative suggests is one that is heard rather than seen: the prominent soundscape of the novel—one that is often closely linked to Edna and other brutes—conveys privileged narrative information that the novel’s narrator hears and imitates. I argue that *The Awakening* was Chopin’s response to precisely the sort of crisis in representation that Leja describes, one that frankly doubts the reliability of the visual as a viable means of knowledge production. The novel’s endorsement of sound as a mode of representation with superior access to a visceral, subjective ideal of “reality” is not unlike the role of sound in early film, in which the many and varied soundscapes—the interventions of local “sound men” that tailored film sound to local tastes and opinions; the ability of sound effects to transform the meaning of a film, and the irrepressible sounds of the audience itself—were soundtracks of a reality that exceeded the limits of the images playing on the screen.

Historical and Critical Context

My project's focus on the historical practices of observation and documentation places it in dialogue with literary criticism that reads realist and naturalist literature through the lens of historically specific cultural practices of image making and writing. As one of the first of such studies to consider the dilemma of representation—whether in terms of painting, photography or writing—as one of naturalism's constitutive concerns, Walter Benn Michaels's *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* has been a key influence on my own work. Michaels argues convincingly for naturalism's concern with a particular question of accuracy that was continually posed by both the era's financial and cultural systems of representation, namely, which is more real, the thing itself or its representation? A monetary system based on the gold standard of the book's title is the ultimate example of what Michaels calls the “double identities that seem, in naturalism, to be required if there are any identities at all,” but as Michaels shows, such identities also defined the terms of the era's cultural debates about fictional realisms like tromp l'oeil painting, photography and writing itself. Michaels's work focuses on the complex possibilities suggested by the representations themselves—paper money, a tromp l'oeil painting, or a photograph—and the cultural responses to such representations. Like Michaels, I read in naturalism an overweening concern with the problem of accurate representation; however, my project locates this concern in specific parallels between the narrative oddities of the naturalist text and the everyday acts of representation enabled and enacted by the era's popular visual technologies. Miles Orvell's consideration, in *The*

Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940, of how the nineteenth century debate about photography's contested status as an art form or as evidence of reality was reflected in the era's realist literature has also provided a valuable historical framework for my own consideration of how questions of accuracy and truth are asked and answered by visual and literary representations.

My project is also in dialogue with a recent strain of literary criticism that reevaluates and/or redefines naturalism's generic commitments, particularly in terms of how the genre exceeds or otherwise challenges the most familiar and often derisive assumptions about what it is—identities that range, as Lisa Long has noted in a recent review of such works, from the “debauched heir of literary romanticism; the less radical cousin of European naturalism; or as is most often claimed, the pessimistic and overcompensating kid brother of the more respectable American realism.”⁷ One of the works in particular that Long considers, Jennifer Fleissner's *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism*, argues convincingly for the kind of expanded definition of naturalism that my own work suggests. In terms of her argument for how a psychoanalytically defined model of obsessive compulsive behavior structures the naturalist text, Fleissner's work in particular has been a key influence on my own reading of the naturalist narrator as a force driven by latent, largely inarticulate and uncontrollable anxieties. The wide range of texts treated by the authors of Mary Papke's 2003 anthology, *Twisted From the Ordinary*, argues both for an expanded definition of the genre and for its continued usefulness as a lens through which to view historical and cultural phenomena that are not often regarded as central concerns of the genre. The very

⁷ Long, Lisa. “Genre Matters: Embodying American Literary Naturalism.” *American Literary History* 19.1 (2007): 160-173.

recently published *Oxford Companion to American Literary Naturalism* makes a similar gesture, pointing to naturalism's relevance to a broad range of topics with essays from renowned scholars in the field.

My own project urges us to take naturalism seriously, as an insightful and prescient commentator on a social world in which everything, it seems, can be made readily available for our viewing pleasure. The epistemological and ethical skepticism that I locate at the heart of the naturalist project insists on a genre far more modern than any of its more familiar redefinitions—as a dead end of realism, for example, or a stop on the way to modernism—might suggest. At the very least, my reading of naturalism reminds us of the profound and uncanny strangeness—however “normal” it might come to seem—of watching the lives of others unfold from a distance.

Chapter 1

The Threat of Accuracy: Photographic Narratives in Frank Norris's *McTeague*

Frank Norris's *McTeague* is a novel full of stories, told by narrators with dangerously intimate relationships to the stories they tell. The dentist McTeague's foray into bourgeois respectability is hardly the only plot that occupies the novel's observant narrator; and this narrator is hardly the only storyteller who contributes to what the novel imagines about the possibilities and limitations of narrative representation. Most critics read *McTeague's* subplots as variations on one or more of the novel's predominant themes: Miss Baker and Old Grannis as satiric caricatures of the impossibly ideal bourgeois household; Zerkow the junk dealer and Maria Macapa as cruder, more exaggerated versions of Trina and McTeague, the novel's primary victims of their own unmanageable desires. But in the case of Maria and Zerkow, the act of narrative itself becomes—quite literally—a matter of life and death. *McTeague's* Maria/Zerkow subplot speaks most directly to the novel's larger concerns with the narrative risks that representing experience accurately entails. During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, photography offered what looked like an indisputable answer to questions about the truth and accuracy of the period's proliferating representations of urban experience. It's hardly surprising, then, that Norris uses a photographic model to explore the meaning and implications of narrative accuracy in his "story of San Francisco." The Maria/Zerkow subplot tests the possibilities of a particular kind of accuracy for narrative

representation—an indexical accuracy that reaches beyond the mimetic faithfulness to surface detail that is usually invoked as naturalism’s most “photographic” quality.

The standard of photographic accuracy that the Maria/Zerkow subplot evokes is a standard derived from the photograph’s ontological condition: no photograph can exist without the camera and photographer having shared, at some point, a moment of time and space with the object or person it pictures. Like a footprint or a shadow, the photograph indexes the material existence of the person or object it represents. Throughout the novel, Maria’s story of the gold plate—and later, her story of the abuse that she endures—are figured as narrative representations with a legitimate claim to this kind of indexical accuracy. Zerkow and *McTeague*’s narrator perceive Maria and her story as accurate, authoritative evidence of lived experience; in much the same way that many during the 1880s and 90s perceived the first photographically illustrated narratives of urban life as newly accurate representations of what often seemed like an increasingly unknowable and illegible city.

Maria Macapa, who could easily be read as a fictional version of a real-life subject described by such narratives, tells a story that is as accurate and powerful as these narratives themselves—without the help of any photographic evidence at all. The accuracy of Maria’s story breeds the peculiar intimacies that she shares with Zerkow and Trina—intimacies that imagine Maria’s body as the indexical link to her story’s accuracy. Zerkow’s desire for Maria springs from his conviction that she has seen and touched the magnificent gold plate she describes, and Trina’s friendship with Maria is grounded in the physical evidence that both women exhibit to prove the stories of their husbands’ abuses. Fascinated by—and envious of—the kind of accuracy that Maria seems able to

produce, *McTeague*'s narrator is compelled to share the intimate spaces and emotions that Maria shares with Zerkow and Trina, moving through the fictional spaces of the novel as an embodied, material presence. The narrator's telling of Maria's story is marked by the evidence of both his shared intimacies with Maria, Zerkow and Trina; and by his abrupt attempts to withdraw from such intimacies. In the chapter that follows, I read the narrator's shifts from intimate to distant modes of narration as a recognition of the risks and consequences that any narrator faces as part of an effort to tell an indexically accurate story. These shifts register the psychological risks associated with telling a "real-life" story about violence and murder, and the sudden narrative withdrawals from *McTeague*'s doomed characters are anxious attempts to mitigate such risks. The narrator's embodied presence at the scene of several of the subplot's violent conclusions interrogates the ethical implications of indexical accuracy, but it also questions the value of such accuracy as a "true" way to represent any experience, particularly that of the working and lower classes in late nineteenth century urban America.

Indexical Accuracy, 1887-1900: Photography, The Body and The City

The interrogation of indexical accuracy that surfaces in *McTeague*'s Maria/Zerkow subplot speaks to a set of cultural and intellectual anxieties about the nature of perception, accuracy and the human body—anxieties that frequently surfaced in and around the new uses of photography that were emerging in the final two decades of the nineteenth century. The period's medical and social scientific investigations continually revealed new complexities about the nature of the human body and the

psyche, and the cultural and intellectual responses to such work were an uneasy mix of optimism and anxiety.⁸ Emerging scientific and pseudo-scientific concepts about the instability of perception, sensory trauma and nervous disorders⁹ pointed to a generalized anxiety about the human body's potential to meet the challenges of living in an increasingly mechanized, highly stimulating urban environment.¹⁰ Photography occupies a paradoxical position vis-à-vis these anxieties: it was a technology that both exposed the limitations of the human body and offered itself as a way to make up for those

⁸ Jonathan Crary's *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999) defines the work of impressionist and post-impressionist painters Manet, Seurat and Cezanne as responses to the nineteenth century's "generalized crisis in perception," (2) a crisis that Crary identifies as a consequence of scientific discoveries about optics and perception that began at the start of the nineteenth century. Crary claims that "the scientific work of Hermann von Helmholtz, Gustav Fechner and many others" on optics and perception had, by the 1860s, "defined the contours of a general epistemological uncertainty in which perceptual experience had lost the primal guarantees that once upheld its privileged relation to the foundation of knowledge." (12) See Crary's earlier work, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990) for details about the scientific and technological advances that he defines as the primary influences on the development of a modern concept of embodied observation.

⁹ In *Suspensions of Perception*, Crary outlines the scientific research, during the latter half of the nineteenth century, about the relationship between nervous disorders and perception, claiming that the majority of such investigations "on newly invented nervous disorders, whether hysteria, abulia, psychasthenia or neurasthenia, all described various weakenings and failures of the integrity of perception and its collapse into dissociated fragments." (94) Social scientists, physicians and other observers writing at the close of the nineteenth century often emphasized the vulnerabilities of the human nervous system to sensory experience and emotional stress. For example, Georg Simmel's 1903 sociological study, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," describes the experience of living in the modern city as a series of sensory shocks that eventually exhaust the nervous system, producing the characteristically "blasé" attitude of the modern urban dweller. The idea of modern life as sensorially exhausting also figures prominently in the work of physicians and psychologists like George Beard, G. Stanley Hall and Herbert Spencer; and Max Nordau's widely read study of the art and culture of the late nineteenth century, *Degeneration*, locates much of the pathology of so-called degenerate artists in their "abnormal" sensory and perceptive faculties. See: Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in: *On Individuality And Social Forms; Selected Writings*. Levine, Donald N., ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971); Tom Lutz, *American Nervousness, 1903: An Anecdotal History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); George Beard, *American Nervousness, Its Causes And Consequences, A Supplement To Nervous Exhaustion (Neurasthenia)*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1881; Max Nordau, *Degeneration*. New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1912.

¹⁰ Many critics who theorize about the history and cultural formations of the late nineteenth century regard the traumatic physiological experience of managing the urban environment as a defining feature of modern life. Walter Benjamin has famously theorized the links between visual culture, capitalism, and the jarring sensory experience of everyday life in the late nineteenth century urban environment; more recently, Ben Singer's study of early sensational cinema argues that the "blood-and-thunder" melodramas popular during the 1880s and 90s were responses to the often traumatic and almost always distracting experience of living in a highly stimulating urban environment. See: Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in: *Illuminations*. Arendt, Hannah, ed. & intro. and Harry Zohn, trans. (New York: Schocken Books, 1985); and Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema And Its Contexts*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

limitations. During the late 1880s and 1890s, the popular media's most notable uses of photography emphasized the medium's potential as a technological solution for the bodily anxieties of modern life, highlighting the ways in which photographs could expand the capacities of human perception and knowledge. By the turn of the century, photography was well-recognized as a useful tool for middle and upper class city dwellers seeking to see and understand what often seemed like an illegible and unknowable urban environment. Many of the photographically illustrated articles appearing in popular magazines, beginning in 1897 and continuing into the early 1900s, express this attitude. In his discussion of a series of articles published by Scribner's between 1897 and 1903, Alan Trachtenberg shows how the photographic illustrations of dramatic urban sights like skyscrapers and teeming crowds emphasized photography's role as a visual technology that could help the urban dweller adjust to and appreciate "the explosive transformation" of the modern urban environment, one that "made the city seem as threatening to tranquility and older perspectives as it was fascinating in its modernity." Trachtenberg explains that articles portraying these new sights of the city as aesthetically pleasing encouraged the idea of the camera as one of the "delightful new mechanical instruments for seeing the city in unexpected ways;" while guidebook-style articles illustrated with old and new urban landmarks in a "city that no longer seemed self-evident...focused on the challenge not simply of getting around but of taking it all in, enjoying the spectacle—especially through the lens of a camera."¹¹

¹¹ Trachtenberg, Alan. *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Matthew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 185. For a detailed discussion of how photographs like those that illustrated the Scribner's articles contributed to an ideal of urban life as "picturesque," see Bramen, Carrie Terado, "The Urban Picturesque and the Spectacle of Americanization" *American Quarterly* 52.3 (September 2000) and Hales, Peter, *Silver Cities: The Photography of American Urbanization 1839-1915*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984).

Photography's role as a viable tool for managing the visual and hermeneutic challenges of the city was enabled by the progress in photographic technology and printing techniques that occurred during the latter part of the nineteenth century.¹² Two of the most important examples of such progress are the introduction of the half-tone engraving process in the 1880s and the introduction of flashlight powder in the late 1880s. Both of these advances emphasized the photograph's indexical accuracy, a feature that was crucial in making photographic illustrations into a newly powerful form of authoritative evidence for the narrative accounts that they accompanied. The development of the half-tone reproduction process made it possible to reproduce images of all kinds on the same page as a block of text, thereby making it possible for photographs to enter the realm of the popular press in greater numbers than ever before.¹³ But as Neil Harris points out in his influential study of "the half-tone effect" in popular media, the half-tone process did more than increase the sheer number of photographs appearing in the newspapers and magazines. To readers in the 1890s, photographs reproduced using the half-tone engraving process looked more vivid, more intense—in short, more "real"—than any other form of illustration that had ever appeared in the popular media. Harris claims that the half-tone reproduction process "code[d] the original picture in a new way...the illusion of seeing an actual scene, or receiving an objective

¹² Beaumont Newhall, in *The History of Photography* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1982), provides a detailed discussion of many such technological advances that occurred from the 1870s until the turn of the century, including the developing of dry plates, roll film, and various improvements on the portability and usability of cameras. See especially pgs. 117-139. And Neil Harris, in "Iconography and Intellectual History: The Half-Tone Effect" in John Highman and Paul Conkin, eds. *New Directions in American Intellectual History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), points to the steady advance of photomechanical reproduction techniques throughout the nineteenth century that led up to the half-tone engraving process.

¹³ Harris claims that the half-tone engraving process, "first appearing in the 1880s and early 90s...was firmly established as a major reproductive method for publishers of mass illustrated materials" by 1900 (Harris 305).

record of such a scene, was immeasurably enhanced.”¹⁴ Such illusions produced a “deeper psychological satisfaction” in readers, which Harris offers as the reason for the half-tone’s eventual dominance of older forms of reproduced illustrations from the popular media.¹⁵

The emphasis in Harris’s descriptions of half-tone photographs on seeing “an actual scene, an objective record,” and “deeper psychological satisfaction” points toward a visual experience that derived its appeal from the photograph’s indexical accuracy.¹⁶ One of the other major developments in photographic technology during the 1880s, the introduction of flashlight powder, emphasized the same photographic potential to produce indexical signs of the people and places it depicted. Although the first available kinds of flashlight powder were dangerous to use and imprecise, their enabling of photographs that imaged even the dimmest interior spaces changed the way the urban poor was represented in the popular media. In his study of urban photography during the latter half of the nineteenth century, historian Peter Hales emphasizes the importance of early flash technologies in making the often shocking images of life in the urban slums believable:

¹⁴ Harris 307.

¹⁵ Harris *ibid.* Harris does note that older forms of illustration were still widely used throughout the 1890s and well into the 20th century. Recent works that emphasize the continuing significance of non-photographic forms of illustration include: Rebecca Zurier, *Picturing The City: Urban Vision And The Ashcan School* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) and Joshua Brown, *Beyond the Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and The Crisis of Gilded Age America*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

¹⁶ Harris’s description of the “half-tone effect” on photographs in particular is echoed by a number of photographic and media historians who regard the development of the half-tone reproduction process as a crucial moment in the history of both photography and journalism. Newhall notes that “when the feeling of presence and authenticity was needed, the mere reproduction of a photograph could carry a conviction unattainable by the wood engraving,” (Newhall 252) and Karen Roggenkamp, in *Narrating the News: New Journalism and Literary Genre in Late Nineteenth-Century American Newspapers and Fiction* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2005), claims that “the added layer of authenticity” of photographic illustrations reproduced by the half-tone process contributed to an “unquestioning belief in the ‘infallibility and objectivity’ of news delivered photographically.” 125.

Sometimes the truths they wished to tell were too shocking, too unexpected to be accepted without question; then phrases like “as illuminated by the truth of the magnesium lamp” or simply “taken from the camera’s eye” reasserted the factual authority of the image.¹⁷

As Hales emphasizes, journalist and social reformer Jacob Riis was among the first city reporters to take advantage of flashlight powder’s ability to “illuminate the truth” of life in the urban slums.¹⁸ The years during which Riis was actively documenting the lives of slum dwellers on the Lower East Side coincided with both the development of flashlight powder and the first experiments with the half-tone reproduction process, and Riis eventually made use of both technologies to achieve the kind of indexical accuracy that he wanted to illustrate his work. The images that Riis could obtain with flash photography were like no other illustrations of the urban slums that were familiar during this period in history. What Riis called the “flashlight possibilities”¹⁹ of his photography were the possibilities of creating the kind of accurately powerful illustrations—the kind that went beyond mimetic faithfulness and attested to the real existence of the conditions they pictured. In his autobiography, Riis describes the motivation for his photographic practice as “...the wish [that] kept cropping up in me that there were some way of putting before the people what I saw there...A drawing might have done it, but it would not have been evidence of the kind I wanted.”²⁰ Flashlight powder made it possible for Riis to obtain the kind of images he wanted, and eventually, the half-tone reproduction process made it possible for his images to reach a large audience in a newly vivid and accurate form. By the time Riis’s book-length study of the slums was ready for publication in

¹⁷ Hales 5.

¹⁸ For a thorough discussion of Riis’s methods, including his pioneering—and often dangerous—use of flash powder, see Hales 163-217.

¹⁹ Riis, quoted in Hales 171.

²⁰ Riis, quoted in Hales 169.

1890, Riis was insisting that his work be illustrated with half-tone reproductions of his original photographs, rather than with the inferior copies that had accompanied the first publications of his work.²¹ *How The Other Half Lives* was one of the first widely distributed books to use half-tone reproductions of photographs as illustrations.²²

How The Other Half Lives garnered serious attention when it was published in 1890, and both contemporary reviews of the work and later historical assessments suggest that the impact of the work was due in no small part to its photographic illustrations. Hales claims that “the photographs provided the real revolutionary impact” to the work, in part because such illustrations had been seen by very few readers.²³ And as contemporary accounts of the reception of Riis’s work suggests, the photographic illustrations represented a newly powerful form of indexical accuracy that guaranteed the truth of what the photographs showed. Hales notes that contemporary reviews of Riis’s book-length account of life in the slums reserved their most detailed and careful comments for the photographs and illustrations, and points out that even when those critics “who didn’t directly address the photographs or point to them as the major arresting element of the book unconsciously adopted metaphors of light, sight, and vision to explain their fascination with the book.”²⁴

My reading of Riis’s work vis-à-vis *McTeague*’s narrator is that of an impossible ideal, one that this narrator eventually recognizes as untenable for an observer who approaches his subjects through the interiority of language rather than from behind the

²¹ The first publications of Riis’s photographs by the popular press preceded the widespread adoption of the half-tone reproduction process, and thus the earliest reproductions of Riis’s photographs in 1888 and 1889 in the *New York Sun* and *Scribner’s*, respectively, were wood engravings and line drawings copied from Riis’s original photographs. Newhall claims that the line drawing accompanying the *New York Sun* article were “not convincing.” (Newhall 133)

²² Harris 314; Hales 179.

²³ Hales 179.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

camera's protective apparatus. What Riis managed to achieve for his narratives through his photography was, according to Hales, "a means of hiding his hand, erasing his presence as authority, and transferring that authority to an apparently irrefutable medium of proof."²⁵ The narrator's corporeal presence in *McTeague* is an attempt to transform his stories into just this sort of "irrefutable proof," but as I will show, this attempt is inevitably frustrated by the narrator's unwillingness to maintain the intimacies with his characters necessary for telling an indexically accurate story. Photographs like Riis's offer the fantasy of a bodily presence that can easily be erased, a hand that can easily be hidden—but as *McTeague*'s narrator learns, such bodily erasures and concealments are far more difficult to enact than Riis's photographs make them seem.

The stubborn bodily presence of *McTeague*'s narrator that frustrates his attempts to tell a photographic story reflects the vexed relationship of photography and the body that, along with the concept of photography as an ideal of authoritative accuracy, was also a part of the emerging visual culture of the 1880s and 1890s. The photographer's body at the scene of the photograph guarantees the photograph's indexical accuracy, but this same seeing body was also being marked as increasingly unreliable by much of the photographic experimentation and practice at the end of the nineteenth century. The results of Eadweard Muybridge's experiments with stop-motion photography, published first in the *Scientific American* in 1878 and later, in 1887, as an eleven-volume set²⁶, revealed facts about human and animal movement that were imperceptible to the naked eye, thereby revising ideas about both the reliability of human perception and the generally accepted facts about human movement. Beaumont Newhall claims that

²⁵ Hales 193.

²⁶ Newhall 121.

Muybridge's work "convincingly demonstrated...the inadequacy of human vision," revealing the facts of human locomotion to a larger audience even than the first photographic investigations into human locomotion in the 1860s;²⁷ and Jonathan Crary identifies Muybridge's work as one of the most significant examples of a nineteenth century technology that participated in "a blunt dismantling of the apparent continuities of movement and time," identifying his work as "one instance of a larger decoupling of empirical verisimilitude from a "reality effect."²⁸

Work like Muybridge's was one of many examples of photography being used as a way to understand and document the facts of the human body. Such practices were quickly taken up by disciplinary organizations committed to the management and control of criminal bodies. Allan Sekula²⁹ has convincingly argued for the significance of photography as part of the late nineteenth century's methods of police work and investigation; although Sekula emphasizes that, by the end of the nineteenth century, photography lost some of its authority as a standard of identification, his work nevertheless references a moment when photography was part of a wider effort among social scientists, legal authorities and others to document the human body for disciplinary purposes. In his discussion of the first uses of photography for juridical purposes, Sekula identifies the photographic image as an evidentiary tool that works by silencing a certain kind of narrative. When confronted with the photographic "mug shot" of their criminal narrator, claims Sekula,

the protean oral "texts" of the criminal and pauper yield to a "mute testimony" that "takes down" (that diminishes in credibility, that transcribes) and unmask the

²⁷ Newhall 117.

²⁸ Crary, *Suspensions of Perception* 140.

²⁹ Sekula, Alan, "The Body and the Archive" *October* 39 (Winter 1986) 3-64.

disguises, the alibis, the excuses and multiple biographies of those who find or place themselves on the wrong side of the law.³⁰

In Sekula's formulation, the photograph's mastery of the criminal's body annihilates the collection of identities that he or she generates through narrative.

The kind of antagonisms between photography, the body and narrative invention that Sekula highlights also find expression in the embodied narrative practice of *McTeague's* narrator. The model for this narrator's storytelling practice may be grounded in the physical proximity required by a photographic practice like Riis's, but the narrator's abrupt rejections of these intimacies reflect the potentially unsettling relationships between photography and the body that are revealed by Muybridge's experiments and photography's juridical uses. The position of *McTeague's* narrator within the text is closer to that of a photographer/observer than it is to the observed bodies of criminals or Muybridge's subjects, but this position is not fully secured against the kinds of risks faced by the closely observed characters in the novel. Without the protection of the camera, the closeness required for indexical accuracy proves too dangerous for an observer whose materials are not photographic, but linguistic. The risks that the narrator perceives are sometimes psychic, sometimes physical—but they are activated by his sense of proximity or comparison of his body to those of the characters he describes.

The problem of the narrator's body in *McTeague* reflects the maddening paradox of material presence that lies at the heart of photographic accuracy: the photograph is impossible without the invisible, intangible—but nevertheless haptic—exchanges between the photograph's subject, rays of light, the camera's lens and the photographer's

³⁰ Sekula 6.

eye; and the photograph produced is a material trace that simultaneously guarantees the past existence and the present absence of the body pictured. The narrator's body expresses a similar material paradox, serving as both the key to the narrator's attempt to make his own story indexically accurate and as a liability in that same attempt. Realizing that the psychic risks of bodily presence are too great, the narrator ultimately reneges on his attempt at indexical accuracy.³¹ The mute bodily presence that the narrator thinks is enough for accuracy always gives way to the deeper and more disturbing accuracy of language, which provokes the narrator's abrupt withdrawals from the intimate spaces he shares with Maria, Zerkow and Trina. The free indirect discourse that the narrator uses in those moments that he eventually experiences as his riskiest narrative efforts expresses the inextricability of bodily and psychic risk: being physically close enough to the characters to be "inside" their heads seems to transform the narrator's own thoughts into their thoughts, or, at the very least, to threaten his objectivity about the characters. The narrator never becomes an actor that the characters see, but he experiences himself as a potential actor in the scene—and it's these experiences that unsettle him. The centrality of the narrator's body for the photographic model that Norris deploys in the Maria/Zerkow subplot points to the text's engagement with some of the period's most basic questions of representation, truth and identity; namely, how can anyone who "sees

³¹ I would place this failed attempt at indexical accuracy among the numerous other "failures" of naturalist narrative that many critics contend are the genre's most meaningful features—an example of the "disorder and dysfunction" that Naomi Schor, in *Reading In Detail* (New York: Routledge, 1989) claims we must understand in order to apprehend the naturalist text (Schor 113). Lee Clark Mitchell, in *Determined Fictions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), considers what is often described as naturalism's "irritating" narrative style—its repetitions, its purple prose and overused clichés—a style that is often offered as a reason for naturalism's aesthetic failure—as the most important sign of the genre's preoccupation with determinism as a threatening social and psychological possibility (ix-xi). And Michael Davitt Bell, in *The Problem of American Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), points out that the kind of free indirect discourse in Dreiser that mimics the characters' clichéd thoughts, etc. is a kind of failure of the naturalism's generic attitude, claiming that this sort of language "—collapse[s] the very distance on which the book's apparently naturalistic narrative structure is based." (Mitchell 160)

without touching” do so in a way that avoids both culpability and the possibility of becoming a victim of the same forces that menace people being observed; and, is a representation that entails such risks even “truthful” or powerful enough to make these risks worthwhile?

Criticism that explores the relationship between naturalism and photography has generally been limited to observations about each medium’s propensity for capturing superficial details and overall investment in mimetic accuracy. There are, however, several important critical precedents for my own reading of a relationship between naturalism and photography that is founded on something other than a faculty for mimetic accuracy. For Walter Benn Michaels, it is the photograph’s potential to represent a certain kind of “inaccuracy” that aligns the photographic act—and indeed, the act of writing itself—with naturalism’s articulation of cultural standards patterned after a market economy driven by speculation and risk.³² Michaels locates the photographic preoccupations of naturalism’s narratives in the charm of this risk, and the potential it offers for attaining personal freedom and creativity through the act of representation. For Michaels, naturalism sees narrative as a mode of representation that—like photography—is rich with the potential for a kind of accident and spontaneity that brings with it real creativity and freedom.

As a reading of naturalism’s relationship to photography that moves beyond considerations of mimetic detail, Michaels’s analysis is an important precedent for my own claims about the photographic model of narrative enacted in *McTeague’s*

³² See Michaels, Walter Benn, *The Gold Standard and The Logic of Naturalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), chapter 7, “Action and Accident: Photography and Writing,” 217-244.

Maria/Zerkow subplot.³³ But while Michaels reads photography as a representational mode that encourages the gaps between what the operator intends to show, the subject pictured, and the image that is actually produced, I am suggesting that, in *McTeague*, the idea of photography is characterized by the inescapable certainties that bind photographer, subject and image together. In *McTeague*, photography does not so much represent a standard of spontaneous action as it does a standard of indexical accuracy—one that the narrator ultimately rejects as too dangerous. In my reading of the Maria/Zerkow subplot, the risks of telling a story that is as accurate as a photograph are framed in terms of the psychic and emotional dangers that the narrator comes to recognize and fear—not, as is the case with Michaels’s reading, in terms of what opportunities for creative freedom or spontaneity photographic representation offers.

The unpredictability of what the photograph will show is, for Michaels, what makes this kind of spontaneity possible: the links between naturalism and photography are still ultimately about what the photograph pictures. I argue that the psychological risks that *McTeague*’s narrator senses as part of his narrative project are not about what his narrative might or might not show, but are rather about the kind of dangerous presence that the photographic act requires. Paul Young, in his recent work on the relationship between *McTeague* and the kinoscope, also argues that the narrative style of *McTeague* is shaped by the narrator’s anxieties about engaging with an emerging form of visual representation, and, like myself, Young emphasizes problems of intimacy and

³³ A number of other critics have explored the connection between naturalism and the late 19th century’s proliferating modes of visual representations and entertainment. See Orvell’s discussion of Crane, James, Dreiser, Norris and others as part of an emerging “culture of imitation” that included visual modes of reproduction, display and advertising; Don Graham’s study, in *The Fiction of Frank Norris: The Aesthetic Context* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978) of Frank Norris’s “aesthetic documentation” (3) of visual works of art throughout his novels; and Bill Brown’s observations in *The Material Unconscious: American Amusement, Stephen Crane and the Economies of Play* (Cambridge: University of Harvard Press, 1996) on the influence of photography and visual entertainments on the work of Stephen Crane.

embodiment as part of the narrator's telling of the Maria/Zerkow subplot.³⁴ For Young, it is not still photography but the kinoscope that "haunts"³⁵ *McTeague*'s narrator as both an ideal form of accuracy and a certain kind of threat. This threat is not, however, one that menaces the narrator's conscience or sanity, but rather one that menaces his cultural and social authority as a representative of Norris himself. Young claims that, for Norris, the kinoscope was a visual entertainment that seemed to require an author-like figure to select and arrange a collection of snapshot-like scenes; however, the superior accuracy and objectivity of these scenes also threatened to obliterate any trace of this author-figure in the kinoscope's visual narratives. For Young, the problems of intimacy and embodiment are not between the narrator and the characters, but rather between the narrator as a surrogate for the author and his potential audience. The objectivity of the kinoscope's images threatened what Young claims was, for Norris, the intimate "whispering distance"³⁶ between author and reader that guaranteed the author's authoritative presence within the text. Young reads embodiment as yet another threat to this authorial presence and authority, a sign of unruliness that he reads in the novel's representation of the audience that responds to the vaudeville-style show that *McTeague*, Trina and her family attend. Young's reading of *McTeague* as a novel that interrogates the possible relationships between narrative and a modern form of visual representation is an important precedent for my own argument, with respect both to *McTeague* and to my larger claims about naturalism's generic engagement with the late nineteenth century's changing visual cultures.

³⁴ Young, Paul, "Telling Descriptions: Frank Norris's Kinetoscopic Naturalism and the Future of the Novel, 1899" *Modernism/Modernity* 14.4 (2007) 645-668.

³⁵ Young 645.

³⁶ Young 658.

Young ultimately explains *McTeague's* narrative anxieties as reflections of Norris's authorial anxieties about the threat that modern visual entertainments posed to his cultural authority and position in the changing literary marketplace. My reading of photography in *McTeague* is not so much that of a visual form of representation that threatens literature's entertainment value or its cultural authority, but rather as a practice that the novel imagines as a way for narrative to approach the problem of representing experiences of urban life that differed sharply from those of middle and upper class readers. The way *McTeague's* narrator reacts to his own attempts to represent the experiences of Maria, Zerkow and Trina suggests that such attempts pose a threat to the integrity of the narrator's psyche.

My focus on the way the Maria/Zerkow subplot calls attention to the risks of presence and involvement aligns my reading with June Howard's identification of a particularly troubled form of observation as naturalism's generative narrative force.³⁷ But while for Howard, naturalism's narrative form always includes some expression of the paralysis that prevents the novel's spectator/narrator figures from becoming like the poor and working class figures they describe,³⁸ I am interested in the way *McTeague's* narrator willingly risks becoming like the characters he describes, at the level of his own narrative practice. My interest in the narrative exchanges between *McTeague's* narrator and his subjects is, in part, an attempt to further explore what Howard calls the "alarming

³⁷ According to Howard's formulation in *Form and History In American Literary Naturalism*, naturalism's plots are determined by a characteristic "gesture" by its spectators (either the narrator or a character whose perspective approximates that of the narrator/reader/author) of "gathering...privileged readers (regardless of what their class position may empirically be) around him to stare anxiously at the specter of proletarianization." (105)

³⁸ Howard defines the paralysis of naturalism's spectators as a "radical disjuncture between action and understanding," a condition that protects these figures from the deterministic forces that menace the other characters. Howard explains that "the insight and good intentions of the author and reader, or of a character who represents the author and reader, can be envisioned as affecting causal processes and determined events only through a vague, virtually magical process." (*Form and History* 125)

precarious[ness]”³⁹ of the spectator’s protected distance from the characters he describes. The intimate approaches of *McTeague*’s embodied narrator to Maria and Trina are moments when what Howard calls the “barrier that separates the classes and the two kinds of characters is pierced by proletarianization *as well as observation*, opening a scandalous possibility that threatens the very gesture of control the genre also implies”⁴⁰ [italics mine]. The narrator’s experience of intimate observation represents his willing traversal of the boundary that separates him from a character like Maria—a character who, unlike the inarticulate brutes that Howard describes⁴¹, seems uncannily able to tell just the kind of indexically accurate story that the narrator himself wants to tell.

Seeing a Photograph, Hearing a Story: The Experience of Indexical Accuracy

McTeague’s Maria/Zerkow subplot introduces the idea of an indexically accurate narrative in its early descriptions of Maria Macapa and her oft-told tale of her family’s lost service of gold plate. For Zerkow, the gold-obsessed junk dealer at McTeague’s Polk St. flat, Maria’s story guarantees both the plate’s existence and Maria’s past proximity to it, and it is these indexical “facts” that provoke Zerkow’s obsession with both Maria herself and the plate. As a theory of photography that emphasizes the fact of indexicality as the essence of the photograph’s identity and power, Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida* offers a productive model for reading both the nature of Zerkow’s obsession and the broader implications that photographic indexicality has for the subplot as a whole. Maria

³⁹ Howard 126.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ For Howard, one of the defining characteristics of naturalism’s brutish characters is their inability to know or describe the subtleties of their own consciousness or experience. Such characters belong to naturalism’s “polarized category...of signs,” rather than the category of “sign-producers” that includes naturalism’s thoughtful, articulate spectator figures. (*Form and History* 105)

and Zerkow's relationship and Barthes' theory of photography are both inaugurated by confrontations with the fact of indexical accuracy, and both eventually meditate on the consequences of such accuracy. Zerkow's response to Maria and her story regards the two—woman and story—as a representation both corporeal and narrative that certifies the existence of the gold plate:

He was near someone who had possessed this wealth. He saw someone who had seen this pile of gold. He seemed near it; it was there, somewhere close by, under his eyes, under his fingers; it was red, gleaming, ponderous. He gazed about him wildly; nothing, nothing but the sordid junk shop and the rust-corroded tins. What exasperation, what positive misery, to be so near to it and yet to know that it was irrevocably, irretrievably lost!⁴²

Zerkow believes that Maria has actually seen and touched the tantalizing object she describes, and his fascination with her and her story is founded upon this belief. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes' experiences a similarly embodied thrill of response to a photograph:

One day, quite some time ago, I happened on a photograph of Napoleon's youngest brother...and I realized then, with an amazement I have not been able to lessen since: 'I am looking at eyes that looked at the Emperor.'⁴³

For Barthes, the photograph of Napoleon's younger brother fascinates because of its connection to an actual moment and person who once existed in the material world. Barthes' "amazement" is the experience of looking at eyes that looked (at the Emperor); Zerkow's fascination with Maria and her story is the experience of seeing someone who has seen—and touched (the gold plate).

Zerkow's belief that Maria has touched the gold plate is significant in that it recognizes Maria's body as a necessary part of her representation of the gold plate. In the

⁴² Frank Norris, *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco*. Ed. Donald Pizer. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), (30). All subsequent page number references will be noted within the text.

⁴³ Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. Trans. Richard Howard. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 3.

Maria/Zerkow subplot, the indexical sign of the gold plate's existence is both a narrative representation and an embodied person: like the photograph itself, which is at once both material object (paper and chemicals) and representation, Maria's body and her story are inextricably fused to each other throughout the novel. As her story unfolds, Maria's body is revealed as more and more flawed, and as such, less and less able to fulfill the promise of indexical accuracy that it seems to promise. The sexual relationship that develops out of Zerkow's desire to "touch someone who had touched the gold plate" fails to quell his desire for the plate itself, just as it fails to produce any surviving progeny. These "bodily" failures evoke the agonizingly incomplete intimacies of sight and touch that Barthes associates with the experience of looking at a photograph. The photograph is, in Barthes' explanation, "literally the emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here."⁴⁴ The photograph that "emanates" touches the past and the present, the "there" and the "here," the "real body" that was photographed and the seeing, touching viewer of the photograph. But even though this viewer is "touched," it is only ever by the "radiations" of the "real body" that's pictured in the photograph—never by this body itself. The photograph comes close enough to the real thing to fascinate, but never close enough to satisfy. Zerkow's experience of listening to Maria's story is troubled by this same sense of incomplete intimacy. Being close to Maria brings Zerkow closer to the plate, but closer isn't ever as close as he would like to be: the plate "seems," but isn't "near," and Zerkow doesn't so much see and touch it as he dimly perceives it, "under" his eyes and fingers, as if the plate were close enough to sense psychically but not close enough to touch physically.

⁴⁴ Barthes 80.

Zerkow's certainty that the gold plate existed at some point in the past is strong enough to convince him, eventually, that the plate exists now, hidden away somewhere in the home he shares with Maria. Fascinated by Maria's story and the effect it has on Zerkow, the narrator shares this certainty—up to a point. The narrator recognizes—however dimly—Zerkow's madness as a consequence of sinking too deeply into the paradox of the photograph's particular kind of indexical accuracy, and his distance from Zerkow at the end of his life registers the narrator's anxiety about maintaining his own sanity in the face of an indexically accurate story. The narrator's behavior at the end of the Maria/Zerkow subplot suggests that indexical accuracy is dangerous, but Zerkow's final appearance in the novel asks an even more pointed question about such accuracy, specifically, does the truth of indexical accuracy always guarantee that a story will be believed?

McTeague's narrator seems just as fascinated as Zerkow is with the possibility that Maria's story refers to an actual object; in other words, the narrator is fascinated with the possibility that the story was "made" in the same way that a photograph is made. The narrator's musings on this possibility seem eventually to lead him to believe in the plate's existence and even to empathize with Zerkow's feelings about it. Despite how unlikely it might seem for Maria, now a poor "maid-of-all-work" at the Polk Street building, to have owned the resplendent service of solid gold that she describes, *McTeague's* narrator provides several possible explanations:

Were her parents at one time possessed of an incalculable fortune derived from some Central American coffee plantation, a fortune long since confiscated by armies of insurrectionists, or squandered in the support of revolutionary governments? It was not impossible. (30)

Maria's "loss" of the story after the death of her infant provokes another of the narrator's speculative musings about the truth of the story. "It was possible," muses the narrator, "that the gold plate she had once remembered had had some foundation in fact, that her recital of its splendors has been truth, sound and sane." (136) And although the narrator's speculations about this possible connection initially seem more detached than Zerkow's desperate and, eventually, violent insistence on the plate's existence, the narrator's attitude about the plate resembles Zerkow's attitude more and more as the subplot draws to a close. In a scene that expresses Zerkow's growing conviction that Maria is hiding the gold service, the narrator shares Zerkow's thoughts and voice, asking whether

...it stood to reason, didn't it, that Maria could not have described it with such wonderful accuracy and such careful detail unless she had seen it recently—the day before, perhaps, or that very day, or that very hour, that very *hour*? (137)

The narrator empathizes with Zerkow's belief in the plate's real existence and comes close to sharing his growing delusion that the plate is not only a real object, but also an object that Maria is deliberately hiding.

Zerkow is eventually unable to tolerate believing both that the plate exists and that it is not present, and his madness at the end of his life is a rejection of the reality that the plate is not, in fact, hidden somewhere in the Polk Street flat. And although the narrator seems to empathize with Zerkow's feverish delusion that the plate exists "somewhere close by," the narrator stops short of empathizing with Zerkow's madness. The narrative revelation of Maria's murder and Zerkow's suicide is far more distanced than the narrator's intimate descriptions of Zerkow's thoughts and desires about the plate itself, as if, when confronted with Zerkow's madness, the narrator suddenly tries to disavow the possibility that he, too, has believed in the truth of Maria's story and has

been tortured by its absence. The narrator reveals Maria's murder through an account of Trina's discovery of her body, while the circumstances of Zerkow's death are detailed by narrator's remark that "Polk Street read of it in the morning papers." (177) The narrator offers no definitive answer to the paper's question of whether Zerkow "had drowned himself or fallen from one of the wharves," (177) effectively denying whether, he, the narrator, has been close enough—either physically or emotionally—to Zerkow to know whether or not he intended to kill himself.

Yet even from his distanced position from Zerkow, the narrator cannot help but know what the rusty tin dishes mean to Zerkow, and knowing this means acknowledging the possibility of an accuracy more powerful than an accuracy certified by indexical presence. The newspaper's description of Zerkow clutching a set of rusty tin dishes as he dies offers a coldly sardonic answer to both Zerkow's and the narrator's earnest belief in the real existence of the gold plate: dishes do, in fact, exist at the end of the Maria/Zerkow subplot, but not in their "correct" form. Clearly, the rusty tin dishes do not look like the gold plate that Maria has described, but they are nevertheless "accurate" in that Zerkow regards them as the "real body" represented by Maria's story, the body that he could sense but never quite touch. For Zerkow, the rusty tin dishes have fulfilled the promise of tactile contact that Maria's photographic story held out to him for so long. At the end of the Maria/Zerkow subplot, the accuracy that prevails is Zerkow's deluded perception of the rusty tin dishes as the service of gold plate.

Zerkow's insane misrecognition points to the risks associated with telling an indexically accurate story and questions whether or not the power of such a story is worth taking them. Zerkow shows his madness by becoming a particularly involved "narrator"

of the story of the gold plate: clutching the rusty tin dishes “acts out” the only indexical guarantee of the story’s truth that the novel provides. Zerkow’s death scene carries what Barthes describes as the photograph’s particular madness to an extreme conclusion. The photograph indexes both absence and presence simultaneously, an effect that Barthes describes as a “shared hallucination (one the one hand “it is not there,” on the other “but it has indeed been”): a mad image, chafed by reality.”⁴⁵ Zerkow’s misrecognition of the rusty dishes as the gold plate is a refusal to accept the duality of his own particular “hallucination” of the gold plate.

The narrator’s withdrawal from his intimacy with Zerkow at this point in the novel throws the consequences of Zerkow’s final involvement with the story into sharp relief. When Zerkow becomes the kind of narrator who can claim that “his” story is indexically accurate, he goes mad. Telling about the incident after he reads about it in the newspapers may distance the narrator from his subject; it may even mean that he isn’t able to offer much insight or inside information about what happened—but the narrator’s recourse to the newspapers as a mediator between himself and Zerkow suggests an unwillingness to risk his own sanity to give his story the kind of immediacy and intimacy it would have if he had remained physically and emotionally close to Zerkow. The narrator’s shift from a perspective shared with Zerkow to one that he appropriates from the newspapers is a shift from a subjective to an (purportedly) objective—perhaps truer—perspective. The narrator, in the face of what is so clearly a subjective and powerful form of accuracy, cedes his authority over Zerkow’s story to the newspapers.

⁴⁵ Barthes 115.

Norris's introduction of the newspapers as a narrative authority in *McTeague* registers both his personal engagement with newspaper reportage as source material⁴⁶ for the novel and, more generally, the new credibility and authority of newspapers that styled themselves as alternatives to the sensationalized "rags" that dominated the popular press in the 1880s and early 1890s. By transferring his narrative authority to the newspapers at the end of Zerkow's story, *McTeague's* narrator aligns his own narrative practice with what had become, by the time *McTeague* was published in 1899, print culture's primary space of photographic production. Photography was crucial to the efforts of many newspapers committed to the newly emerging journalistic ideal of factual, objective reporting, and after 1897, the widespread use of the half-tone reproduction process quickly secured photography's role as the dominant mode of illustration in the period's major newspapers. The photograph's ability to "prove" the existence of what it imaged made photography an ideal weapon in the reaction, which intensified throughout the 1890s, against the fictionalized, exaggerated and sensational "news" stories that were alternatively known as "new" or "yellow" journalism. As Karen Roggenkamp claims in her history of nineteenth century journalism, for newspaper readers, photography "...functioned in some degree as a substitute for the more illustrative prose of new journalism."⁴⁷ The newspaper articles that Norris used as source material for *McTeague* appeared in William Randolph Hearst's *San Francisco Examiner*, a newspaper well-known for the kind of "illustrative prose" that photography eventually replaced. But the narrator's description of the newspapers that report Zerkow's death do not seem much

⁴⁶ Donald Pizer, in *The Novels of Frank Norris* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), states that "the initial inspiration for *McTeague* was probably a San Francisco murder in late 1893," which was "fully reported in the San Francisco newspapers on October 10, 1893." (52-63)

⁴⁷ Roggenkamp 125.

like the *Examiner*: rather than affirming the more sensational (but not provable) possibility that Zerkow has committed suicide, the newspaper reports only the available facts: that Zerkow's body was found in the water by the wharves, clutching a set of rusty tin dishes. In 1893, when the *Examiner* articles were published, photographs were not yet widely used as illustrations in most newspapers. However, by the time *McTeague* was published in 1899, Norris—who worked as a reporter for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *San Francisco Wave* and *McClure's* from 1895-1899—was certainly aware of the new possibilities for illustrating the news that the half-tone reproduction process had introduced. The nameless newspaper that Norris introduces at the end of the Maria/Zerkow subplot seems like the kind of newspaper that *would* use photographic evidence in lieu of sensationalized reporting. By having his narrator surrender authority to *this* kind of newspaper—rather than the kind that actually published the articles that inspired *McTeague*—Norris restyles his own sensational sources into the kind of objective, fact-based reportage that valued the indexical accuracy of the photograph over exaggerated prose.

Taking A Photograph, Telling A Story: Maria And The Narrator Experiment With Indexical Accuracy

The narrator empathizes with Zerkow as he listens, spellbound, to Maria's story: like Zerkow, *McTeague's* narrator recognizes something uncannily accurate about Maria's story. As the narrator observes a storyteller who seems unable to tell a story that is *not* indexically accurate, he finds it increasingly difficult to withdraw from what ultimately becomes an uncomfortably intimate relationship with Maria and Trina. The

narrator does much more than empathize with Maria and observe her narrative practice: he imitates it, and in doing so, finds himself complicit in the circumstances of Trina's death.

Even when Maria "loses" her memory of the gold plate, she is still able to tell its story—and in fact, her transformed version of this story has an even stronger indexical connection to the material world than the original story of the gold plate has. The story of Zerkow's abuse that Maria tells Trina carries the trace of her original story of the plate. The bruises that Maria sustains from this abuse index the power that the story still has over Zerkow: Maria no longer describes the gold plate's splendor, but her body's bruises still show the trace of her story. When she and Trina swap stories about their husbands' abuses, their bruises act as evidence for their efforts to determine "whose husband was the most cruel." (172) It would seem that the story of Maria's abuse would be difficult *not* to believe—and yet the narrator, who initially seemed so certain of Maria's narrative accuracy, doubts whether or not the story of her abuse is true. The narrator points out that Maria and Trina "exaggerate" and "invent details," (172) and affects a sort of skepticism about Zerkow's developing mania about the gold plate: "He [Zerkow] was becoming impatient, evidently," (172) the narrator claims, as a way of introducing Maria's subsequent description of Zerkow's fits of fever and mania brought on by his futile attempts to find the gold plate. The narrator's skeptical "evidently" suggests that he does not quite believe that Zerkow's mania is a result of his impatience with Maria's refusal to produce the plate, despite the fact that this is obviously the case.

The grisly evidence of Maria's story of abuse unsettles the narrator and accounts for the distance he tries to put between himself and Maria and Trina when he describes

the two womens' narrative exchange. His implication that the women are not telling the truth suggests a literal form of distance between himself and the women: if the narrator were physically close to Trina and Maria, then he, too, could see the severity of their bruises and know that they were not exaggerating their stories. To *McTeague's* narrator, Maria's bruises look like a particularly violent marker of what it means to tell an indexically accurate story. Not only do Maria's bruises register the physical pain she suffers in order to "prove" her story, they also represent a severely limited version of her original story, that of the gold plate. The fact that the gold plate was never seen by any of the listeners to Maria's story means that she could have said anything at all about it—she could have exaggerated its splendor, or downplayed it, and no one would have been able to contradict her with any certainty. The same cannot be said for the story of her abuse. The presence of her bruises makes it much harder for Maria to exaggerate the abuse she suffers from Zerkow, and even harder, if not impossible, to deny that the abuse has happened. The actual violence that Maria endures shares something with Barthes' concept of a photographic violence: just as the photograph forcibly denies the truth of any other representation of its referent, Maria's bruises limit the kind of story she can tell about their origin. For Maria, the presence required for her to tell an indexically accurate story is dangerous; not only that, the "proof" she gets by being there limits the kind of story she can tell.

The distance that the narrator puts between himself and Maria during this scene suggests his resistance to committing himself fully to the risky kind of presence that Maria's indexical narrative practice requires. But the narrator is also unwilling to relinquish entirely the possibility of authenticating his own story with the kind of

indexical accuracy that Maria seems so able to attain. Despite what seems like the narrator's physical and emotional distance from Maria and Trina in this scene, the narrator is paying close enough attention to their narrative exchange to appropriate a phrase that Maria uses in this dialogue. The narrator may not position himself close enough to see, but his later quotation of Maria's advice to Trina to "hump your back, and it's soonest over" suggests that he's close enough to hear; and indeed, that he's enthralled enough with Maria's indexical narrative to attempt claiming it for himself.

The particular language that the narrator appropriates is telling, in terms of what it says about the consequences of telling an indexical story. The narrator chooses a phrase that foreshadows the circumstances of the novel's most grisly conclusions, Trina's murder. Trina's intense struggle and prolonged death have an uncanny relationship to Maria's advice: Trina does quite the opposite of "humping her back," and her death is anything but quick. The narrator's dehumanized description of Trina—as a "harassed cat;" a "piece of clockwork;" a "rubber ball"—as she dies suggests that the narrator sees himself as complicit in Trina's death, because of his involvement with Trina's story—his quotation of Maria's phrase is the "evidence" of his presence at the scene of the women's conversation about their husbands' abuses—abuses which, after all, eventually escalate into murder.

The narrator's quotation of Maria's advice indexes his presence as a witness to the abuse the women suffer, but it also indexes (photographically) an intimacy that is—much like the photographic referent—both present and absent in the representation. The narrator's re-use of Maria's advice comes just after Maria's death, in the midst of a particularly intimate description of Trina's thoughts:

What odds was it if she was slatternly, dirty, coarse? Was there time to make herself look otherwise, and who was there to be pleased when she was all prinked out? Surely not a great brute of a husband who bit you like a dog, and kicked and pounded you as though you were made of iron. Ah, no, better let things go, and take it as easy as you could. *Hump your back, and it was soonest over.* (185)

The narrator here seems to be speaking in Trina's defensive voice, sharing in what sounds like a reply to a critique of Trina's slatternly appearance. The narrator's intimacy with Trina strengthens as he follows the progression of her thoughts, shifting into an even more personal mode of free indirect discourse. When Trina's thoughts turn from the reasons why she neglects her appearance to her husband's abuse, Trina is no longer "she" or "her," but "you." The rhetorical questions that the narrator asks about the futility of keeping up her appearance certainly seem as if they express Trina's point of view, but they still maintain some distance from Trina by referring to her as "she." But when the narrator "answers" these questions by referencing McTeague's abuse, Trina becomes "you," a narrative shift that suggests that the narrator is actually inside Trina's head, that he is actually speaking in her voice.

The narrator's subjective mode of description here gets more intense when the narrator describes Trina's abuse—a situation that the narrator, at the last minute, hastily tries to remove himself from by speaking in Maria's voice rather than in his own. Quoting Maria's advice to Trina while he describes Trina's thoughts puts the narrator in Maria's place, so to speak, evoking the intimacy that the two women shared before Maria's death. But this quotation is also a way for the narrator to distance himself from Trina at what seems like a climactic moment between Trina and the narrator: using Maria's language is a way for the narrator to evoke intimacy without having to participate in it directly. The narrator's quotation of Maria during a moment of intense intimacy with

Trina is his most extreme—and indeed, most successful—attempt to imitate the kind of indexical accuracy that he observes in Maria’s narrative practice. Quoting Maria directly is the closest the narrator can come to indexing his own presence at the scene of Maria’s and Trina’s conversation about their husbands’ abuses, but his quotation also can’t help but index Maria’s absence in the present moment of the narrator’s intimacy with Trina. It is here that the narrator’s story is at its most photographic: at the moment when, like the Barthesian photograph, it indexes both that Maria *has been* present at the scene and that she is no longer present “in the flesh.” Maria is clearly not there—the narrator replaces her as Trina’s advisor and confidant, but the narrator’s use of Maria’s words are evidence that Maria has, indeed, been.

The narrator’s attempt to withdraw from Trina in the above scene comes at the culmination of an intimacy with her that derives from his presence in Trina’s own home. In the scene just before the narrator’s quotation of Maria’s advice to Trina to “hump her back,” the narrator wistfully describes the decline of Trina’s physical appearance, with a nostalgia for the lovely way she used to look:

Worst of all, Trina lost her pretty ways and her good looks. The combined effects of hard work, avarice, poor food, and her husband’s brutalities told on her swiftly. Her charming little figure grew coarse, stunted, and dumpy. She who had once been of a cat-like neatness, now slovened all day about the room in a dirty flannel wrapper, her slippers clap-clapping after her as she walked. At last she even neglected her hair, the wonderful swarthy tiara, the coiffure of a queen, that shaded her little pale forehead. (184)

The narrator’s description of Trina’s physical appearance is almost tender in its recollection of her lost beauty, and the details he focuses on emphasize the pitiful preciousness of her body—her “little figure,” and her “little pale forehead.” The narrator’s description here references the pity he feels for Trina, but this reference is

inextricably linked to the narrator's presence at the scene: the narrator is literally close enough to Trina to hear the sound her slippers make as she walks around her house.

The narrator's appropriation of anything Maria says during her dialogue with Trina would have indexed his presence at this particular scene, but the particular language that he chooses hints at the narrator's complicity in the novel's grisliest conclusion, Trina's murder. Trina's efforts to resist McTeague and the length of time it takes her to die confirm the "accuracy" of Maria's advice to Trina to "hump your back, and it's soonest over:"

... Trina turned and fought him back; fought for her miserable life with the exasperation and strength of a harassed cat; and with such energy and such wild, unnatural force, that even McTeague for the moment drew back from her. But her resistance was the one thing to drive him to the top of his fury. (205)

Rather than submitting to McTeague's beating, Trina resists, and although it's impossible to say whether this resistance actually does prolong it, the length of time it takes Trina to die is a significant part of this scene. The narrator notes that "it was astonishing how long Trina held up under it," (206) and the final metaphor describing Trina compares her to "a piece of clockwork running down." (207) It does seem that, if Trina had "humped her back," her murder might have been over sooner. Like the rusty tin dishes that Zerkow clutches as he dies, the nature of Trina's death scene is a particularly chilling response to one of the narrator's experiments with a form of photographic accuracy. The degree to which this advice proves accurate is somewhat more than the narrator has bargained for: Maria's words index the narrator's presence at the scene of her dialogue with Trina, but they also predict the nature and the outcome of Trina's murder.

The language the narrator uses to describe Trina's dying body during this scene suggests that he recognizes the phrase's uncanny relationship to the scene he's

describing, and that he seeks to distance himself from this recognition. Trina becomes more like a thing, an animal or a spectacle in the narrator's description of her as she struggles to resist McTeague:

No acrobat ever went through such wild gymnastics, such contortions, such furious gambols. The frail body bounded about from wall to wall of the room with the vigor and elasticity of a rubber ball...It did not seem as if flesh and bones could endure such stress and yet live.⁴⁸

The narrator's distanced mode of description in this passage is, perhaps, an attempt to disavow what he knows—what he can plainly see—about the nature of the crime, namely, that a human being—not a “harassed cat” or a “rubber ball”—is being brutally murdered. His remark that it didn't seem possible for “flesh and bones to endure such stress and yet live” reads like an impossible wish, a wish that evokes something of the longing that Barthes associates with the photograph. The narrator knows that Trina is indeed flesh and blood, but he wishes that she weren't. He wishes, impossibly, that she were an animal or an automaton, some form of life or mechanism whose destruction he could witness without feeling complicit in its enactment. The narrator reads this scene as if what he sees is both there and absent: he watches Trina endure what seems impossible, just as the presence of what the photograph pictures seems both absolutely true and obviously false.

The dehumanized metaphors and skeptical tone that the narrator uses to disavow his knowledge of Trina's humanity produces a narrative that doubts and contradicts itself at every turn: rather than the indexical accuracy of a photograph, the narrator's story

⁴⁸ This description of Trina's death appears in the manuscript version of *McTeague*, in a lengthy passage that Norris excised from the first published version of the novel at the request of his publishers. Donald Pizer provides all that is extant from the passage (206) in the Norton Critical edition of *McTeague* referenced herein. Although the entirety of this passage was not included in the widely published version of the novel, it seems highly likely that, were it not for his publisher's concern about the passage's graphic detail, Norris would have allowed the passage to remain intact.

finally seems inaccurate, in terms of both mimesis and indexicality. The narrator's remark that Trina's body has the "vigor and elasticity of a rubber ball" as she bounces from wall to wall of the schoolroom is especially difficult to reconcile with his literal description, in the same sentence, of Trina's "frail body;" and his statement that "*no* acrobat" ever achieved the kind of "contortions" and "gambols" of Trina's struggling body suggests a certain skepticism about the physical truth of what he sees: if not even a virtuoso of bodily contortion could move the way that Trina moves, then perhaps the movements the narrator sees are—as indeed, the narrator hopes they are—somehow untrue. Such a hope could certainly be fueled by the "visual dictionaries"⁴⁹ of human movement produced by Muybridge and others during the 1880s and 90s. Contemporary responses to Muybridge's work often noted the shockingly different appearance of his images and the "live" appearance of human movement: perhaps the narrator has seen (just as Norris had surely seen) work like Muybridge's; and perhaps no image ever did show the human body approximating Trina's "furious gambols and contortions."

Realizing the horror of what he witnesses and worrying about his own complicity in the crime, McTeague's narrator would be only too willing to use his knowledge of Muybridge's photographs to prove his disavowal of the reality he witnesses. But Trina, of course, *is* human, regardless of whether or not any photograph exists to confirm it. The narrator's attempt to use Muybridge's photographs to "prove" what he knows is not accurate or true suggests a way in which the photograph, with its authoritative claim to

⁴⁹ Newhall 122. Newhall uses this term to describe Muybridge's 1887 eleven-volume publication of photographs showing animals and humans in motion. Many of Muybridge's photographs of human beings, most of them nude, depict acrobatic feats like headstands, handsprings and cartwheels. Other photographic works popular during the 1880s and 90s that depicted human beings in action evoke a similarly "acrobatic" look and feel; Newhall's discussion on pgs. 119-123 identifies both Etienne Jules Marey and painter Thomas Eakins as producers of such work.

indexicality, could be used to deny or reconstruct—rather than affirm—the truth of lived experiences. Most of the ideas and attitudes about photography in the 1890s that I have highlighted in this chapter assumed that the photograph’s ontological claim to indexical accuracy meant that photographs could only be used to tell the truth. However, the narrator’s use of photographic evidence to disprove or deny the unpleasant truth that he witnesses also registers the period’s emergent anxiety about photography’s potential to construct new “truths” or “realities” that obscure or deny lived experience—especially when that experience is lived by the “hidden” members of the urban poor. Disciplinary uses of photography like those that Sekula describes may have replaced the criminal’s “protean” autobiographical fictions with the visual truth of his identity, but *McTeague*’s narrator enacts the possibility of photographs being used to generate new fictions that deny or distort autobiographical truths.

Such a possibility is preferable for an observer like *McTeague*’s narrator—a figure who wants to tell an accurate story, but who knows that the risks of producing such a story are too great. Photography was authoritative because of its ontological claim to indexical accuracy—but indexical accuracy didn’t necessarily have to equal the truth of lived experience. Photographs could, after all, be staged to suggest certain things that weren’t necessarily true—as was the case with many of Riis’s photographs. This particular photographic possibility—a staged visual fiction with the authority of indexical accuracy—represents the ideal that *McTeague*’s narrator is on the verge of imagining, namely, the possibility of possessing the photograph’s authority without experiencing the trauma of presence that taking such a photograph would require.

The trauma of being present as an observer—rather than the trauma of being present as a victim—is ultimately what dominates the narrator’s story of Trina’s murder. As the story of Trina’s murder draws to a close, the narrator’s descriptions focus on the traumatic experiences of several other “observers” who witness Trina’s murder, the black cat who “lived on the premises” (204) and the kindergarten students who discover Trina’s body. The cat figures prominently in the narrator’s description of Trina’s final moments, accompanying the narrator as he watches the murder and later, as he turns to a description of McTeague’s exit from the kindergarten and return to his room above the music store. The physical spaces that the cat occupies and his sensual responses to the scenes he witnesses are a curious echo of the narrator’s traumatic attempts to observe the characters in *McTeague* from the photographer’s intimate perspective. As Trina scrubs the floor, the cat, “preferring to be dirty rather than to be wet,” watches her from within the “coal scuttle, and over its rim watched her sleepily with a long, complacent purr.” The cat’s preference to be “dirty rather than wet” as he observes Trina scrubbing the floor is a literal echo of the narrator’s realization that any observation of someone else’s suffering—even the kind that is physically distant from the “wetness” of active involvement—has the potential to “dirty” his psyche with fear and guilt. But the cat’s complacency—much like the narrator’s ambitious attempts to observe accurately—is quickly destroyed by the horror of witnessing Trina’s murder from an intimate vantage point. The narrator’s final description⁵⁰ of the fight between Trina and McTeague is focalized through the cat’s perspective. From outside the cloakroom, the cat hears

the sounds of stamping and struggling and the muffled noise of blows, wildly terrified, his eyes bulging like brass knobs. At last the sounds stopped on a

⁵⁰ In fact, the *only* description of the fight that was actually included in the first published editions of *McTeague* is provided through the cat’s perspective.

sudden; he heard nothing more. Then McTeague came out, closing the door. The cat followed him with distended eyes as he crossed the room and disappeared through the street door. (206)

In this passage, the signs of the cat's "terror" are a literal expression of traumatic observation: his eyes, "bulging" and "distended," seem physically damaged by what he has seen. The cat's body becomes a literal incarnation of the narrator's invisible body, traumatized and fascinated by the horrors of decay and abuse that he witnesses throughout the novel. By the time Trina is dead, this observing feline, "wildly terrified" and yet unable to tear himself away from McTeague, has become the literal image of the metaphoric "harassed cat" that the narrator evokes in his description of Trina as she struggles to survive. The narrator's attention to the cat's experience here shifts emphasis from the trauma of a human being who struggles like a "harassed cat" to the trauma of an actual cat who is "harassed" by the experience of watching that human being's futile struggle.

The cat's terror is not, however, the novel's final—and hardly its most disturbing—image of traumatic observation. Trina's body is discovered by a group of kindergarten students who arrive at school as usual on the morning after the murder. The narrator's final word on Trina's murder is actually a description of how these children notice the body. They arrive as usual and notice a "funnee smell" that one of the girls, "a butcher's daughter," equates with the smell of her father's shop. They also notice the cat (who returns with the narrator and the children) "acting strangely...his nose pressed close to the crevice under the door of the little cloakroom, winding his tail slowly back and forth, excited, very eager. At times he would draw back and make a strange little clacking noise down in his throat." (208) The smell of blood and flesh and the cat's strange

behavior direct the girls' curiosity to the cloakroom, and the narrator closes the scene by telling how the students "all ran in," presumably to discover the source of the smell and the reason for the cat's odd behavior. The narrator's description stops abruptly with these words, signaling his refusal to follow the little girls into the cloakroom and his unwillingness to witness the trauma of their discovery. The fact that *this* trauma—rather than that of the murder itself—is what provokes the narrator's withdrawal is a telling sign of his solipsistic preoccupation with the risks of intimate observation.

The kind of witnesses—an animal and children—who register what is really the narrator's own trauma of observation signal one of *McTeague*'s deepest anxieties about the risks and dilemmas of accuracy, observation and narrative. The actual characters that Norris chooses to show the literal trauma of observation are far less able to understand and communicate an account of what they see than the novel's articulate, subtle narrator. The cat, of course, will never speak, and the children who find Trina's body speak to each other in short, declarative phrases and slangy abbreviations ("what a funnee smell;" "tsmells like my pa's shop;" "ain't he funnee!") that suggest both their crude linguistic abilities and their naïveté. The cat may be a brute in the literal sense of the word, but children are brutes as well: their immaturity and their crude vulnerability to the sensory world; their class and their race (Norris is careful to identify one of the children as "colored") mark them as the victims of the naturalist novel's deterministic forces. In some ways, then, it seems only fitting that these characters are forced to serve as embodied examples of the observer's trauma—but the forced transformation of brutes into observers also speaks to the narrative situation that initially provoked the urgency with which the narrator attempts to tell a photographic story. Maria Macapa, the mentally

unstable narrator whose startlingly accurate story fascinates and inspires the narrator, is hardly less brutish than the children or the cat. Maria's story—like the stories that, perhaps, the children will one day tell about their grisly discovery—is based on an aspect of her personal experience that the novel refuses to definitively disprove or deny. Maria's firsthand experience with the gold plate has imprinted the story into her mind, as if she herself were like a photographic plate, sensitized for the task of narrative by an innate ability to receive—and even, to articulate—her experience. *McTeague's* narrator may be able to project the dangers and anxieties of observation onto his brute subjects, but in doing so he cannot help but reintroduce the real dilemma of presence, accuracy and narrative that his photographic model attempts to solve—namely, that the so-called “brutes” whose lives became such fascinating subject matter for journalists, photographers and fiction writers at the end of the nineteenth century were always already the most accurate narrators of their own stories, more present in their own lives than they could ever be in a photograph.

Chapter 2

Do You See What I See? Mediating Sensational Stories With The Moving Picture Lecturer And Stephen Crane

"Why, Martha," said Carrie, in a reasoning tone, "you talk as if you wouldn't be scared of him!"

"No more would I," retorted Martha.

"O-oh, Martha, how you talk!" said Kate. "Why, the idea! Everybody's afraid of him." Carrie was grinning. "You've never seen him, have you?" she asked, seductively.

"No," admitted Martha.

"Well, then, how do you know that you wouldn't be scared?"

Martha confronted her. "Have you ever seen him? No? Well, then, how do you know you *would* be scared?"

The allied forces broke out in chorus: "But, Martha, everybody says so. Everybody says so."

--from Stephen Crane, *The Monster*⁵¹

"...it would be hard for modern patrons to understand the feeling of panic that swept the audience at sight of this smoking monster rushing down upon them...At the point where it appeared certain the monster would hurl itself from the screen, babies yowled, youngsters trembled like aspen leaves, women screamed, and men sat aghast."

--from Albert Smith, *Two Reels and a Crank*⁵²

At issue in the two preceding quotes are the vexed relationships between sensation and knowledge that defined the projects of both naturalist writers like Crane and cinematic innovators like Smith at the end of the nineteenth century. Both reflect on a particular sort of "monster's" shocking irruption into spaces of comfortably established modes of observation and spectatorship: the disfigured and mentally damaged Henry

⁵¹ Crane, Stephen, "The Monster." *The Portable Stephen Crane*. Ed. Joseph Katz. (New York: Penguin Books, 1969) Subsequent page numbers from this edition will be noted in the text.

⁵² Smith, Albert, *Two Reels and A Crank*. (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1952) 39-40.

Johnson's jaunts through a small town full of nosy neighbors, gossips and hypocrites pushes the voyeuristic enthusiasm of its residents to the breaking point; and Smith's "smoking monster" seems about to make its audience flee in terror from what was likely a familiar site of pleasurable entertainments.

Martha Goodwin's insistence that neither her neighbors' tales nor the actual sight of Henry Johnson will make her fear him reminds us of the boundaries between sensation and knowledge—boundaries that Smith's hyperbolic description of an early film audience's response to a film depicting a "monstrous" onrushing train willfully forgets. Martha believes in the possibility of seeing something frightening without becoming afraid—a possibility in which her knowledge of who and what Henry Johnson really is would successfully mediate the potential shock of confronting his newly "monstrous" appearance. Smith's description of screaming women and men frozen with fear refuses such a possibility, insisting instead on an audience whose visual experience produces a genuine fear that is completely untempered by what they surely knew—even at this early moment in this history of cinema—about how the "monster" they saw rushing toward them was only an image, offered up for their entertainment.

As an assertion of the power of rational knowledge to tame either the body's visceral sensations or the insistent chorus of what "everybody says," Martha's statement is itself a kind of irruption within the text of *The Monster*. Martha believes that knowing and telling the truth is powerful enough to thwart the kind of visceral thrills and, even more significantly, the unjust victimization of Henry Johnson by the majority of her fellow townspeople. Hardly anyone in Crane's fictional Whilomville shares Martha's opinion—not even *The Monster's* narrator. The narrative voice in *The Monster* is as cool,

as sophisticated, and as ironic as any in Crane's oeuvre, but it can also be sensational: the narrator often seems as vulnerable to the fascinated, fearful thrill of seeing Henry Johnson as the townspeople he describes, and just as curious and uninformed about the scandalous stories of Johnson's encounters with Whilomville's residents. These abrupt narrative shifts from a "sensational" voice to one that sounds more like naturalism's characteristic voice of informed distance continually frustrate the reader's desire to know—whether, for example, the narrator regards the victimized Henry Johnson as noble, pitiful or ridiculous; or whether the narrator is really as hypocritical and narrow-minded as the small-town neighbors whose perspectives he seems to both share and criticize. The narrator's commitment to a perspective that registers the thrilling sensations of Whilomville's townspeople far more readily than it explains or describes their moral limitations ultimately says more about the futility of any attempt to mediate either the sensory or the ethical impressions of an audience—whether of readers or spectators—through the kind of informed, rational narrative that defined the naturalist project.

As a voice inflected by both the sensory charge of a thrilling story and an informed sense of how and why that story unfolds, Crane's narrator sounds uncannily like another sort of narrator familiar to purveyors of modern entertainment at the turn of the century: the lecturer who, in the early years of cinema, explained and embellished the sometimes unfamiliar and predominantly silent scenes of the first moving pictures. Early film—at once a technological wonder, a visual novelty and a form that drew heavily on its theatrical and literary precursors—exploited both the distinctly sensory thrill of confronting the moving image and the comfortable pleasure of recognizing the familiar figures, stories and exhibition practices that defined the existing cultures of public

entertainment. Descended from both the carnival barker urging potential spectators to gape at sideshow wonders and from the refined, well-informed educator of genteel audiences, the moving picture lecturer was a familiar part of this culture.⁵³ He was, however, a figure whose attentions to his audiences had always been divided between helping them make sense of what they were seeing and encouraging them to experience the thrilling sensations of novel sights and sounds.

The Monster's narrator speaks from a similarly interstitial position, one that continually evokes both the bodily thrills of sensation and a privileged knowledge about the story he tells. Like the moving picture lecturer, *The Monster's* narrator attempts to mediate how and what people come to know about a story that confronts its audience with an aggressive, sensational force. In the chapter that follows, I argue that this narrative attempt is in fact an elaborate demonstration of just how futile the attempt to tell an ethical story can be in an ever-more visible and sensational social world.

This narrative crisis is one that the moving picture lecturer made vividly apparent: the history of this figure's lecturer's practice emphasizes just how difficult it is to mediate, through narrative, what people can easily see for themselves. *The Monster's*

⁵³ For book-length studies of early film history that include information on the moving picture lecturer's practice throughout the late 1890s and early 1900s, see: Altman, Rick. *Silent Film Sound*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Noel Burch's *Life To Those Shadows*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); and Miriam Hansen's *Babel And Babylon: Spectatorship In American Silent Film*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991). For a detailed study of the moving picture lecturer in the context of traveling exhibition, as embodied by popular exhibitor and lecturer Lyman Howe, see Charles Musser's *High-Class Moving Pictures: Lyman H. Howe And The Forgotten Era Of Traveling Exhibition, 1880-1920*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). Scholarly articles that treat this topic include: Germaine Lacasse's "Le bonimenteur de vues animées/The Moving Picture Lecturer" *iris* 22 (Fall 1996); Tom Gunning's "The Scene of Speaking: Two Decades of Discovering the Film Lecturer." *iris* 27 (Spring 1999): 67-79. Accounts of this practice dating from the late nineteenth century include: Smith's *Two Reels And A Crank*. (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1952); Bush, Stephen W. "The Picture and the Voice." *Moving Picture World* 2 November 1912: 429; and "Burton Holmes Takes His Audience On An Interesting Journey," *The Milwaukee Sentinel* 15 November 1899: 3, column A.

narrator dramatizes both the ethical and the perceptual implications of this crisis, pointing toward the impossibility of mediating either the sense that people make of what they see or their subjective sensation of experiencing it. Unlike *McTeague*, in which the narrator's eager approaches and anxious retreats from his subjects are produced by the pursuit of accuracy, *The Monster's* narrative oddities suggest a pointed manipulation of fact and knowledge—a manipulation that has more to do with the text's ethical implications than its aesthetic ones. The derision and pity with which *The Monster's* narrator depicts the novella's victims and perpetrators alike suggests not so much a commitment to accuracy as it does a commitment to telling what seems like a moral tale in radically amoral terms—a commitment that ultimately exposes the inherent difficulties of producing the kind of exhaustive knowledge to which the naturalist text aspires.

Crane, Sensation And The Pursuit Of Knowledge

The question of how anyone comes to know and articulate experience is one that has often been raised by Crane's writerly practice and his fiction, both during his own lifetime and as part of the ongoing critical conversation about his work. One of the most frequently commented upon features—indeed, what might even be called its most sensational aspect—of Crane's best-known work, *The Red Badge of Courage*, was the fact that its author had never experienced the kind of Civil War battles and struggles that he wrote about so convincingly.⁵⁴ Crane's blurring of the line between fact and fiction was also linked to his journalistic writings, many of which are clear precursors or inspirations for his fictional works. Crane's collection of writerly projects could easily be

⁵⁴ For a fuller discussion of Crane's photographic and journalistic sources for *Red Badge* and the implications of his absence from any actual battlefield of the Civil War, see Orvell 127-128.

read as a studied investigation into the problem of how a writer should come to know the stories he tells. Through personal imagination, and the record of the past, as in the case of *Red Badge*? Through direct experience and observation, as in the case of his urban sketches? Or through an elaborated re-interpretation of the sensational news stories and clichéd, melodramatic plots and themes that filled the newspapers and magazines to which he often contributed? Such questions are, of course, just as applicable to many of naturalism's most familiar texts: Crane's frank experimentation with a diverse array of literary epistemologies emphasizes—ironically, of course—the more general tendency of the naturalist text to insist on its own claims to factual accuracy. The choices Crane made in terms of what to write for newspapers and what to write as fiction suggest that he was consciously interrogating the viability of “literary” knowledge. Michael Robertson identifies Crane's “practice of journalism and his familiarity with the fact-fiction discourse of 1890s papers” as a major contributing factor to what he calls Crane's “awareness of the instability of narrative representation;”⁵⁵ and in her study of *The Monster* as an illustration of the cultural and economic dynamics of lynching and capitalism at the end of the nineteenth century, Jacqueline Goldsby calls *The Monster* “the most acutely observed and discerning account” of an actual lynching that occurred in Crane's hometown of Port Jervis, NJ, in 1892.⁵⁶ Evidence also suggests that Crane fabricated at least some of what he passed off as true reporting for newspapers, including

⁵⁵ Robertson, Michael, *Stephen Crane, Journalism And The Making of American Literature*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) 67.

⁵⁶ In *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching In American Life And Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), Goldsby reads *The Monster* as a pointed commentary on the 1892 lynching of Robert Lewis in Port Jervis. She notes that Crane's former neighbors were upset by the novella, angry that Crane was revealing “their most shameful moment.” See Chapter 3, 105-163.

a story about a house fire that closely resembles the descriptions of the Trescott house fire in *The Monster*⁵⁷.

Critical attention to the role of sensation and perception in Crane's work has primarily focused on discussions of Crane's preoccupation with visual experience⁵⁸ and, relatedly, his literary impressionism. Recently, however, critical attention has turned even more directly to the body's role in the kind of perception that Crane's work suggests. Walter Benn Michaels has recently commented on the representation of dialect in Maggie as an example of realism's "commitment to making "the complete image" available to the senses," a way of "making sounds seen," a gesture that he identifies as one that acknowledges sight as the primary sense to be satisfied; and Mary Esteve's recent article on Crane's "documentary anaesthetics" suggests that Crane's fiction is part of what she calls a "cultural will to anaesthesia," one that "disrupts the dominant will to a stabilizing sense-perception."⁵⁹

Like Esteve, I believe that Crane's work rejects the notion of a universal or objective way of seeing and sensing the world; however, I read Crane's objection to the notion of a "stabilizing sense-perception" not as a rejection or disavowal of sensory experience, as Esteve does, but rather as a deep engagement with the newly intense

⁵⁷ Levenson, J.C. "Introduction." *Tales of Whilomville*. Ed. Fredson Bowers. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1969). xxi

⁵⁸ In his introduction to an anthology of essays on Crane, Harold Bloom identifies Crane's work as part of a genealogy of literature that "sees," which he regards as a distinctive feature of 1890s literature. Carol Schloss, in *In Visible Light*, identifies Crane as one of many authors who aspired to an ideal of neutrality and—interestingly—superficiality and surface--represented by photography. Crane and other were, she claims, "concerned with securing external likenesses, fascinated by the permutations of the surface of life, as if literature no longer had reason to render depth, interiority, or the relation of seen to unseen existence." (18) Keith Gandal, in *The Virtues of the Vicious: Jacob Riis, Stephen Crane and The Spectacle Of The Slum* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), identifies Crane's preoccupation with spectatorship and visual experience as a mode of deriving a reinvigorated energy/life from the "strenuous" world and alternative moral/ethical code of the slums. (79-84)

⁵⁹ Esteve, Mary. A "Gorgeous Neutrality": Stephen Crane's Documentary Anaesthetics." *ELH* 62.3 (Fall 1995) 663-689.

possibilities for sensation represented by the experience of early film. For Crane, the diverse and evolving culture of cinema offered an especially pointed version of the epistemological dilemmas raised by much of his fiction. In 1899, the culture of cinema was a highly diverse phenomenon, defined in large part by confrontations between established, familiar modes of entertainment like the educational lecture and a newly visceral—even shocking—cinematic entertainment that frankly sought to elicit embodied responses from its spectators. Such films were usually single shots that animated titillating, curious, exotic or sensational scenes. Film historian Tom Gunning, who, with Andre Gaudreault, developed the term “cinema of attractions” to describe these films in a series of essays written in the last half of the 1980s⁶⁰, identifies the genre as presenting

...visual delights, surprises, displays of the exotic, beautiful or grotesque (views of foreign sites or indigenous people, scantily clad women or physical freaks) or other sorts of sensational thrills... Rather than attempting to create a fictional world (as narrative tends to do) attractions address the spectator directly, even aggressively, subjecting him or her to emotional shocks... [cinema of attractions] could be described as an “exhibitionist” cinema, well aware of the act of being seen, flaunting the act of display.⁶¹

The moving picture lecturer was frequently figured by the fledgling film industry as a reassuring and necessary mediator—not only of the cinema of attractions’ “sensational thrills” and “emotional shocks,” but also of the audience’s unpredictable and unruly responses to this new mode of entertainment. The relationship between lecturer and audience was indeed crucial—but the history of this diverse practice suggests that the lecturer often acted more as a register and reflector of audience response than as an

⁶⁰ For a detailed account of the genesis of this term and a summary of the writings and lectures that introduced it to the scholarly community, see Wanda Strauven’s introduction to the recent anthology of essays devoted to the topic, *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007).

⁶¹ Gunning, Tom. “Cinema of Attractions.” *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema*. Ed. Richard Abel. (Routledge: London and New York, 2010) 124.

authoritative interpreter and mediator of a film's content.⁶² I read *The Monster* as an exaggerated allegory of both the visceral thrills elicited by the cinema of attractions and the lecturer's collaborative mediation with the audiences who experienced them—an allegory that ultimately points to the futility of any narrative project that seeks to tell its readers how to see, think or feel.

Henry Johnson And The Cinema Of Attractions

Like many of the cinema of attractions' classic short films, *The Monster's* victim-protagonist Henry Johnson is initially portrayed as an amusing spectacle, well-liked and familiar but also curiously observed. However, the story of Henry Johnson's transformation from strutting dandy to ostracized freak quickly becomes a nightmarish version of the kind of confrontation between spectator and film that defined the experience of early cinema. After his disfigurement, the thrill of seeing Henry becomes a genuine terror to his neighbors, one that Henry's increasingly aggressive exhibitionism repeatedly incites. Henry's monstrosity is essentially a realization of the bodily contact between spectator and film that was the cinema of attractions' most tantalizing—but never realized—suggestion.

In a series of episodes that culminate in the scene of his disfigurement, Henry Johnson's figurative and literal "performances"—as an obedient servant, a strutting "cakewalker,"⁶³ a lightweight boxer and, eventually, a sacrificial body—evoke a number of early filmic subjects associated with the cinema of attractions as well as that genre's

⁶² See especially [chapter in Altman's *Silent Film Sound? Others?*]

⁶³ The cakewalk was a popular subject for early films. Charles Musser's catalog of Edison films cites one such representative example, produced by W.K.L. Dickson and entitled "Cake Walk." The film was described by The Kinetoscope Company's *Price List of Films* from May 1895 as "the best negro subjects yet taken and are amusing and entertaining." Musser, *Edison Motion Pictures* 174.

emphasis on exhibitionism. The scene in which Henry “performs” his regular task of washing Dr. Trescott’s buggy depicts Henry as a contented servant who enjoys being watched. When Jimmie watches Henry perform this task, Henry “procure[s] great joy from the child’s admiration” of his work—so much so that when Jimmie fails to be immediately distracted by “the wonders of wagon washing,” Henry uses “seductive wiles in this affair of washing a wagon,” in an attempt to engage his audience—an audience who the narrator tells us Henry is “always delighted to have...there to witness the business of the stable.” (452-453)

Another early scene, that of Henry’s “cakewalk” down the main street of Whilomville, makes both the voyeuristic appeal of Henry’s racialized body and his exhibitionism even more explicit. Flaunting his own good looks and flamboyant clothing, Henry elicits a string of jibes from a group of young men who interpret his stroll as a cakewalk:

“Hello, Henry! Going to walk for a cake to-night?”
“Ain’t he smooth?”
“Why, you’ve got the cake right in your pocket, Henry!”
“Throw out your chest a little more.” [454]

The narrator claims that Henry is “not ruffled in any way” by the commentary of these young men; he responds to them by “laugh[ing] a supremely good natured, chuckling laugh, which nevertheless expressed an underground complacency of superior metal.”

[455] And in fact, Henry relishes the attention he receives from his neighbors:

Henry was not at all oblivious of the wake of wondering ejaculation that streamed out behind him. On other occasions he had reaped this same joy, and he always had an eye for the demonstration. [456]

The pleasure that Henry derives from his neighbor’s admiration of him—however tongue-in-cheek it may be—is hinted at by the narrator’s early comment that “it was plain

from his [Henry's] talk that he was a very handsome negro," one who was "known to be a light, a weight, and an eminence in the suburb of the town." [451] Describing Henry as "a light" and "a weight" also casts Henry as the principal figure in yet another cinematic genre popular during the 1890s, that of the prizefighting film. The narrator makes this designation even more explicit in his later description of Henry "duck[ing] in the manner of his race in fights" and "aim[ing] to pass under the left guard" [465] of the fiery specter who blocks his exit from Dr. Trescott's burning laboratory. Casting Henry as the kind of prizefighter who was frequently depicted in the boxing films of the 1890s—both real and staged⁶⁴—ascribes a significantly more intense—and bodily—thrill to his performances than the one he elicited as a racial curiosity: prizefighting films exploited both the erotic thrill of viewing the nearly nude male bodies of the fighters, but they also evoked the vaguely sadistic thrills of seeing these bodies beaten, bruised and threatened with injury or death⁶⁵.

The scene of Henry's disfigurement marks his definitive transformation from a bodily curiosity to a body that threatens its spectators with the possibility of real contact—a transformation that is effected by Henry's surrender to an experience of visual sensation untempered by the kind of knowledge that reminded early film audiences of their own bodily safety. This scene—perhaps the most explicitly violent scene in the novella—is also, in the most literal sense of the word, the most spectacular: in order to escape down a little-used staircase in Dr. Trescott's laboratory, Henry must confront and

⁶⁴ For more information on the popularity of prizefighting films, see Musser, Charles, *The Emergence of Cinema: Vol. 1: The American Screen to 1907*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) 193-208; and Streible, Dan, *Fight Pictures: A History of Boxing and Early Cinema*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

⁶⁵ For a thorough discussion of why and how films that showcased the human body (i.e., those that featured prizefighters, contortionists, body builders, and others) appealed to late nineteenth century audiences, see Musser, *Edison Motion Pictures*, 28-30 and 40-43.

pass though what the narrator describes as a “strange spectacle,” one that proves impossible to see safely. The narrator’s description of this scene is an incongruous combination of visual delight and corporeal threat. The beauty of flames that are like “burning flowers...blooming everywhere” in hues of “violet, crimson, green, blue, orange, and purple;” or that are “precisely the hue of a delicate coral,” or that “lay merely in phosphorescent inaction like a pile of emeralds” are also those that “bit[e] deeply into Johnson...like a panther,” and the “delicate, trembling sapphire shape like a fairy lady” is the same brutal adversary who “dooms” Henry and Jimmie with her “left guard” and clutching “talons” that are “swifter than eagles.” The tension between visible beauty and bodily threat that runs throughout this scene finds a brutal resolution in Henry Johnson’s disfigurement, when a chemical flame like a “scintillant and writing serpent,” “ruby-red” and “languorous,” flows “directly down into Johnson’s upturned face.” [465]

Henry’s face is destroyed by the kind of physical contact with a thrilling spectacle that the cinema of attractions evokes, but stops just short of delivering. The event of Henry’s disfigurement upends the delicate balance between sensation and sense that the cinema of attractions cultivated: as he stands before the spectacle of burning wonders in Dr. Trescott’s laboratory, Henry is quite sure that he is not safe from what he sees; and in fact, he knows that any chance of survival means that he *must* touch what he sees. Henry becomes, then, a victim of pure sensation, a spectator who sacrifices his face and his sanity—but retains his vision—in order to survive and save Jimmie.

After his disfigurement, Henry Johnson seems to become the kind of threatening sensation that he confronted in Dr. Trescott’s burning laboratory. The narrator’s statement that “he always had an eye for the demonstration” is grimly realized in the

nature of his disfigurement: all that remains of his face is a “single, unwinking eye,” one that becomes, for his neighbors, an alarming demonstration of monstrosity. Henry may lose his face and his senses in the fire, but—much to the horror of his neighbors—his penchant for self-display remains intact: he retains not only his ability to see, but also his desire, or impulse, to be seen. Henry’s life after the fire is defined by a series of increasingly aggressive confrontations with the people of Whilomville, confrontations that elicit fear, anger and violence. Henry’s transformation from a spectacle of fun to one of horror is essentially a literalization of the cinema of attractions, one that imagines the kind of scenarios that provoke the thrills and frights of these films as “real” events, with consequences that resonate long after the initial shock of the encounter has worn off. By the end of the novella, it is not only Henry who is ostracized, but also the Trescotts: both Dr. Trescott’s medical practice and his wife’s social life become markedly slower when it becomes clear that they intend to keep Henry under their roof. Rather than an audience whose initial shock gives way to curiosity and pleasure, as we might imagine happened in the case of the cinema of attractions, Whilomville’s spectators reject both Henry and anyone who continues to associate with him.

The Monster’s Narrator And The Moving Picture Lecturer

Whilomville’s rejection of Henry is—oddly enough—one that the novella’s narrator seems to share. After Henry’s disfigurement, the narrator’s perspective on Henry changes from one of psychological intimacy to a perspective that seems to notice nothing but the superficial sights and sounds of Henry’s story. The narrator surrenders to an experience of vision that is just that: a vision that “sees” only Henry’s appearance of

monstrosity, untempered by any knowledge of his character or history. Throughout the second half of the novella, the narrator does not refer to Henry as anything but “the monster,” as if the narrator’s perception of Henry as a psychologically complex character has been eradicated by the disturbing sight of a face that is nothing but an eye. The narrator’s omniscience changes from a psychological to a sensory one—a process that ultimately renders the narrator more like the hypocritical townspeople than a moral authority who might mediate the disturbing shocks of Henry Johnson’s story.

If Henry Johnson is a literal and nightmarish exaggeration of the shocks and thrills served up the cinema of attractions, then *The Monster’s* narrator is an equally disturbing exaggeration of the knowledgeable, artful performer who was tasked with mediation of early film’s novel and sometimes unsettling or confusing offerings. In the initial scenes that feature Henry—many of which mirror the curiosities and thrills of the cinema of attractions—the narrator’s commentary on the workings of Henry’s private psychology evokes the kind of insider knowledge about Henry that a lecturer might offer his audience about a particular film. Perhaps the most striking example of such knowledge is the narrator’s precise detailing of Henry’s changing emotional state during his attempted rescue of Jimmie Trescott. In this section, the narrator is privy to the chain of desires, memories, fears and determinations that Henry experiences as he struggles to escape the burning house with Jimmie in tow, a series that the narrator summarizes as Henry’s “singular and swift set of alternations in which he feared twice without submission, and submitted once without fear.” Henry’s relinquishment of “almost all ideas of escaping from the burning house, and with it the desire;” his recollection of the back stairway that makes his “submission to the blaze depart instantly;” and his “wish”

for the unconscious Jimmie “to participate in his tremblings” [464] all suggest an intimate knowledge of the region the narrator has previously referred to as “somewhere far in the interior of Henry.” [453]

The access that *The Monster*'s narrator has to the “interior” of a character like Henry Johnson mirrors the special knowledge that moving picture lecturers had about both the subject matter and the organization of early films. The moving picture lecturer's conventional role, as articulated with increasing clarity throughout the late 1890s and early 1900s by trade publications and industry officials, was that of a knowledgeable explainer of unfamiliar images or cinematic conventions⁶⁶. According to such commentaries, knowing more about the films he presented than his audience was the moving picture lecturer's special contribution to the cinematic experience—a contribution meant to both temper the shocking thrills of early films and to tame the potentially unruly responses of enthusiastic spectators. In a series of articles published during the early 1900s in the film trade journal *Moving Picture World*, Stephen W. Bush, one of the burgeoning film industry's most prolific critics—and, perhaps not surprisingly, a former moving picture lecturer himself—emphasizes the need for the lecturer's knowledgeable, rational influence as an essential part of experiencing a film, claiming that

⁶⁶ Noel Burch, who posits that the first viewers experienced early films as “too uniformly ‘centrifugal’ for the eye to pick its way confidently through them,” claims that the lecturer “served...to bring order to the perceptual ‘chaos’ of the primitive picture” and “taught film-goers how to read the vast, flat and acentric pictures” (154-155) that Burch identifies as characteristic of early film. Musser also points to the lecturer as a figure who helped “reassure” audiences through explanation and interpretation. In his description of “The Passion Play of Oberammergau,” one of the most popular and widely shown films during the last half of the 1890s, Musser states that the shows were characterized by a “consistent reliance on lecturers who linked and interpreted the images;” he also claims that, in films depicting boxing matches, the narration of the film lecturer “emphasized... the details and significant moments that would one day be brought out by close-ups.” Burch, Noel. *Life To Those Shadows*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Musser, *Emergence*, 209.

you would be surprised how much more you can discover in it than on your first witnessing it. This is quite natural. The manufacturer of the picture devoted days, perhaps weeks to it, and no matter how hard he may have tried to make it perfectly plain and simple, there are always some points which are brought out more forcibly by explanation.⁶⁷

The scenario that Bush imagines here is one in which the lecturer informs audiences of what they might have missed—a scenario that assumes that audiences are not just less knowledgeable, but also less observant than the lecturer. For Bush, the lecturer’s contribution to a film represents not an intensification of the embodied sensations of eye and ear, but rather a rational explanation that enhances the experience through explanation:

The lecture, properly selected and handled, delivered by a competent speaker, adds directly to the enjoyment of certain pictures, because we all enjoy just in the degree in which we understand.⁶⁸

According to Bush, most films—not just the “great feature films”—would benefit greatly from a lecture prepared by “a man of fair education and quick wit and some gift of speech.” However, his claim that “we all enjoy just in the degree in which we understand” is hardly the universal truth that his rhetoric attempts to make it into, especially in the case of early film. It was, in fact, not quite understanding how films worked—the marvel of seeing motion displayed on the screen, for example—that accounted for the appeal of many films in the cinema of attractions.

Despite what commentators like Bush claimed, other historical accounts suggest that lecturers—even those who struck the pose of the genteel educator—traded on the pleasures of not knowing at least as often as they did on the pleasures of being informed.

In an 1899 article detailing the recent appearance of traveling lecturer Burton Holmes,

⁶⁷ Bush, Stephen W. “The Picture and the Voice.” *Moving Picture World* 2 November 1912: 429.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

The Milwaukee Sentinel's appreciation of the well-known Holmes derives largely from his identification with his audience's perspective of naivete and wonder. "Burton Holmes Takes His Audience On An Interesting Journey," the title of the article proclaims, and begins by detailing how Holmes' "wonderful pictures" and "pleasant narrative...transported an audience of several hundred people into the very heart of the Colorado canyon in Arizona, an unknown and mysterious region to them for the most part."⁶⁹ According to this commentator, Holmes's mediation has more to do with his presence on the scene than the precise nature of the description or explanation he provides. "Mr. Holmes," states the article,

frankly confessed at the outset to his inability to put into words the impression the canyon made on even so hardened a globe trotter as he, and this could be understood as the pictures were thrown on the screen...⁷⁰

The kind of mediation suggested by the above quote assumes a kind of common ground between Holmes and his audience, a shared sense of wonder and danger that robs Holmes of his eloquence. In this situation, Holmes is less the knowledgeable, confident expert than he is one of the naïve and wondering spectators experiencing the images on the screen for the first time. Holmes's "frank admission" that he is unable to find words to describe the scenes in his film assumes a perspective similar to that of his audience, a group who has never seen and is thus more likely to experience the images he shows as genuinely thrilling. Thus read, Holmes mediates the experience of film not by explaining and describing, but rather by admitting to an experience of wonder and amazement that mirrors that of his audiences upon seeing his film. It seems unlikely, however, that Holmes would actually be at a loss for words while watching images that he himself had

⁶⁹ "Burton Holmes Takes His Audience On An Interesting Journey," *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, 1899, column A.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

made and had probably seen many times already. Professing his inability to find words to describe the images onscreen, then, was likely a calculated strategy, one based on Holmes's perception of his audience's response to his film images.

It is, of course, possible—and likely—that Holmes did provide some explanation and background information about the scenery his images displayed; however, his claims of wonder and amazement gesture toward a kind of mediation that is more deictic than explanatory; more participatory than didactic. In the early chapters of *The Monster*, the narrator's descriptions of Henry are marked by similar tension: the narrator's elaborate descriptive metaphors seem to be an imaginatively phrased reflection of his intimate knowledge of Henry's psyche—a kind of description that approximates a lecturer like Holmes's refined delivery of insider knowledge. Yet these descriptions are actually closer to Holmes's "frank admission" of wordlessness than we might think. The narrator's metaphors seem to compare Henry Johnson to a world outside the text, when in fact they refer most directly to the novella's plot itself—as if the narrator, like a caricatured grotesque of a rapt spectator, can do little else but point and exclaim about the thrilling visions unfolding before him.

What Michael Fried has called the "relentlessness" of the Crane's metaphoric descriptions⁷¹ seems, in *The Monster*, to be a sign both of the narrator's ironic distance and of his cuttngly perceptive insight about the characters he describes. In the case of Henry Johnson, however, the narrator's metaphors are more sight than insight, continually evoking a purely superficial perspective on Henry that refuses to see or know what he really is. For example, the narrator's early evocation of Henry as a prizefighter

⁷¹ Fried, Michael. *Realism, Writing and Disfiguration: On Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 120.

initially seems to be of a piece with the sarcastic description of Henry's character in which it appears, one that derives its parodic force from Crane's use of elevated language to describe an ordinary servant whose self-important attitudes derive from a mind that is, according to the narrator, "precisely alike" to that of a young child. [451] At the literal level, the description of Henry as "a light" and "a weight" communicates Henry's good standing—what the narrator calls "his eminence"—in "the suburb of the town," but the proximity of these two words also suggests—along with boxing—the term "lightweight," which evokes what seems like the narrator's "genuine" opinion of Henry as a person of little intellectual consequence. In this sense, then, the proximity of "light" and "weight" to each other is a deft bit of sarcastic wordplay that reveals the narrator's derisive opinion of Henry. But the multiple ways in which this phrase can mean, as well as the metonymic crowding of "light" and "weight," also points to an inability to name exactly what Henry is: he might be both a light and a weight, or either; just as the meaning of the phrase lies in its references to both—or either—figurative, abstract notions of social or intellectual status or the far more concrete, visible spectacle of prizefighting films.

This refusal—or inability—of the narrator to provide a definitive description of Henry becomes even more explicit in his description of the hostler preparing himself for his stroll through town:

No belle of a court circle could bestow more mind on a toilet than did Johnson. On second thought, he was more like a priest arraying himself for some parade of the church. [453]

In this passage, the narrator seems to revise his original description of Henry with one that, "on second thought," seems more evocative—but not evocative enough, perhaps, to justify the complete erasure of the narrator's initial "thought" about how to describe

Henry.⁷² The narrator's uncharacteristic indecision in this moment calls attention to his role as a thinking, speaking mediator who crafts his story carefully, rather than a narrative voice or function that aspires to the exhaustive, mechanical accuracy and detail of a camera.

This scene also includes the narrator's assertion that "there was no cakewalk hyperbole" in Henry's refined attitude—an observation that is quickly belied by the commentary of the young men who teasingly ask Henry if he is "going to walk for a cake." The young men's opinion of Henry unsettles the narrator's authority as the definitive, knowledgeable commentator on Henry's story—an authority that was already shaken by his uncertainty about whether Henry more resembles a "belle" or a "priest." As an audience themselves, the young men assert an opinion of Henry that seems just as valid—if not more so—than the one the narrator offers. Their immediate perception of Henry as precisely what the narrator assures us Henry is *not* makes the narrator's opinion seem suspect—he protests too much, or perhaps he is more influenced by the opinions of his characters than we might think. The juxtaposition of the young men's commentary with the narrator's suggests a certain intimacy between the narrator and the young men—between, we might say, the mediator of Henry's story and one of that story's audiences; between a mediator and an audience who are, like the film lecturer and his spectators, "constantly keeping in touch." For *The Monster's* narrator, however, it seems as though his knowledge of Henry is somehow identical to that of his audience: whether Henry is or

⁷² Goldsby offers a somewhat different reading of this odd moment, namely, that the narrator is begrudgingly allowing Johnson more respect than he would the "belle of a court circle," an allowance that she associates with the narrator's inability to master/completely penetrate Henry's powerful way of fashioning himself/performing himself. She also points to the narrator's loss of access to Henry's thoughts, signaled by his admission that "the change was somewhere far in the interior of Henry." Like myself, Goldsby reads Crane's narrator as a figure who watches the story as it unfolds, and who revises and updates it accordingly. See Goldsby 105-163.

is not full of “cakewalk hyperbole,” both parties choose to refer to him through the metaphor of the cakewalk. Like the lecturer who must be sensitive to the opinions and impressions of his audience, then, *The Monster’s* narrator seems to have predicted and absorbed the opinion of Henry that he knows his audience of young men will have.

The metaphoric descriptions of Henry detailed expose certain “cracks” in what seems like the narrator’s masterful mediation of Henry Johnson’s story—cracks that show how vulnerable the narrator’s “vision” is to the perceptions and opinions of his multiple audiences. The text’s uncanny realizations, or enactments, of these figurative descriptions suggests that the narrator’s imaginative mediation is curtailed not only by his audience’s perception, but also by the narrator’s own “literal” vision of the events he describes. During the scene in which Henry and Jimmie are brought out of the Trescott home on stretchers, the narrator’s painstaking descriptions of Henry as a “belle of a court circle” and a priest are brutally realized:

A little procession moved across the lawn and towards the street. There were three cots, borne by twelve of the firemen. The police moved sternly, but it needed no effort of theirs to open a lane for this slow cortege. The men who bore the cots were well known to the crowd, but in this solemn parade during the ringing of the bells and the shouting, and with the red glare upon the sky, they seemed utterly foreign, and Whilomville paid them a deep respect. Each man in this stretcher party had gained a reflected majesty. They were footmen to death, and the crowd made subtle obeisance to this august dignity derived from three prospective graves. [470]

The narrator’s description of the “stretcher party” as a “procession” and a “solemn parade” suggests that this scene is the “parade of the church” that Henry-as-priest “arrayed himself” for, but this passage also takes up the narrator’s description of Henry as the “belle of a court circle.” The designation of the procession as a “slow cortege,” the references to the “reflected majesty” and “august dignity” of the twelve firemen, and the

“subtle obeisance” paid to them by the townspeople—these descriptions use the “regal” language of a “court circle” that Henry is indeed at the center of in this scene.

In terms of a certain kind of accuracy, this enactment of the narrator’s figurative descriptions authorizes them as the “right” kind of description. However, in terms of a mediation that seeks to complement rather than capture the subject at hand, these enactments suggest that *The Monster’s* narrator has little to offer his readers. The text’s enactment of the narrator’s figurative images calls into question the kind of imaginative distance from what is described that any metaphoric description implies. Metaphors work by directing readers to imagine not what is directly before them (i.e., the “real” characters or setting of a text) but rather, to conjure an image that shares some important characteristic with whatever is being described. Even though it is just for a moment, metaphors create distance between the reader and the “real” events of the text, offering them a slightly different or enhanced perspective on the text itself. *The Monster’s* narrator, however, seems unable to offer his readers such perspectives: enactments like the realization of Henry as the “belle of a court circle” or “a priest arraying himself for some parade of the church” reveal what seem like fanciful, imaginative descriptions as little more than a reference to the real events of the text itself, a kind of deictic gesturing in which language—and knowledge—is overtaken by the visual.

Recent film historical work suggests that the practice of many moving picture lecturers was as focused on the immediate experience of the image on the screen as the metaphoric practice of *The Monster’s* narrator was on the immediate experience of *The Monster’s* plot. Many lecturers—those who likely doubled as barkers, projectionists or other employees of the theaters that first showed moving pictures—would be better

described as agitators than mediators; performers who directed their audiences' enthusiastic responses to the experience of watching films. According to Albert Smith, one of the founders of the Vitagraph company, his partner Stuart Blackton's commentary about their first train film, *The Black Diamond Express*, was less a reassuring explanation of how the film worked or what it represented and more a calculated acknowledgment—and indeed, an imitation of—the excitement and thrill that audiences would likely feel at the sight of the film. Smith claims that “the widespread discomfiture” at the sight of *The Black Diamond Express*

appealed hugely to Blackton's oracular instincts. He would advance upon the stage and, with deep voice and vivid gesture, deliver a ruthless peroration on the dreadful sensation which the Black Diamond Express held in store for all persons present.⁷³

Smith's description here of Blackton as a “terroristic mood setter” depends on his partner's acknowledgement of the “dreadful sensation” that the audience will feel as they watch the film—not on Blackton's attempt to mitigate this sensation with explanation or reassurance. And although Blackton's commentary does draw somewhat on his prior knowledge of the film, i.e., he knows what the audience is about to see, he describes this imminent sight from the perspective that is closer to that of a naïve spectator than that of a practiced exhibitor who has shown the film many times:

Ladies and gentlemen, you are now gazing upon a photograph of the famous Black Diamond Express. In just a moment, a cataclysmic moment, my friends, a moment without equal in the history of our times, you will see this train take life in a marvelous and most astounding manner. It will rush toward you, belching smoke and fire from its monstrous iron throat...⁷⁴

⁷³ Smith 39.

⁷⁴ Smith 38-39. Blackton is referencing not only the “cataclysm” of the film's subject matter, but also the wonder of a photograph that suddenly “becomes” a motion picture when the projector's crank is turned.

The moment of seeing the Black Diamond Express is “cataclysmic” not for Blackton, but for the audience, as is the “marvelous and most astounding manner” in which the train “take[s] life;” it’s also worth noting that the “moment” Blackton describes was hardly unique, and only “without equal” in the experience of first-time viewers of Smith and Blackton’s film. Train films were among the most popular of early films, and they were shown widely all over the country beginning in the late 1890s and continuing well into the early part of the century. Blackton’s commentary, then, is less a deployment of new knowledge about the film and more a kind of pose or performance that imitates what his audience knows or is about to learn by watching the film.

In an article surveying recent scholarship on the moving picture lecturer, film historian Tom Gunning emphasizes the significance of precisely the kind of performative enthusiasm and sensitivity—even deference—to audience response epitomized by Blackton's commentary. Stressing the need to appreciate the diversity of a cultural practice that has only recently begun to receive sustained critical attention, Gunning describes several variations of the lecturer’s practice that function less as narrative explanations that “serve” a film’s visual images and more as original, individualized performances that derive their force from a recognition of the spectator as a key figure in the production of a film’s meaning.⁷⁵ For Gunning, the lecturer is part of the larger

⁷⁵ Lacasse expounds on this idea in the special issue of the film journal *Iris* devoted to the moving picture lecturer: “It must be said that at the time of early cinema, not only did a voice translate and comment films, but they were also often mimicked, parodied or performed by interpreters, in the two senses of this word as when someone interprets a legend in his own way or an actor interprets this or that role.” Lacasse, Germaine, “Le bonimenteur de vues animées/The Moving Picture Lecturer” *iris* 22 (Fall 1996) 14. And Noel Burch, despite his insistence on the lecturer as early film’s primary narrative agent/the primary sign of early film’s narrative “destiny,” admits that the juxtaposition of the lecturer’s performative storytelling alongside a film could lead to “a disjunction in the signifying process” and “an effect of ‘non closure’ and distantiating.” (Burch 154) Summarizing the work of Germaine Lacasse on lecturers who tailored their commentaries to the cultural or political views of local audiences, Gunning, in “The Scene of Speaking: Two Decades of Discovering the Film Lecturer” *Iris* 27 (Spring 1999): 67-79, emphasizes the lecturer’s

soundscape that accompanied a film and exerted considerable influence on how it was perceived and understood. Such soundscapes, says Gunning, have the “capacity...to create a new space, neither on the screen nor entirely unrelated to it, a space of the “auditorium,” shared by the film’s accompanists and the audience in which meaning can be played with.”⁷⁶

At the most basic level, however, Gunning highlights how the lecturer’s practice called attention to the material presence of the audience itself. The “space of the “auditorium” that Gunning references is significant not just as a theater for the production of alternate meanings, but also as a space that allows the lecturer to provide a human connection between audience and film, a connection that Gunning calls the “common ground of nearly all film lecturers”:

Clearly the film lecture acted as a relay between film and audience, but the lecturer could either basically ignore the audience in explicating the film or constantly keep in touch with them through jokes, comments and gestures. With this tactile metaphor I come back to what I see as the common ground of nearly all film lecturers, their supplementing of the visual sense with another dimension. Even the trade journal articles calling for a dignified film lecturer found their argument for spoken accompaniment not simply in the need for narrative clarity, but in the immediate appeal of the human voice. We must not limit this appeal to the supplement of sound, but recognize the attraction of being addressed by a fully present human being, an element which silent cinema had trouble supplying.⁷⁷

Gunning’s remarks here about the lecturer’s practice of “constantly keep[ing] in touch” with the audience suggests a mode of mediation that calibrated itself precisely to the responses of the audience to the images on the screen. Such calibration represents the acquisition and deployment of a kind of knowledge entirely different from the collection

opportunity to “re-interpret or transform the meaning of the original film,” an opportunity that he claims was “inherent in the lecturer’s interaction with a film text.”

⁷⁶ Gunning, “Scene” 74.

⁷⁷ Gunning, “Scene” 77.

of facts that the lecturer would know about a film's locale or its narrative sequence. Gunning suggests that coming to know his audience is at least as important as the lecturer's knowledge about the particulars of the film he shows, and as his "tactile metaphor" suggests, the method by which the lecturer acquires such knowledge brings him closer to the audience's experience of embodied sensation than his conventional role as distanced, knowledgeable narrator might suggest. Coming to know his audience required the lecturer's careful observation and interpretation of the spectators themselves; specifically, of their comments, body language and facial expressions. Lecturers were, essentially, managers of a different kind of knowledge—the knowledge of what and how an audience responds to and will feel about a particular film.

The points that Gunning and Lacasse make about the centrality of audience response to the lecturer's practice gesture toward its principal challenge, one defined by a confrontation between two subjects who know, albeit in different ways. The lecturer may know more about the film than the audience, but the audience knows what they see. Telling people what they were seeing as they were seeing it ran the risk of contradicting the interpretations and explanations that spectators were forming for themselves—a risk that made the lecturer's perceptions of audience response even more crucial to his successful mediation of a film. He was, then, responsible not only for disseminating his own factual knowledge about a film, but also for gauging and managing the knowledge that the audience was producing for itself about a particular film.

The moving picture lecturer's challenge of mediating an experience that audiences were ever-more capable of understanding for themselves illuminates the narrative crisis that *The Monster* pushes to a starkly pessimistic conclusion. By the end of Crane's

novella, no amount of well-reasoned, knowledgeable telling can convince anyone in Whilomville that Henry Johnson is not the menacing monster that he appears to be: the townspeople stubbornly cling to their sensory experience of Henry rather than the sense that figures like Dr. Trescott and Martha Goodwin try to make of him. This eventual conclusion is neatly encapsulated by *The Monster's* opening scene, in which Jimmie's tortured interactions with his father fail utterly to mediate a shocking scene that both characters confront—a scene that, like the films that confronted both audience and lecturer in the theaters of the 1890s, was visible to both but purportedly more legible to the lecturer who explained and commented on its content. But although Jimmie understands the scene more fully than his father, he is hardly able to explain what has happened or shape his father's response to it. As he attempts to explain how, during his imaginary game of “train,” he has accidentally destroyed a garden peony, Jimmie experiences a profound loss for words:

“Pa!” repeated the child at length. Then he raised his finger and pointed at the flower-bed. “There!”
“What?” said the doctor, frowning more. “What is it, Jim?”
After a period of silence, during which the child may have undergone a severe mental tumult, he raised his finger and repeated his former word—“There!” The father had respected this silence with perfect courtesy. Afterwards his glance carefully followed the direction indicated by the child's finger, but he could see nothing which explained to him. “I don't understand what you mean, Jimmie,” he said.
It seemed that the importance of the whole thing had taken away the boy's vocabulary. He could only reiterate, “There!” [449-450]

Jimmie's “vocabulary” is reduced to a single word that, in this scene, derives all of its meaning from the visible sight of the broken peony—just as the narrator's metaphors can be read as direct references to actual events in the text. As this opening scene suggests, struggling—and often failing—to find words to describe a shocking scene is a recurring

motif in *The Monster*—even, it seems, for the narrator. But rather than the kind of feigned wordlessness that represents the identificatory strategy of a lecturer like Holmes, *The Monster's* “lost vocabularies” are genuinely lost. The narrator’s losses of vocabulary especially expose the inherent challenges of attempting to mediate the kind of subjective, variable experiences of perception and sensation that another person’s spectatorship always entails—particularly when, as was true in the case of the moving picture lecturer, such mediation was so heavily dependent on reading and interpreting these experiences of spectatorship effectively. In *The Monster*, as the novella’s opening scene suggests, such intense concern with audience response leads to the mediator’s loss of control and authority: at the end of this scene, Jimmie’s attempt to mediate the shocking scene of the broken peony for his paternal audience is taken over by Dr. Trescott, just as the narrator’s “audience” of Whilomville residents will eventually commandeer the narrator’s own point of view about who and what Henry Johnson is. In the novella’s opening scene, Jimmie is acutely anxious about his father’s response to the scene of the broken peony, “look[ing] guiltily at his father” just after the incident; twice more as he surveys the situation and tries to “fix” the damage he has inflicted, and, finally, “scanning his [father’s] countenance” [450] after Trescott has noticed the broken flower. Jimmie’s continual checks on his father’s response to what he sees are an exaggerated version of Gunning’s evocation of a performer whose skill lay in his ability to perceive and respond to the visual data offered by the faces of his audience. In *The Monster's* version of this scene, sensitivity to an audience’s response inverts the roles of mediator and spectator, transferring control of the situation from Jimmie to his father. After several frightened

attempts to get his father's attention and direct it toward the sight of the peony, Dr.

Trescott is

obliged to go forward alone. After some trouble he found the subject of the incident, the broken flower. Turning then, he saw the child lurking at the rear and scanning his countenance. [450]

Abandoned by his guide, Jimmie's audience of one is forced to search and see for himself. In doing so, Dr. Trescott becomes a voice of both a narrative and an ethical authority: he draws the story of the peony's destruction out of Jimmie, and his "delivery of judgment" deems the "thrills" of Jimmie's game of train too dangerous to continue:

The father reflected. After a time he said, "Jimmie, come here." With an infinite modesty of demeanor the child came forward. "Jimmie, how did this happen?" The child answered, "Now—I was playin' train—and—now—I runned over it." "You were doing what?" "I was playin' train." The father reflected again. "Well, Jimmie," he said, slowly, "I guess you had better not play train any more to-day. Do you think you had better?" "No, sir," said Jimmie. [450]

In this scene, Jimmie is only able to explain what has happened after his father sees the damaged peony and, essentially, deduces that Jimmie is somehow to blame. It is only after Dr. Trescott becomes an audience who already knows the essentials of what he's seeing that Jimmie is able to explain the details of the sight before them: his story is painstakingly brought forth by an audience who sees and knows for itself and passes judgment accordingly.

As the scene's most articulate speaker and judge, Dr. Trescott himself assumes a sort of narrative responsibility, one that manages the scene's ethical import and its position within the narrative—it is Dr. Trescott, after all, whose dismissal of Jimmie brings the scene to a close. Dr. Trescott's narrative role is thrown into sharp relief by

what seems like the narrator's deliberate abdication of such ethical and narrative responsibilities: after the peony is definitively destroyed, the intense psychological intimacy that he has shared with Jimmie is replaced by a studied attention to the superficial sights and sounds of the Trescott yard. As the narrator begins to describe the conversation between Jimmie and his father, his description of the ambient noise in the yard suggests that such noise is at least as absorbing as Jimmie's or his father's psyches:

The doctor paused, and with the howl of the machine no longer occupying the sense, one could hear the robins in the cherry-trees arranging their affairs. Jim's hands were behind his back, and sometimes his fingers clasped and unclasped. Again he said "Pa!" The child's fresh and rosy lip was lowered. The doctor stared down at his son, thrusting his head forward and frowning attentively. "What is it, Jimmie?" [449]

The narrator's description of the lawnmower's "howl" as a sound that "occupies" suggests a certain aggression to the sound of the mower, a noise that forcibly overtakes not just an individual's hearing, but the larger "sense"—not Dr. Trescott's or Jimmie's sense of hearing, but a larger and more general "sense" indicated by the definite article "the"—of the events being perceived. And although the cessation of the mower enables the connection between Jimmie and his father, the lack of the machine's "howl" seems to distance the narrator from "the sense" of what happens in Jimmie's consciousness and to redirect his attention to the superficial, material details of the scene. The narrator states that "one" could hear the sound of the robins, a pronoun that aligns the narrator's perspective not with Jimmie or his father, but rather with an anonymous listener without the kind of access to the characters' thoughts that the narrator's initial description of Jimmie's game of train evidences. Rather than confirming and elaborating on Jimmie's feelings of guilt and shame, the narrator's depictions of Jimmie are now limited to descriptions of his physical gestures and demeanor—his "fingers clasped and unclasped,"

and his “lowered...fresh and rosy lip.” Several lines later, the narrator makes his lack of access to Jimmie’s thoughts explicit when he says that, “after a period of silence, during which the child may have undergone a severe mental tumult, he raised his finger and repeated his former word—There!” The narrator refuses—or is unable—to definitively confirm or deny the “mental tumult” that Jimmie experiences during the “period of silence” that passes between Jimmie and his father. No longer privy to Jimmie’s intimate thoughts; then, the narrator’s omniscience becomes a kind of purely sensational knowledge, one whose access to sights and sounds is expansive but limited to their superficial occurrences: like Jimmie himself—or perhaps more like Burton Holmes’s “frank” admission of his inability to describe what he sees—the narrator’s mediation of this scene becomes a gesture of surrender—a mute finger that does little more than point—to the sensational events that he narrates.

Sights, Sounds And Narrative Disruption

The replacement, in *The Monster’s* opening scene, of the narrator’s psychological omniscience with a superficial knowledge that is limited to the sights and sounds of the Trescott yard is a gesture that is repeated throughout *The Monster*, and it is one that is frequently occasioned by or otherwise linked to representations of sound. These narrative perceptions of sound are moments in which the temporal order of the story becomes compromised or unsettled—moments in which the narrator seems *not* to know as much about his story as anyone else who might have watched it unfold. At the end of a section that shifts abruptly among several different scenes of intense activity related to the fire at the Trescott house, for instance, the narrator draws attention to the simultaneity of the

events he has just described, a gesture that “re-caps” the town’s frenzied response to the fire with close attention to the way these responses sounded and looked:

The news had been telegraphed by a twist of the wrist of a neighbor who had gone to the fire-box at the corner, and the time when Hannigan and his charge struggled out of the house was the time when the whistle roared its hoarse night call, smiting the crowd in the park, causing the leader of the band, who was about to order the first triumphal clang of a military march, to let his hand drop slowly to his knee. [462-463]

The statement that “the news had been telegraphed by a twist of the wrist of a neighbor” explains the origin of the whistle that “smote the crowd in the park,” but the rest of the information in this passage refers to events that have already been described. The narrator’s gesture in this passage seems to be one of practical clarification at the level of the novella’s plot—a gesture that echoes the moving picture lecturer’s explanations of the often puzzling temporal relationships between scenes in the earliest “story films.” However, the narrator’s indication that the events he references happened simultaneously does little to enhance a reader’s understanding of *The Monster*’s plot: the account of these scenes that precedes this passage makes it fairly clear that they unfold at around the same time; furthermore, why does it matter that Hannigan’s encounter with Mrs. Trescott happened at precisely the same moment as the whistle’s “smiting” of the crowd in the park? The narrator strikes the didactic pose of the lecturer at a moment in the novella when such a pose is largely unnecessary, at least in terms of understanding the plot—a gesture that, incidentally, points to the special obsolescence to which the lecturer would eventually be relegated by the rise of genuinely narrative films.

Rather than providing a necessary clarification, then, the narrator’s commentary is most significant in its evocation of an omniscience that seems solely focused on the

sensory data and physical spaces of the scenes he observes. The superficiality of this perspective is further emphasized by the passage's emphasis on the minute bodily gestures of its characters:⁷⁸ it is, in part, the smallness of the gestures the narrator observes here—the neighbor's "twist of the wrist;" the band leader's hand dropping slowly to his knee;"⁷⁹ and later, the image of "somebody grappl[ing] the bell-rope in the Methodist church" to produce the bell's "solemn voice speaking from the clouds" [460]—that highlight the narrator's penetrating yet superficial vision—his sensory but not psychological omniscience. The narrator's insistence on the simultaneity of events in the passage above emphasizes an omniscience that only knows as much as it sees: the narrator's notation of the simultaneity of the events he describes reveals only that he knows what gestures caused what sounds; in other words, he knows how the sounds he describes look as well as how they sound.

The narrator's sensory omniscience may attempt to claim a form of knowledge that transcends the boundaries of the senses, but it is nevertheless spectacularly bad at gauging the degree to which its reader knows or understands the story being told. The way the narrator references the various scenes in this "sum-up" passage at first seem to acknowledge the reader's familiarity with the scenes he references; however, by the end of the passage, the narrator speaks as if the reader has forgotten—or hasn't heard—his initial description of the band's truncated performance. Referring to Mrs. Trescott as Hannigan's "charge" and the Trescott house as "the house" acknowledges that readers

⁷⁸ These narrative "close-ups" reflect films in the cinema of attractions that depicted similar views of body parts or gestures. Musser claims that "facial expression films," for example, were "popular in the late 1890s and early 1900s." Musser, *Edison Motion Pictures* 130.

⁷⁹ The similarity of these gestures to the act of writing recalls Michael Fried's well-known argument, in *Realism, Writing and Disfiguration*, about Crane and the scene of writing. The rhyme in "twist of the wrist" especially calls attention to the text as constructed, but also to its potential for being spoken.

will immediately recall the scene that describes Hannigan's efforts to get Mrs. Trescott to leave her burning house. Yet his next reference—to the scene of the crowd hearing the whistle in the park—seems to forget that the reader already knows about the scene to which he is referring. The phrase “the time when the whistle roared its hoarse night call” provides the reader with enough information to recall the scene being referenced, whereas the clauses that follow sound like an unwitting repetition or re-description of the narrator's original account of this scene that appears several pages earlier:

Suddenly, without preliminary bars, there arose from afar the great hoarse roar of a factory whistle...The band-master had been about to vehemently let fall his hand to start the band on a thundering career through a popular march, but, smitten by this giant voice from the night, his hand dropped slowly to his knee...[458]

The narrator's repetition, in the later passage, of his comments about the whistle “smiting the crowd in the park;” the “leader of the band ha[ving] been about to order the first clang of a triumphal military march;” and his “hand drop[ping] slowly to his knee” is more like a description that reminds rather than a narrative that tells. The narrator's re-description of this original account of the scene in the park highlights his failure—or refusal—to acknowledge what his readers already know about the story he is telling. In this passage, a moment of panoramic visual knowledge coincides with a moment of ignorance about the reader's knowledge: emphasizing what he knows about the story also emphasizes what he doesn't know about the reader's perceptions. The narrator may be supersensitive to the bodies and sounds of the story he tells, but he is also blatantly insensitive to his reader's “sense” of the story he is telling.

The narrator's repetitive “sum-up” of exactly how and when the events leading up to the fire occur reads like a literary version of the overlapping action that characterized

some early fiction films. In *The Monster's* latter "re-cap" passage, the narrator's quickly shifting descriptions among scenes that are all occurring at the same time echo this technique; however, in Crane's version, the emphasis is more on simultaneity and sensory sensitivity rather than on pushing the narrative forward. Like the visually arresting, one-shot films that defined the cinema of attractions, *The Monster's* moments of narrative stasis are vivid, intensely sensory episodes. Such moments are also marked by the narrator's insistence on his own uniquely sensitive perception of the spectacle he describes: complexly synesthetic descriptions and metaphors map out a privileged sort of sensory knowledge, one accessible to the narrator alone. Crane's emphasis on the narrator's sensory privilege is perhaps the novella's strongest insistence on the futility of telling a story that listeners can hear and see for themselves: the idiosyncrasy of narrator's synesthetic metaphors and descriptions makes the narrator's tale look more like a private illustration of his own story than an attempt to make that story visible to a community of readers.

The oddly synesthetic descriptions of the beginning of the fire at the Trescott house are an excellent illustration of this tendency: they emphasize the narrator's uniquely sensitive perceptions, but in the process, they undermine the ironic distance and narrative authority that characterizes much of his other narration. Several of the fundamentally silent visual details in this passage are described in terms of sound, as if the narrator's vision is powerful enough to hear as well as see. The narrator describes the "outlines" of the Trescott home as having "faded quietly into the evening," and in the next paragraph states that the fire's first wisps of smoke "drifted quietly into the branches of a cherry-tree." Describing the fundamentally silent phenomena of fading and drifting

as “quiet” suggests that they actually do have an aural component, one that is—perhaps—only perceptible to the most sensitive of ears.

The suggestion of an ear that is sensitive to sight as well as sound is made explicit in the metaphoric language that the narrator uses to describe the first glimpses of actual fire:

After a moment the window brightened as if the four panes of it had been stained with blood, and a quick ear might have been led to imagine the fire-imps calling and calling, clan joining clan, gathering to the colors. [461]

The organization of clauses in this sentence presents the experiences of seeing and hearing as inextricably linked. The “and” that joins the first two clauses suggests that the sight of the fiery panes of glass inspires the narrator’s image of an aural imagination and the sound of the “fire-imps calling and calling” that such an imagination might produce. The narrator’s hearing is not just sensitive to sight, it is also a sense that can “imagine” all on its own, seemingly without the help of a mind to interpret what it hears.⁸⁰ Crane’s collapsed version of imagined sound—a version that ascribes the power of imagination to an isolated sense—conflates the body and the mind, insisting on a mode of perception that hears and imagines all on its own.

Such an ear seems to belong to the narrator alone: the next sentence reiterates the deceptively quiet and peaceful sight of the house in a way that distinguishes the narrator’s impression of the fire from the more “public” appearance of the house:

⁸⁰ The idea of being led to imagine could also easily describe the situation that spectators of early film found themselves in: the lecturer led them to imagine many things about the films he described/showed, and the sounds that films could not yet reproduce were always available to be—and often were—imagined and reproduced by the sound effects that accompanied most films in the 1890s. For a detailed discussion of such sound effects, see Stephen Bottomore’s “An International Survey Of Sound Effects In Early Cinema.” *Film History* 11.4 (1999) 485-498.

From the street, however, the house maintained its dark quiet, insisting to the passer-by that it was the safe dwelling of people who chose to retire early to tranquil dreams. No one could have heard this low droning of the gathering clans.
[461]

These sentences emphasize just how unlikely it would be for any “passer-by” in Whilomville to imagine the kind of metaphoric description of the fire’s beginning that the narrator puts forth in the previous sentence. The inability to hear the “low droning” reads not so much as a sensory insensitivity, but rather as a failure of imagination—a failure to imagine the fullness of sensory experience upon seeing a particular sight. The narrator is careful to emphasize that the house is actually quiet: the anonymous “passer-by” would be prevented from imagining the fire-imps by the house’s “dark quiet,” a description that makes use of the same synesthetic linkage of sight and sound that characterized the descriptions of the fading house and drifting smoke.

This kind of synesthetic perception is elaborated and interpreted by the narrator’s metaphoric understanding of the world he describes—an understanding that is repeatedly contrasted with the less insightful perceptions of Whilomville’s many “passer-bys.” The narrator’s declaration that “no one could have heard” the low droning of the fire-imps is the second time in this section that the narrator presents a metaphoric image that he insists is barely discernible to anyone but himself. In the paragraph that describes the first wisps of smoke drifting from an upstairs window of the Trescott home, the narrator ends his description by claiming that the phenomenon “was no more to be noted than if a troop of dim and silent gray monkeys had been climbing a grape-vine into the clouds.” Considering that it would indeed be quite unusual to see the kind of monkeys that the narrator imagines, it seems that his claim about the smoke’s obscurity is a sarcastic one.

The narrator's initial emphasis on the copiousness and proliferation of the smoke corroborates such a reading:

A wisp of smoke came from one of the windows at the end of the house and drifted quietly into the branches of a cherry-tree. Its companions followed it in slowly increasing numbers, and finally there was a current controlled by invisible banks which poured into the fruit-laden boughs of the cherry tree. [461]

It seems unlikely that such a river of smoke—or a “troop of monkeys” would go unnoticed. Both this image of an abundant river of smoke and the outlandish image of monkeys climbing to the sky point to a mocking assessment of the perceptive powers (or lack thereof) of Whilomville's “passer-bys.” However, the narrator's sarcasm here is not completely untempered—the monkeys are, after all, “dim and silent,” suggesting that they might actually be difficult to perceive—not because of what they are, but because of how they appear. The narrator's focus on the perceptibility of his own metaphoric image deflates the force of his irony, as if the brute facts of sight and sound overcome the sophisticated twists and turns of style that the narrator's metaphor tries to achieve.

Conclusion

By the end of *The Monster*, the narrator's emphasis on his own uniquely perceived “facts” of sight and sound gives way to an emphasis on an even more subjective and arbitrary “fact,” one that undermines both the narrator's authority as a seeing, sensing mediator and the authority of the novella's generally recognized “moral center,” Dr. Trescott. *The Monster's* final scene depicts Dr. and Mrs. Trescott in the latter's drawing-room, contemplating the table of unused teacups and uneaten cake intended for the friends who have shunned them as a result of their continued support of Henry Johnson. Most of this scene unfolds through dialogue between Dr. and Mrs.

Trescott, with the most significant commentary from the narrator directed at describing Dr. Trescott's perceptions of the scene—the "example." In the final sentences of the novella, however, the narrator's free indirect discourse suggests an intimacy with Dr. Trescott that includes not just access to his thoughts, but also the same experience of a mental "glitch" or repetition that Trescott experiences. As he begins to understand his wife's abandonment by her friends, Dr. Trescott

glanc[es] down at the cups [and] mechanically counted them. There were fifteen of them. "There, there," he said. "Don't cry, Grace. Don't cry." The wind was whining round the house, and the snow beat aslant upon the windows. Sometimes the coal in the stove settled with a crumbling sound, and the four panes of mica flashed a sudden new crimson. As he sat holding her head on his shoulder, Trescott found himself occasionally trying to count the cups. There were fifteen of them. [508]

The narrator's repeated description of Dr. Trescott's "mechanical" impulse to count his wife's teacups and statement of their number suggests that the narrator, too, has taken refuge in a kind of mechanized perspective, one that is perceptive enough to know the details of a character's thoughts, but hardly discerning enough to pick and choose which are significant enough to share through description. The narrator's initial description of Trescott's cup-counting is significant in that it conveys just how many women have shunned Mrs. Trescott, but the repetition of both the description of Trescott's mental exercise of counting and the number of cups concludes the novella with a narrative gesture that is as arbitrary as it is insightful: the narrator's final piece of privileged knowledge is actually a performance of just the sort of cognitive-perceptual "glitch" that might affect the witness of a traumatic or shocking scene.

The narrator's final comment about Mrs. Trescott's fifteen cups is also an observation of precisely the sort of fact that would require neither explanation nor

mediation—at least not for a reader even minimally attentive to textual details. Such a fact would also be easily legible to any sort of seeing, thinking audience that might perceive it in a filmic image—and yet, in 1899, moving picture lecturers were still on hand to indicate, explain and dramatize such facts. *The Monster's* conclusion enacts the futility of precisely this sort of deictic mediation, one that insists on showing audiences what they could see well enough for themselves. Within the next ten years, the moving picture lecturer's practice would be rendered largely obsolete by the advent of narrative films—films whose purely visual technique of storytelling made the moving picture lecturer's practice seem as redundant as a repeated statement of how many unused teacups sit on a table. In *The Monster*, the narrator's final display of narrative futility is perhaps the novella's clearest answer to the epistemological and ethical questions it persistently raises: the narrator may see, feel and know more than any of Whilomville's gossiping, spectacle-loving citizens, but none of these perceptual and cognitive privileges can definitively guarantee him the privilege of mediating their sensational experience or the sense they make of it.

Chapter 3

The Brute Learns to See: Snapshot Photography and Henry James's *What Maisie Knew*

The thing had been done in the cloakroom where the kindergarten children hung their hats and coats...About half past eight, two or three five-year-olds, one a little colored girl, came into the schoolroom of the kindergarten with a great chatter of voices, going across to the cloakroom to hang up their hats and coats as they had been taught...Then the tallest of the little girls swung the door of the little cloakroom wide open and they all ran in.

--Frank Norris, *McTeague*⁸¹

But the little boy remained very interested in watching Vandover, still on the floor, tying the last knots. As he finished, he glanced up. For an instant the two remained there motionless, looking into each other's eyes, Vandover on the floor, one hand twisted into the bale rope about his bundle, the little boy standing before him eating the last mouthful of his bread and butter.

--Frank Norris, *Vandover and the Brute*⁸²

The scenes referenced by the preceding quotes represent the reader's final glimpses of two of Frank Norris's most hapless brutes—Trina McTeague and Vandover—as viewed through the eyes of children: observers who, at the end of the nineteenth century, could readily be identified as both a particular sort of observer and a particular sort of brute. Leaving the final images of Trina and Vandover in the keeping of these diminutive, observant brutes might seem like nothing so much as expressions of a conventionally naturalistic pessimism about the meaning of an individual's experience: kindergarten children and Vandover's boy observer are barely able to understand or

⁸¹ Norris, Frank. *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco*. Ed. Donald Pizer. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996)

⁸² Norris, Frank. *Vandover and the Brute*. (Garden City: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1928)

articulate the social or moral significance of what they see, a fact that points to the unlikelihood of these lives ever being told in a meaningful way. Such pessimism could certainly be read as equally applicable to the observers who attempt to document the lives of brutes: perhaps the naturalist author has as little hope of making meaning out of Trina's or Vandover's story as the inarticulate children who witness the final moments of these characters.

Yet these child observers are not exactly inarticulate, nor are they without the ability to interpret and complicate what they see for an audience of adult observers. One of the little girls in McTeague's cloakroom scene nearly discerns what she is about to see by comparing the "funnee smell" of the cloakroom to the odor of her father's butcher shop⁸³; and, in Vandover, the little boy's repetitions of a jibe that initially provoked the delighted laughter of his adult companions eventually make them uncomfortably conscious of how much they have in common with the hapless Vandover.⁸⁴ These scenes hint at the possibility that the child-brute is, in fact, a uniquely perceptive sort of observer. Yet the cloakroom scene especially suggests that this is a possibility Norris was unwilling to explore fully: his narrator stops short of describing the little girls' reaction to what they see, a gesture that I read as a telling refusal to surrender control of the story he tells to narrators with a far better view of it than his own. Unlike Norris's privileged, distanced narrators, who can advance or retreat from their subjects at will, his child observers—who have little control over where they go or what they see—cannot help their intimacies with the scenes they observe. The presence of children as the final

⁸³ Norris, *McTeague*. 208.

⁸⁴ Norris, *Vandover and the Brute*. 309-311.

witnesses of Trina's and Vandover's decline indexes an uneasy awareness of their unique potential, as naïve tellers of the stories they are forced to witness.

Unlikely as the juxtaposition may seem, *What Maisie Knew*—perhaps the most penetrating of Henry James's interrogations into a mode of childhood perception that is at once naïve and uniquely knowledgeable—takes up the questions of observation and knowledge that Norris's classic naturalist novels shrink from addressing. Maisie is a child whose observations, unlike those of Norris's kindergarten girls or bread-munching little boy, are meticulously documented by a narrator who observes and interprets them from a perspective that is closer to that of Maisie herself than it is to the patronizing, distant eye of Norris's narrator. *What Maisie Knew* could hardly be described as an example of naturalist fiction along the lines of *McTeague* or *Vandover and the Brute*; however, James's novel takes up issues about the privileges of seeing, knowing and telling that animate the most recognizable and compelling of naturalism's fictional illustrations of life at the end of the nineteenth century.⁸⁵

The potential of the child as a quintessential witness, documentarian and observer of modern life that both Norris and James engage was hardly lost on the makers and promoters of the era's most significant photographic innovation, the instantaneous camera. The advertising and promotion of America's new photography hobby by

⁸⁵ The question of whether or not James can or should be considered a naturalist writer has been much debated in the critical literature. See, for example, Lyall Harris Powers's *Henry James and the Naturalist Movement*. (East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 1971); Donald Pizer's *American Realists and Naturalists*. (Detroit: Gale, 1982), and Mark Seltzer's *Bodies and Machines*. New York: Routledge, 1992); and Hersan Al-Zubi's "American Realism Versus French Naturalism: Henry James, Emile Zola and the Negotiation of Ideology." *Journal of American Studies in Turkey* 10 (1999): 17-37. More recent discussions of James and naturalism suggest that James's interest in late-nineteenth century phenomena as varied as statistics (Colbey Emmerson Reid, "The Statistical Aesthetics of Henry James, or Jamesian Naturalism." *The Henry James Review* 30.2 (Spring 2009): 101-114) and fashion and fads (Fleissner, Jennifer. *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment Of American Naturalism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

Eastman Kodak—by far the best-known and most successful proprietor of the business of instantaneous photography—relied heavily on the idea of a child as both an ideal subject and practitioner of instantaneous photography. Snapshot photography was a practice that realized the anxious proto-imaginings of *McTeague*'s narrator at the close of his story: not only did it give “brute” observers (especially children) a means of documenting their own lives, it also allowed for the kind of distanced accuracy that *McTeague*'s narrator ultimately rejects as untenable.

The physical distance between photographer and subject that snapshot photography afforded suggests that it would be an ideal model of observation and documentation for a narrator too anxious to stand close enough to photograph his brute subjects in the conventional way. I would argue, however, that Norris and his fellow naturalists shrank from such a model rather than embracing it: we never do see Trina's body through the eyes of the little girls who find it, and we never learn what kind of image Vandover is to the little boy who “narrates” his final scene of decline. These child-brute observers may be eyewitnesses to the lives of people like Trina and Vandover, but their childish lack of experience and knowledge about these lives puts a different sort of distance between them and the people they see, one that the naturalist narrator cannot accept. The children in *McTeague* and *Vandover and the Brute* are observers who see without knowing, a mode of observation that was epitomized by the popular practice of snapshot photography. Rather than naturalism's insistence on the precise correlation between seeing and knowing, where seeing equals knowledge, the mode of observation shaped by instantaneous photography was characterized more by the gaps between sight and knowledge than it was by their convergence. Norris's palpable yet unexplored

anxiety about the possibilities of child observers gestures toward a broader cultural anxiety about the freedom of observation and documentation that snapshot photography offered to virtually anyone—even those who might be considered brutes. Eastman Kodak’s robust advertising campaigns—especially those that drew on the innocence of the child photographer—strove to erase anxieties about the democratizing potential of snapshot photography. In *What Maisie Knew*, however, the methods of seeing, knowing and telling that occupy Maisie’s narrator and James’s perceptive subject confront these anxieties directly, and ultimately point toward an intuitive epistemology that depends on a so-called “brutish” mode of perception and understanding as the ideal way in which to bear witness to the reality of modern life. Like the wide-eyed children who populated Kodak’s advertisements, James’s Maisie learns to see with a naivete that renders her uniquely suited to apprehend the world she confronts. Both Kodak’s ads and James’s novel suggest that the best observers are those who don’t quite understand what they see—a suggestion that the nineteenth century’s realist and naturalist authors were distinctly unwilling to entertain seriously. Unlike the majority of naturalism’s well-informed narrators, Maisie contemplates the realities of a changing social and urban landscape without the reassurance (debatable though it may be) of knowing—or believing that she knows--what came before or what to expect from the world that surrounds her.

Seeing The Brute And The Seeing Brute In *What Maisie Knew*

In James’s novel, the growth of Maisie’s understanding takes place in the kind of curious separations between sight and knowledge that were epitomized by the era’s

ubiquitous image of a Kodak camera wielded by a child. For Eastman Kodak, children were both an ideal market demographic and, as the “stars” of myriad advertisements and promotional statements, an appealing trope that mitigated the cultural anxieties associated with snapshot photography. George Eastman’s comments in letters, promotional materials and interviews about the Kodak’s debut suggest that the company’s association of their snapshot cameras with the idea of the child was almost immediate: in one such statement, Eastman likens the joy of one of his principal stockholders at receiving a Kodak to that of a “boy over a top,”⁸⁶ while elsewhere, when asked about the origin of the name “Kodak,” Eastman claimed that the word was appealing only on the basis of its definitive, hard sound—otherwise, it was “as meaningless as a child’s first ‘goo.’”⁸⁷

Comments like these predict the force with which Eastman’s company would soon deploy the image of the child in the advertisements that filled popular “family” magazines and newspapers. Ads like these [Fig. 1] pictured children as happy, curious practitioners of snapshot photography, wielding their cameras much as they would any other new toy. Equating the snapshot camera with a harmless toy suggested that the practice itself was just as harmless—a gesture that was necessary in the face of the growing social and cultural anxieties about the ease with which snapshot photography enabled just about anyone to take a picture of anyone else.⁸⁸ Perhaps the most pointed example of this deployment of children as the representatives of a harmless—even

⁸⁶ Jenkins, Reese. “Technology and the Market: George Eastman and the Origins of Mass Amateur Photography” *Technology and Culture* 16 (1): 1975, 1-19. 17.

⁸⁷ Conniff, Richard. “When “fiends” pressed the button, there was nowhere to hide.” *Smithsonian* 19 (3): 1988. 106-116. 110.

⁸⁸ Robert Mensel, in his account of the Kodak’s influence on the development of privacy rights, claims that newspapers, who of course wanted photographs, attempted to dismiss complaints like these as irrational over-reactions to what were only “boyhood pranks.” See Mensel, Robert. “Kodakers Lying in Wait”: Amateur Photography and the Right of Privacy in New York, 1885-1915. *American Quarterly* 43.1 (March 1991) 24-45. 34.

morally and socially edifying—practice was occasioned by Kodak’s introduction of the widely popular Brownie camera in 1900. As Marc Olivier claims in his study of the cultural reception and history of the Brownie camera, the device was directly marketed to children, a gesture that “redefined not only who could take photographs, but for what purpose.”⁸⁹ Olivier notes that the camera was named after the Brownies, a group of well-known, cartoonish characters who appeared in a popular series of children’s books and “a series of illustrated poems and an unprecedented number of product endorsements that had appeared in popular women’s and children’s magazines from the 1880s onward.”⁹⁰ The Brownie books often detailed the adventures of these mythical sprites in the modern world of technology, telling stories of how they confront modern marvels like trains, telephones or electricity. In stories like these, claims Olivier, “the Brownies help anchor the shock of new technologies to traditions of unseen forces and magical helpers,”⁹¹ a feature that would be surely appeal to Eastman Kodak as a means of downplaying the snapshot camera’s unsettling potential to “shock” unsuspecting subjects.

Olivier emphasizes that Kodak’s promotion of the Brownie depended on the notion of the child’s “brutish” characteristics, i.e., his naivete and his ability to realize a purportedly “primitive urge toward visual communication.” In *Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia*, Nancy Martha West offers a similar reading of Kodak’s deployment of children in their advertising campaigns, noting their emphasis on snapshots as “simple, spontaneous and accessible to children”—a characterization West claims was an attempt

⁸⁹ Olivier, Marc. “George Eastman’s Modern Stone-Age Family: Snapshot Photography and the Brownie,” *Technology and Culture* 48 (January 2007) 1-19.

⁹⁰ Olivier 1.

⁹¹ Olivier 6.

to render the “subversive,” unruly aspects of snapshot photography, i.e., the randomness of what the early, viewfinder-less snapshot cameras could and did capture.⁹²

But while Kodak’s advertisements drew on the child’s naivete to emphasize the “innocence” of the practice more generally, *What Maisie Knew* asserts that the child’s attempt to puzzle out the mysterious connections between what she sees and what she knows are among the most potent of epistemological methods for building an accurate picture of modern life. *What Maisie Knew* recounts the life of a little girl tossed between her selfish, divorced parents—and later, her step-parents—as the token of their mutual hostility and bitterness. Yet as James’s narrator suggests in an early description of Maisie, the novel also documents what he describes as the “fated” growth of Maisie’s knowledge about her own situation:

It was the fate of this little girl to see much more than, at first, she understood, but also, even at first, to understand much more than any little girl, however patient, had ever understood before.⁹³

This early characterization of the unequal relationship between what Maisie sees and what she knows as her “fate” invites us to consider her childlike mode of vision—one that is distinctly camera-like in its mechanical absorption of visual data—as an alternative version of naturalism’s insistence on the privilege of seeing and knowing as part of a pre-determined or “natural” set of abilities and characteristics. In the classic structure of the naturalist novel, the spectators who see and the brutes who are seen are cast in their respective roles by factors beyond their control—their biological inheritances, or the inexorable power of industrial capitalism’s social and economic forces. Maisie’s

⁹² West, Nancy Martha. *Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia*. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000) 181.

⁹³ James, Henry. *What Maisie Knew*. (New York: Library of America, 2003) 401. All subsequent page numbers from this edition will be referenced in the text.

spectatorial potential, however, pointedly complicates naturalism's high-contrast split between its all-knowing spectators and its oblivious brutes. Unlike the brutishness of the brutes of naturalism who are relentlessly explained and patronized by the narrators who tell their stories, Maisie's brutishness is confined to the misperceptions of her ill-behaved caretakers and, even more intriguingly, to the façade of idiocy that Maisie herself cultivates to resist their manipulations. James's pointed evocation of the brute as a deceptive illusion questions any mode of knowledge production—like the naturalist novel—that depends on an assumption that any individual's perceptions are “fated” products of his or her race, ethnicity or class. Situating the evolution of Maisie's sight and knowledge as the “fate” that the novel will trace interrogates—and ultimately unsettles—the structure of spectator and brute that defines the naturalist novel.

The Child Photographer Vs. The Kodak Fiend: A History Of Anxiety About Snapshot Photography

Maisie's complication of naturalism's spectator/brute dichotomy is also a reflection of the late nineteenth century's cultural anxieties about the newly expansive opportunities for seeing, knowing and telling represented by snapshot photography. Maisie's early adventures with the housemaid Susan Ash, in which the latter is “haunted...[by] the fear of being, as she ominously said, “spoken to,” even as she continually urges Maisie to “look at ‘er!” [437]—are a telling indication of Maisie's familiarity with the dangers and thrills of a modern world in which everything—and everyone—was more visible than ever before. James's unusually perceptive and knowing protagonist is an ironic inversion of the naïvely innocent child whose playful

photographic practice animated Eastman Kodak's advertisements throughout the 1890s. This benign image of the child photographer suggested a practice that was as harmless as it was easy—a suggestion that countered the growing cultural awareness of the harm that a snaphooter's surreptitiously obtained photograph could do to the privacy, reputations and social standing of people for whom such things mattered. Both the technologies and the marketing strategies developed by Eastman Kodak appealed to a market that was significantly more socially and economically diverse than the wealthy elites who defined the pre-Kodak cultures of amateur photography. All anyone had to do was “press a button,” and as Kodak's bevy of ads proclaimed, the company would “do the rest” [Fig. 2] of the work involved in creating an enduring record of what even the most unskilled and naïve of photographers captured with their instantaneous cameras.

Eastman Kodak promoted snapshot photography as a means of producing a certain kind of knowledge without the need to know very much at all. Snapshots transformed the ordinary moments of every day life into material pieces of evidence that could be framed, captioned or otherwise assembled into documents that represented rich sites of cultural and social knowledge about middle class life at the turn of the nineteenth century, but the owner of a Kodak hardly needed to know anything about photography—or indeed, about her subject—in order to make such records. Snapshot photography also freed potential snaphooters from the need to know and be known to their photographic subjects: the ever-diminishing size of Eastman Kodak's cameras made it increasingly easy to take someone's picture without their knowledge⁹⁴.

⁹⁴ Robert Taft, in *Photography and the American Scene* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1964), discusses the rise of so-called “detective” or “pocket” cameras as enabling a sort of surreptitious, amateur photography that its practitioners were nevertheless “troubled, or at least felt guilty about.” and that amateurs nevertheless “felt guilty about photographing of strangers in public a major contributor to the

Snapshot photography's liberation of photographers from the weight of both technical knowledge and the need to make themselves known to their potential subjects was certainly a contributing factor to the popularity of the practice. However, widespread anxieties about the voyeuristic and incriminating potential of snapshot photography—expressed most pointedly in the popular press's discourse about the “Kodak fiend”—point to a distinct uneasiness with snapshot photography's emphasis on seeing at the expense of knowing. The appearance of the first snapshot cameras is a telling illustration of just this sort of imbalance between seeing and knowing: the earliest instantiations of the technology had no viewfinders, requiring the photographer to “point and shoot” at his or her subject with no confirmation of what would actually be captured by the camera.

[Fig. 3]

The introduction of finders made it possible for the photographer to know the precise physical details of what he or she was photographing, but Kodak's early, finderless cameras were a prescient illustration of snapshot photography's enduringly unsettling potential to capture sights that were not fully “known,” or even registered as distinct phenomena, to their photographers. By the 1890s, the technology and availability of snapshot photography made it possible for virtually anyone to take a picture of anyone else—often without the act of being visible. Anxiety about being photographed during an embarrassing or incriminating moment that might later be immortalized in the era's proliferating newspapers, scandal sheets, and magazines⁹⁵ shaped the era's discourse

heightened anxiety about being photographed in public. 376

⁹⁵ As Frank Luther Mott indicates in *A History of American Magazines, 1741-1930, Vol. 4*. (Boston: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: 1958-1968), during the years 1895-1905, “newspapers flourished, books at low prices multiplied, the platform was active, but of all the agencies of popular information, none experienced a more spectacular enlargement and increase in effectiveness than the magazines.” (Mott 2). For more on the “explosion” of nationally distributed periodicals during this time period, see Mott 1-15; and Richard Ohmann, *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets and Class at the Turn of*

about the ruthless and secretive “Kodak fiend,” a representative figure who was richly described, caricatured and criticized in the popular press. Douglas Nickel, in an essay on the history of snapshot photography from 1888 to the present, notes that “the camera ‘fiend’ became a recognized threat,” to privacy and decency, and that “editorials openly worried about the lack of protocol regulating this new lens culture.”⁹⁶ And, in an article exploring the role of snapshot photography in the development of modern privacy rights, Robert Mensel draws on commentary from New York periodicals during the late 1880s and 1890s to conclude that

...New Yorkers responded to amateur photographs with exceptionally intense and remarkable feelings. Cameras themselves...were described in terms that suggested their sinister, dangerous nature. They were ‘deadly weapons,’ and ‘deadly little boxes.’ The click of their shutters was ‘ominous’ and ‘dreadful.’ The so-called detective cameras were especially disturbing: “many are never noticed, but they are just as deadly.”⁹⁷

It was, in fact, the potential of not noticing when one’s picture was being taken that many Americans found most disturbing about the ubiquity of the so-called “Kodak fiends.”

Richard Conniff interprets the popular press’s foreboding warnings about lurking snapshotters as expressions of the “terror...of being immortalized at some foolish moment in a snapshot that might be passed among one’s acquaintances,”⁹⁸ and contemporaneous writers railed against the possibility of snapshots being used to “make [one] ridiculous for the benefit of posterity,” or to portray the subject “in newspapers and

the Century. (New York: Verso, 1996) 24-27. Thanks to a series of new technologies for reproducing photographic and other images—most notable the half-tone reproduction process—that emerged during this same time period, magazines and newspapers could and did feature images as a greater portion of their content than ever before. For a thorough explanation of the “half-tone effect” and the other technologies of mass reproduction that influenced publishing practices in the 1890s, see Neil Harris, “Iconography and Intellectual History: The Half-Tone Effect” in John Highman and Paul Conkin, eds. *New Directions in American Intellectual History*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979).

⁹⁶ Nickel, Douglas. *Snapshots: The Photography of Everyday Life, 1888 to the Present*. (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1998).

⁹⁷ Mensel 29.

⁹⁸ Conniff 107.

other publications in embarrassing and uncomplimentary attitudes, or side by side with the debased, the criminal and the degenerate.”⁹⁹

Complaints about the “Kodak fiend’s” practice are essentially protests against the snapshot’s remarkable ability to emerge and circulate in a manner unmediated by either the photographer’s or the subject’s “background” knowledge about the photograph. No single instant could tell the complete story of a subject’s life or personality, but the “Kodak fiend’s” purported eagerness to capture what were the most embarrassing or sensational of these moments threatened to immortalize instants like these as the definitive representation of the photographic subject. The Kodak fiend’s incriminating snapshots were representations freed from the knowledge about who and what their subjects were—a freedom that enabled their use as “evidence” of sensational or lurid stories that may or may not have had much to do with the real lives of their subjects.

The condition of spectatorship that Henry James identifies as Maisie’s perceptual “fate”—to “see much more than she understood”—is an apt illustration of the audience courted by the Kodak fiend’s sensational images. The force and appeal of such images often depended on the lack of any knowledge about the snapshot’s subjects that could mitigate their sensational appeal. Snapshooters seeking a market for such images—as well as the publications that printed them—counted on a public that was content to revel in the voyeuristic thrill of seeing much more than it understood. Maisie’s childhood impressions of her parents and their debased milieu are rich with the kind of lurid imagery eagerly courted by the era’s Kodak fiends, but unlike the complacent viewers of such images that the popular press depended on, Maisie’s reception of such images

⁹⁹ Ibid. 114.

initiates a pursuit of knowledge that is intimately tied to her survival—and one that, as James explains, guides the novel’s narrative progression:

I recall that my first view of this neat possibility was as the attaching problem of the picture restricted (while yet achieving, as I say, completeness and coherency) to what the child might be conceived to have UNDERSTOOD--to have been able to interpret and appreciate. Further reflexion and experiment showed me my subject strangled in that extreme of rigour. The infant mind would at the best leave great gaps and voids; so that with a systematic surface possibly beyond reproach we should nevertheless fail of clearness of sense. I should have to stretch the matter to what my wondering witness materially and inevitably SAW; a great deal of which quantity she either wouldn't understand at all or (x) would quite misunderstand--and on those lines, only on those, my task would be prettily cut out.¹⁰⁰

James’s evocation here of a “systematic surface beyond reproach” evokes the unique accuracy of any photograph: an indexicality that renders what the camera captures as “beyond reproach” in the undeniable fact of its having been present at the moment of the photograph’s making. Yet the “systematic surface” that James here describes is not Maisie’s field of vision, but rather the impressions of her mind: impressions that are, by virtue of their naivete, just as immune to reproach as the camera’s mechanically obtained images.

James’s evocation of the photograph’s surface-level accuracy as a description for Maisie’s thoughts is a photographic metaphor that interrogates the kind of boundaries and exclusions between seeing and knowing that snapshot photography perpetuated—and that Kodak’s promotional campaigns strove to conceal. The use of a photographic metaphor to describe Maisie’s mind suggests a certain ambiguity about the relations between what Maisie sees and what she knows—an ambiguity that continues to animate the metaphors that the novel’s narrator uses to describe Maisie in the early chapters of the novel. Maisie

¹⁰⁰ James, Henry. Preface to *What Maisie Knew*. New York Edition, 1908. ix-x. Etext prepared by Richard Hathaway, SUNY New Paltz. <http://www2.newpaltz.edu/~hathaway/maisie1.html> v-xxii.

is a “boundless receptacle,” [405]; “a ready vessel for bitterness [398]; but she is also “a deep little porcelain cup in which biting acids could be mixed” [398]. These metaphors suggests that Maisie’s mind is indeed as passive and sensitive as the photographic “receptacles”—the photographic film and the camera itself—that capture images; however, as a receptacle for “biting acids,” Maisie’s mind seems more like a crucial part of the apparatus of the pre-snapshot photographer who painstakingly brings his or her images to life with the “biting acids” of the darkroom.

The visions that Maisie sees are as lurid as any Kodak fiend’s finest work and, in terms of the novel’s narrative logic, infinitely more telling. James’s representation of what Maisie both sees and knows—and his choice of a protagonist for whom these entities are distinctly different—highlights the deliberately fragmentary nature of a photographic practice whose images circulated with no mediating knowledge of what lay beneath their “systematic surfaces.” Yet the eventual convergences between what Maisie sees and what she knows represent a threat even deeper than that of the Kodak fiend’s potential to publicly humiliate or misrepresent his subjects. The ways in which Maisie comes to see and know the social and moral laws of her familial world depend on a materialization of vision that mirrors the snapshot’s translation of fleeting moments into tangible, easily circulated objects. Maisie learns about that which is impossibly close to her—i.e., herself and her parents—by looking from the kind of distance that any amateur photographer might have gained from his subject by taking its picture. Maisie’s successful discernments testify to the epistemological power of a certain kind of photographic distance—a power that, as a function of snapshot photography, was just as accessible to the brute as it was to the spectator.

In *What Maisie Knew*, the potential threat of what the novel suggests about the relations between distance, sight and knowledge is emphasized by the fact that it is a mere child who turns these relations to her advantage. James's use of the child to convey a sense of just how fraught the relationships between seeing and knowing could be contrasts sharply with Eastman Kodak's deployment of the child as the redeemer of snapshot photography's voyeuristic sins. From a marketing standpoint, Eastman Kodak's targeting of children as both subjects and practitioners of snapshot photography was hugely successful. Yet the image of the innocent child featured in so much of Kodak's advertising and promotional materials was unable to fully cover over the broad cultural discomfort with the opportunities for observation and documentation that snapshot photography offered to even the most untutored and inexperienced practitioners. Both the efforts of Eastman Kodak to position the child as the innocent redeemer of snapshot photography's voyeuristic potential and the discomfort that lingered in spite of these efforts are apparent in the significant body of juvenile fiction¹⁰¹ that used the concept of snapshot photography as a major theme or plot device. Along with the ubiquitous advertisements for Eastman Kodak, the popular "family" magazines of the 1890s were frequent publishers of short stories and poems that featured the idea of snapshot

¹⁰¹Novels for young adults, like Alexander Black's *Captain Kodak; A Camera Story*. (Boston: Lothrop Publishing Company, 1899), featured young protagonists using their trusty Kodaks to solve mysteries or otherwise "save the day;" while others, like Edward Wheeler's dime novel *Deadwood Dick, Jr., in San Francisco, or, Kodak Kate, the Snap Shot*. (March 3, 1891. Beadle's Half-Dime Library No. 710), referenced Kodak photography to signify the protagonist's intelligence or keen insight. Stories that referenced snapshot photography in some way were also published in a wide range of periodicals, from popular, affordable weeklies like the *Youth's Companion* and the *Ladies' Home Journal*; to specialty photography journals like the *American Amateur Photographer*; to more expensive, "refined" monthly magazines like the *Century* and the *Atlantic Monthly*. Many of the stories published in these magazines sometimes referenced the Kodak only in their titles, to denote a work's brevity or fragmentary structure, while others echo some of the same themes ("snapshotting" as a mode of adventure or detection) explored in the young adult novels mentioned above.

photography in some significant way. In particular, the “Kodak fictions”¹⁰² that adhered to the morally didactic genre of the children’s story often appeared in such magazines; they are particularly revealing in terms of what they suggest about the complexity of snapshot photography’s voyeuristic potential and the child’s potential to mitigate it. Such tales are also an especially pointed complement to the troubled genesis of what Maisie’s nurse, the upstanding Mrs. Wix, would call the “moral sense” of her young charge.

In the Kodak fictions I consider below, the snapshot is figured as a powerful means of moral correction, one whose image of its subjects’ bad behavior has a seemingly instantaneous effect on the evolution of their “moral sense.” In these stories, the young subjects of surreptitiously obtained photographs are rehabilitated by looking at images of themselves—for Maisie, however, her internalized image of herself reveals more about the dissolute adults around her than it does about her own “moral sense.”

For example, in “The Boy With the Kodak,” published in *Zion’s Herald* in 1891,¹⁰³ a mysterious “tall boy” takes a snapshot of brother John and sister Flora just as one of their regular arguments reaches its highest pitch. The snapshot shows Flora “with her clenched fist raised, and in the act of striking her brother, while on her face was a most unbecoming expression of rage and revenge;” and John with a “deep frown and distorted features that were anything but pleasant to look upon.” When the tall boy returns to their home the next day to show them the snapshots, John and Flora are horrified by what they see. Like the images of philandering husbands or immodest women circulated by the “Kodak fiend,” the tall boy’s images show John and Flora at

¹⁰²No comprehensive survey of magazine “Kodak fiction” exists. My claims about the themes and variety of “Kodak fictions” that appeared in popular periodicals are preliminary ones, based on my initial findings from a survey of databases that index popular periodicals and amateur photography journals.

¹⁰³“The Boy With The Kodak.” *Zion’s Herald*. (Boston, MA) 6 May 1891, 142.

their worst. However, rather than complaining about the tall boy's intrusion into their personal lives, John and Flora are immediately sorry for their bad behavior. After seeing the photographs, John and Flora resolve "not to fight anymore," and the narrator closes the story by noting that "ever after that day, when they felt that they were getting angry, the remembrance of a picture which their sister had tacked up in each room caused them to change their tactics instantly."

"The Boy With the Kodak" rewrites the Kodak fiend's threatening, voyeuristic practice not just as a harmless childhood hobby, but as a morally didactic means of educating children about proper social behavior. The "tall boy" seems well on his way to becoming a Kodak fiend himself, but the aspects of his practice that reflect the fiend's most egregious offenses are pointedly explained away. The "tall boy" has watched John and Flora secretly, "from my window across the street," but he readily admits to having done so when his efforts to capture their arguments fail. In addition, his crucial snapshot is taken openly, as he climbs into John and Flora's front yard. The "tall boy" may harbor a "stack of pictures of people who little dream that [he] has photographed them in all their moods and tenses," but his identity as a "boy" and his willingness in this instance to give his incriminating photo to its subjects suggests that his collection of unflattering images will remain private.

The attempts of "Boy" to rewrite the Kodak fiend's practice as a kind of harmless "child's play" also evoke a longstanding belief about the photograph's connection to its subject's character. Throughout much of the nineteenth century, photographic portraiture was shaped by beliefs about the photograph's uncanny, almost supernatural power to

reveal the truth of its subject's moral and ethical character.¹⁰⁴ In this, and another similar story, "A Kodak Valentine," the snapshots of the children are described in precisely these terms. In "A Kodak Valentine," published in *Youth's Companion* in 1896,¹⁰⁵ young Gracie (with the help of her adult cousin Prue) uses a snapshot to apologize to her mother for a recent burst of bad behavior. "Valentine's" narrator remarks that, as Cousin Prue snaps her picture, Gracie "was doing her level best, so of course she was happy, and looked as fresh and pretty as any of the blossoms that nodded at her through the lattice." In this passage, Gracie's "fresh and pretty" appearance is the direct result of her happy industry, and the narrator's "of course" suggests that such an appearance is the natural result of the kind of happiness that springs from virtuous behavior. In "Boy," too, the tall boy's snapshots are effective precisely because they show, in Flora's case, the "most unbecoming expression of rage and revenge," one that Flora had "never before seen." "She had no idea that it [her face] could become thus transformed," claims the narrator, an observation that identifies the snapshot as the bearer of information new and previously hidden (even from Flora herself) about Flora's character.

Framing snapshots as objects that can reveal this sort of information about inner character aligns the images in "Boy" and "Valentine" with a particular idea about photography and character that was more characteristic of mid-century attitudes about more traditional modes of photography than it was of emerging attitudes about the

¹⁰⁴ In "Recognizing Lincoln: Image Vernaculars in Late-Nineteenth Century Visual Cultures," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 8:1 (2005): 31-58, Cara Finnegan states that "in the nineteenth century, portraits were thought to be ekphrastic—that is, they were believed to reveal or bring before the eyes something vital and almost mysterious about their subjects. It was assumed that the photographic portrait, in particular, did not merely "illustrate" a person but also constituted an important locus of information about human character." (Finnegan 42). For more on popular beliefs about the photograph's uncanny ability to capture the truths of character and virtue in the nineteenth century, see Smith, Shawn Michelle. *American Archives: Gender, Race and Class in Visual Culture*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), especially ch. 3, "Superficial Depths," 51-112.

¹⁰⁵ Bumstead, Eudora Stone. "A Kodak Valentine." *The Youth's Companion*. 13 February 1896: 85.

snapshot during the 1890s. And while it is likely true that ideas about photographs as “windows to the soul”¹⁰⁶ persisted throughout the 1890s, I would argue that the vitriolic responses to the “Kodak fiend’s” photographic practice suggest a growing skepticism about any unquestioning belief in the photograph’s ability to expose the true nature of a soul.¹⁰⁷ John, Flora and Gracie accept the snapshots of themselves as indubitable evidence of who they are, but their non-fiction contemporaries who complained about being “caught” by the Kodak fiend’s prying lens were protesting against the potential distribution of an image that *misrepresented* their true selves. In fact, complaints such as these are expressions of a far more modern understanding of the photograph’s potential to lie, distort or otherwise manipulate representations. Unlike older modes of portrait photography like daguerreotypes and wet-plate studio portraiture, snapshots required exposure times of only seconds. It’s hardly surprising, then, that the ease and efficiency of such a method would seem less adept at “perceiving” and illustrating the hidden depths of a soul than photographic methods that required longer confrontations between sitter and camera.

¹⁰⁶ Finnegan, 33. Finnegan’s “Recognizing Lincoln” offers an intriguing case study of a particular body of 1890s-era cultural responses to what was a decidedly pre-snapshot-era photographic image. Finnegan convincingly shows how the responses from readers of McClure’s to that magazine’s publication of a photographically reproduced daguerreotype of a young Abraham Lincoln affirmed beliefs about photographs as “keys to understanding [the] mythic greatness” and “valuable evidence as to [the] natural traits” of revered figures like Lincoln. Finnegan regards such statements as evidence that “the discourses of physiognomy still offered a potent image vernacular” during the 1890s. However, she also points out that the reproduced image of Lincoln was clearly a “standard-issue early daguerreotype: its pose stiff and formal, body and head held firm to accommodate the long exposure times of 1840s photography,” and that McClure’s editors “used an elaborate line drawing to frame the image, perhaps attempting to signal to viewers its daguerrean origins.” Finnegan claims that, despite these framing efforts, the image would have appeared as modern as any other of the half-tone illustrations that filled the pages of 1890s periodicals, but I would argue that the image’s “daguerrean origins” were perhaps more powerful influences on the responses to the image than Finnegan allows.

¹⁰⁷ On this point, I am in disagreement with Mensel, who points to the “contemporary notion that the face was the window to sincere sentiment” (30-31) as the primary reason for the anxiety about the Kodak fiend’s practice.

“Boy” and “Valentine” may evoke ideas about the connections between photography and morality that are based on a mode of photography quite different, and much older than snapshot photography, but their evocation of the idea points to its enduring resonance, even in the 1890s. Eastman Kodak’s deployment of the child as an ideal practitioner of snapshot photography depends not only on widespread ideas about the child’s innocence, but also on the resonance of this earlier idea about photography’s inherent connection to the character and morality of the people who practice it—both subjects and photographers. Insisting on children as ideal practitioners of snapshot photography was tantamount to a suggestion that the innate innocence of the child was magically transferred to the photograph itself, in much the same way that the morality of a photograph’s subject was thought to be transferred to the photograph that depicted him or her¹⁰⁸. Kodak is banking on the resonance of this older idea as a way to mitigate the threat of the Kodak fiend.

In “The Boy With the Kodak,” the threat of the Kodak fiend is evoked and immediately relieved, largely through a recasting of the “fiend” and his subjects as children. The bad behavior of children is hardly as reprehensible as that of the real Kodak fiends’ adult subjects, and their “natural” curiosity is a far more palatable version of the fiend’s calculated voyeurism. The child’s naivete was not, however, completely unproblematic in terms of mitigating the anxiety stimulated by snapshot photography: fictional marriages of snapshot photography and morally didactic tales for children also register the potential limitations of snapshot photography’s naïve practitioners. In “Valentine,” Gracie presents her mother with a snapshot depicting a moment of good

¹⁰⁸ See Alan Trachtenberg’s chapter “Illustrious Americans” (21-70) in *Reading American Photographs: Images As History, Matthew Brady to Walker Evans*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), for further discussion of this idea.

behavior, as an apology and a promise that a recent fit of temper will not be repeated. The snapshot's image shows Gracie happily washing dishes—a direct reference to the moment of bad behavior that Gracie regrets, when she “got kind of a mean streak” and refused to perform that chore. Gracie's snapshot, however, is mediated by a poem that explains its significance. Written on the back of the snapshot by her adult cousin Prue (who is also the surreptitious photographer who takes the snapshot), the poem promises “...true that daily/I'll make the dishes shine/And rub the glasses gaily/For I'm your Valentine!”

Cousin Prue's poem suggests that the mere image of Gracie dutifully washing dishes is not a sufficient motivator for her future good behavior. That Prue recognizes the need for such a mediating force—for a text that insists on the endurance of the fleeting moment that the snapshot captures—points to what was a particularly complex—and even dual—aspect of the figure of the child as an ideal practitioner of snapshot photography. The child's attachment to the present moment was part of what made the child such an appealing figure for Kodak—but this attachment was also somewhat limiting or threatening, in a way that's illustrated by “A Kodak Valentine” and the anxieties about the Kodak fiend. Snapshot photography was defined by its instantaneity, its capture of isolated, fleeting moments that might otherwise be unnoticed, concealed in their convergence with many other moments that make up a memory or an event. The snapshot had a unique ability to isolate moments that wouldn't otherwise be seen or understood. That such moments were extracted from the other moments that mediated them had the potential to make them threatening, or at least not comprehensible by their viewers. This is of special concern in terms of the child subject, given the stubborn

attachment to the present moment that defines any child's worldview—indeed, what could even be called the child's inability, cognitively speaking, to effectively apprehend the reality of either the past or the future. Such is the case with Gracie's snapshot: the mere depiction of her good behavior is not enough to ensure that such behavior will continue: Gracie must be reminded that the moment depicted is one that must be repeated regularly. Prue's addition of the poem is essentially a gesture that tries to overcome the snapshot's instantaneity, pointing to its inadequacy for the didactic purposes that these stories try to make their snapshots fulfill. The mediation of Gracie's snapshot with a textual reminder is a telling recognition of how unstable/volatile a child's "morality" can be. Cousin Prue's addition of the poem underscores just how fleeting and—perhaps—anomalous Gracie's moment of good behavior might be: she needs the reminder of the poem to ensure that her moment of good behavior will endure beyond her present sense of remorse.

Maisie And Materialized Sights

Cousin Prue's poem is an attempt to productively educate and expand that particular feature of the child's consciousness that James, in *What Maisie Knew*, calls "that lively sense of the immediate which is the very air of a child's mind." [405] In both "A Kodak Valentine" and *What Maisie Knew*, a "child's sense of the immediate" is implicitly recognized as a feature that contributes to a certain moral vulnerability. For Gracie, it seems, such vulnerability is effectively countered by her cousin's textual reminder continually to reenact the moment depicted in a snapshot. For Maisie, however, quite the opposite is true: rather than protecting Maisie from the threat that their personal

animosities might pose to her moral development, Maisie's parents take full advantage of her childish attachment to the present in order to further their own feud with each other. Part of what makes Maisie such a willing messenger for insults volleyed back and forth between parents is her "age," the "age for which all stories are true and all conceptions are stories. The actual was the absolute; the present alone was vivid." [405] As an observer whose particularly childlike mode of observation has already been subjected to moral degradation, Maisie is a distinctly different kind of observer than the child photographers depicted in Kodak ads or in Kodak fictions. Maisie's realization of the consequences of her inability to see beyond the present moment, i.e., her realization of her role as a "centre of hatred and a messenger of insult" between her feuding parents, amounts to what James calls a "moral revolution."

James's account of this childhood revolution is essentially an interrogation of the anxieties about visibility, knowledge and power that snapshot photography provoked. Eastman Kodak's version of a child's photographic vision attempted to align the perceived innocence of the child with a practice that was increasingly viewed as threatening. James's observant Maisie, however, raises pointed questions about the opportunities to see and know that snapshot photography offered practitioners who were as innocent—or, as some might claim, as brutish—as a child. Maisie may not, at first, understand the sights she sees, but her method of learning how they illustrate the dubious "moral sense" that informs the decisions of her adult guardians is essentially an instinctual kind of seeing, one in which Maisie's supposedly "brutish" senses—of hearing, smell and touch; but also of tenderness and danger—contribute to a material sort of knowledge that matches the power of the snapshot's claims to tell a truth indisputable

on the grounds of its status as material evidence. For Maisie, however, her childish mode of ignorant sight produces a sophisticated “moral sense” that transcends the limited reserves of self-consciousness allotted to either the children or the brutes of the late nineteenth century’s literary imagination. Maisie’s mode of seeing and knowing depends on a materialization of sight that reflects the era’s proliferating, widely circulated snapshots—a materialization that offers Maisie a distanced perspective from which she might view herself and her parents. Such distance ultimately gives her access to the knowledge that she needs to take control of her own fate. Those who railed against the practice of the Kodak fiend feared that the snapshot’s material accuracy would effectively obliterate any other representation that might mitigate its potential to incriminate its subjects: in other words, they feared the damage that the snapshot’s materiality could do to those who were used to the privilege of observation. Maisie, however, represents the potential of the snapshot’s materiality to enrich and expand the knowledge of the “brutes” who were more familiar as subjects of literary and scientific observation than as active participants in the determination of their own fates. Maisie evokes the specter of the brute who can effectively see itself and its own image through the eyes of others—a power that threatened not merely to disrupt the position of privileged individuals, but to obliterate the standards that define such hierarchies from the start.

The novel’s first and fullest description of the process by which Maisie comes to know figures the process as the transformation of purely visual, intangible impressions into Maisie’s tangible possessions—possessions that, though still troubling, are nevertheless hers to observe and consider. In a metaphor that evokes the pre-Kodak entertainment of the magic lantern show, the narrator describes Maisie’s initial

experience of the new set of conditions created by her parents' divorce as one of uncomfortable intimacy with frightening visions:

She was taken into the confidence of passions on which she fixed just the stare she might have had for images bounding across the wall in the slide of a magic lantern. Her little world was phantasmagoric—strange shadows dancing on a sheet. It was as if the whole performance had been given for her—a mite of a half-scared infant in a great dim theatre. [401]

Maisie's misperception of her parents' "show" of passions as one enacted exclusively for her marks her difficulty in perceiving the behavior of her parents as separate from herself. This frightening perception is characteristic of a child's unavoidably self-centered perspective,¹⁰⁹ one that is unable to distance itself and the actions of the adults who are responsible for it. Maisie, however, gradually comes to see her "phantasmagoric" world in more material terms. When Maisie does come to understand the mystifying stream of adult commentary on her situation, the process is figured as the materialization of

a collection of images and echoes to which meanings were attachable—images and echoes kept for her in the childish dusk, the dim closet, the high drawers, like games she wasn't yet big enough to play. [403]

Maisie's lack of understanding of these images and echoes is figured as a decidedly physical problem, i.e., the "great strain" of being unable to "carry [them] by the right end." As Maisie grows "sharper," however, she is able to "attach" meanings to these images and echoes, to the "wonderful assortment of objects of this kind" that she discovers in her mind, "all tumbled up too with the things, shuffled into the same receptacle, that her mother had said about her father." Maisie's realization of how to

¹⁰⁹ ...and indeed, characteristic of the naturalist emphasis on fate as well. Assuming that everything happens for a reason—that one is the object of a universal fate—denies the possibility of any distance between the individual and the forces of the universe.

“carry” such objects “by the right end” is essentially a realization of how she actually has been at the center of a particular performance enacted by her parents—but not as a spectator, as the narrator’s initial metaphor of the magic lantern show suggests; rather, Maisie realizes herself to have been a central actor in the perpetuation of her parents’ feud. Maisie’s first great lesson is a “vision, private but final, of the strange office she filled,” but this vision is one that understands her role in material terms. Like the insults that “rattle” in the “pillar-box” of her brain with the weight and sound of material objects [405], Maisie’s understanding of her role as the deliverer of such messages is figured as an encounter with a material object: the “moral revolution” of Maisie’s realization is one in which “the stiff dolls on the dusky shelves began to move their arms and legs: old forms and phrases began to have a sense that frightened her.”

Maisie may be confronted with a collection of material objects that frighten her, but they are nevertheless objects that belong to her and that she is thus able to do with as she wishes. Maisie “keeps” her parents’ insults to herself, both in that she refuses to repeat them aloud and in that their lingering resonance within her own body produces a pleasure that is decidedly sensuous:

Her parted lips locked themselves with the determination to be employed no longer. She would forget everything, she would repeat nothing, and when, as a tribute to the successful application of her system, she began to be called a little idiot, she tasted a pleasure altogether new. [406]

Maisie “tastes” the pleasure of appearing like an idiot—of appearing like a brute—behind lips that she has “locked” as she might a cabinet or chest of treasures.

The pleasure that Maisie derives from “tasting” her parents’ insults is the pleasure of self-knowledge: Maisie understands the position into which her parents have forced her, and this knowledge enables her to gain a measure of control over her life that has

hitherto been unknown to her. Maisie's process of gaining this knowledge, however, is as physically unpleasant as her enjoyment of it is sensually pleasurable. Some of Maisie's earliest intimations of her new position are spurred by her experiences of bodily touch, in which

The greatest effect of the great cause was her own greater importance, chiefly revealed to her in the larger freedom with which she was handled, pulled hither and thither and kissed, and the proportionately greater niceness she was obliged to show. Her features had somehow become prominent; they were so perpetually nipped by the gentlemen who came to see her father and the smoke of whose cigarettes went into her face. Some of these gentlemen made her strike matches and light their cigarettes; others, holding her on knees violently jolted, pinched the calves of her legs until she shrieked—her shriek was much admired—and reproached them with being toothpicks. [401]

The various ways in which Maisie's body is touched by others—handled, kissed, nipped and pinched—is Maisie's first clue to her own (and still mysterious) "greater importance." That it is the touch of other people that grants Maisie her first vital bit of self-knowledge evokes the physical processes of photography itself, in which the "touch" of bodies and photographic film by light creates a material object that can then be handled and regarded at a distance by the subject it pictures.¹¹⁰

The quick carelessness of the touches that Maisie endures is especially evocative of snapshot photography, with its ease of use and rapid exposure times, and the bits of knowledge about her own "greater importance" that Maisie gleans from these pinches and nips are hers to keep as much as any snapshot. Maisie's retention of one of these early impressions in particular—that of her "toothpick" legs—is crucial to what is

¹¹⁰ The suffering and bodily violence that Maisie endures as her knowledge is made material evokes Roland Barthes's description, in *Camera Lucida*, of "photography transform[ing] subject into object, and even, one might say, into a museum object: in order to take the first portraits (around 1840) the subject had to assume long poses under a glass roof in bright sunlight; to become an object made one suffer as much as a surgical operation." 13. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980) 13.

perhaps Maisie's most valuable/portentous realization. Hearing—and feeling—her legs treated as toothpicks prompts Maisie to regard them critically herself, comparing them to those of other children and “ask[ing] her nurse if *they* were toothpicks.” The narrator's explanation of Maisie's critical regard for her own body is, in part, that she is “leaving behind the time when she had no desires to meet...a feeling from this time that she was deficient in something that would meet the general desire.” [402] At a much later point in the novel, Maisie observes Sir Claude in what proves to be an especially telling moment—one that, for Maisie, seems informed by her earlier consideration of her own physical inadequacy. During the time that Maisie spends with Sir Claude at Folkestone, just before their departure for France, Maisie learns exactly what it is that complicates Sir Claude's attempts to commit fully to being her guardian. Sir Claude's lingering regard for the “fine stride and shining limbs of a young fishwife who had just waded out of the sea with her basketful of shrimps” [562] renders his gaze “absent from *her* affairs,” an absence that predicts both the reason for and the inevitability of Sir Claude's real absence from Maisie's life. That Maisie notices Sir Claude looking at the “shining limbs” of a fishwife; that her observation dovetails with her realization that Sir Claude has been more involved with Mrs. Beale than she had thought; and particularly, that she intuits some connection of these facts as evidence of the “natural divergence between lovers and little girls” [540], suggests that Maisie's emerging understanding of Sir Claude's sexual weakness and desire is informed by her knowledge of her own “deficiency,” as figured in her perception of her own skinny legs as distinct from the shiny limbs of the fishwife that hold Sir Claude's attention.

Maisie's awareness of the way others see and touch her body will ultimately prove to be her most sophisticated epistemological tool, and one that reflects the threat of the seeing, knowing brute that snapshot photography enabled. The painful apex of Maisie's knowledge is what she learns about Sir Claude, and thus it is the moments in the text that mark the progress of this particular lesson that offer the clearest depictions of Maisie's brutish, snapshot-like mode of seeing. After Maisie's conversation with Ida's latest paramour, the Captain, during a chance meeting with the new couple, Maisie cultivates the same façade of idiocy that she once assumed before her parents. What prompts Maisie's behavior is the unusual and alarming sight of Sir Claude's face:

She had never seen Sir Claude look as he looked just then; flushed yet not excited—settled rather in an immovable disgust and at once very sick and very hard. His conversation with her mother had clearly drawn blood, and the child's old horror came back to her, begetting the instant moral contraction of the days when her parents had looked to her to feed their love of battle. Her greatest fear for the moment, however, was that her friend would see she had been crying. The next she became aware that he glanced at her, and it presently occurred to her that he didn't even wish to be looked at. At this she quickly removed her gaze, while he said rather curtly: "Well, who in the world is the fellow?" [507]

The narrator's detailed account of Maisie's intuitions in this scene repeatedly emphasizes her visual impressions of Sir Claude's face and her perceptions of how her own face might look to him. What Maisie is most immediately conscious of in this passage is the physical evidence of what has transpired between Sir Claude and her mother, as well as between herself and the Captain—the "blood" that is visible on the surface of Sir Claude's flushed face; his expression that he "didn't even wish to be looked at;" and the traces of her tears on Maisie's own face. Her perceptions of both Sir Claude's anger and her own distress are like snapshot versions of the complex and painful conversations that

these physical signs indicate: they attend to and capture surface details that are as telling as they are fleeting.

These detailed snapshots of what Maisie sees highlights all that she doesn't know about exactly what transpired between Sir Claude and her mother, but in terms of enlightening her about Sir Claude's character, they are ultimately just as useful to Maisie as a more complete understanding of the situation might be. Her impression that Sir Claude's conversation with her mother has "drawn blood" instantly provokes a recourse to her old technique of "playing dumb," as if the similarity of Sir Claude's look to those that she remembers on the faces of her parents indicates that perhaps Sir Claude is as vulnerable to the heat of battle as her parents were. Maisie's impressions of adult anger in this scene—both present and remembered—evoke what Nancy Martha West has called the snapshot's tendency to reduce any subject's individuality to a stereotype, one that produces not specific knowledge, but rather a generalized nostalgia.¹¹¹ But this generalizing tendency is, in a sense, exactly what serves Maisie best in terms of gaining knowledge of the situation. Comparing her past impression of her parents' faces with her current one of Sir Claude's leads her to assume her old role of a little idiot with Sir Claude. That Maisie seems "not to have taken in" anything much during her conversation with the Captain angers Sir Claude, but his apologetic note to Maisie leads Mrs. Beale to admit that she and Sir Claude have been in communication—a concrete piece of knowledge that, along with her intuition of Sir Claude's vulnerability to her mother's attacks, Maisie adds to her growing store.

Both Maisie's photographic attention to the physical details of faces and looks and her refusal to elaborate on anything deeper she might know about such details evoke

¹¹¹West 174-187.

the style and the secrecy of the Kodak fiend's photographic practice. Complaints about "fiends" in the era's popular publications certainly figured these photographers as brutal, both in terms of their "preying" on unsuspecting citizens and of their role in perpetuating a base, vulgar sensationalism. James's narrator, too, suggests that a certain kind of brutishness is associated with the kind of snapshot seeing that triggers Maisie's recourse to the "moral contraction" of appearing "not to take things in." Unlike the Kodak fiend, however, whose brutality was both predatory and predicated on his invisibility, the narrator's descriptions of Maisie-as-brute figure her as a victim, highly visible and highly vulnerable. In Maisie's memories of her own past performances of ignorance, she is both called a brute and treated as one, as "when her father, for her blankness, called her a dirty little donkey, and her mother, for her falsity, pushed her out of the room." Sir Claude's angry dismissal of Maisie into a cab may not be as physically brutal as Maisie's parents' treatment of her, but the "sweet sense of success" that Maisie experiences as the cab drives away is one that she associates with one of the novel's few explicitly described moments of physical brutality,

...an occasion when, on the stairs, returning from her father's, she had met a fierce question of her mother's with an imbecility as deep and had in consequence been dashed by Mrs. Farange almost to the bottom. [430-431]

For Maisie, being seen—and even more importantly, being touched—as a brute provides her with a satisfying form of physical evidence that testifies to the importance of the knowledge she withholds. The abuse that Maisie endures is also a pointed indication of just how threatening the seeing brute could be—more so, even, than the Kodak fiend's ruthless distribution of revealing photographs. What makes Maisie's knowledge so maddening is its concealment: no one—not even Maisie—can accurately gauge its depth

or scope, and like the “tall boy’s” private stack of incriminating snapshots, Maisie’s hidden, unanalyzed knowledge poses a threat to its subjects that far exceeds the Kodak fiend’s ruthless—yet predictable—quest to expose and embarrass his subjects.

What Maisie learns about Sir Claude represents her deepest and most painful store of knowledge—a collection of precisely the kind of human sympathies and contradictions that, according to complaints about the fiend, the snapshot could never contain. After Sir Claude returns to Maisie and Mrs. Wix in France, Maisie notices a difference in Sir Claude, one that makes her

[conscious] that she had never seen him in this particular state in which he had been given back.

Mrs. Wix had once said--it was once or fifty times; once was enough for Maisie, but more was not too much--that he was wonderfully various. Well, he was certainly so, to the child's mind, on the present occasion: he was much more various than he was anything else. [622-623]

Characterizing Maisie’s hard-won knowledge of Sir Claude as “various” suggests that what keeps Maisie from possessing Sir Claude himself is precisely the kind of psychological complexity that eluded the snapshot’s representation of a person—but not, perhaps, the representation produced by a collection of snapshots—a material collection of telling images not unlike Maisie’s other “family album,” that collection of insults exchanged by her parents that “rattle” in the “pillar-box” of Maisie’s brain. Sir Claude’s “variety” is revealed by Maisie’s distinctly modern mode of photographic seeing, one that corrects the impression she initially derives from the novel’s only actual photograph, the cabinet photograph of Sir Claude that offers Maisie her first glimpse of her prospective stepfather. Maisie’s initial impression of Sir Claude is overwhelmingly positive—an opinion that is hardly surprising in light of the way in which cabinet photographs were processed and consumed. After the initial introduction of the new

“cabinet size” (slightly larger than the familiar carte-de-visites size) photograph in 1866, this new format quickly became the means for producing a newly flattering—and, as such, not altogether accurate—type of photographic portrait. Robert Taft, in *Photography and the American Scene*, explains how the cabinet photograph’s larger size occasioned “a turning point in the annals of the profession,” one that ushered in a novel mode of retouching photographic negatives. In cabinet photographs,

flaws which were not particularly obvious in the small card sizes now became conspicuous, so that greater skill in the mechanical routine of making portraits was required...The new type of retouching was the manipulation of the negative to remove wrinkles and facial blemishes, to smooth the hair, and to secure a greater variety of intermediate tones than the collodion negative was capable of recording.¹¹²

The discrepancy between the beauty of Sir Claude’s cabinet photograph and its subject’s moral weakness emphasizes the deceptive potential of the kind of photograph Taft describes. Maisie “lost herself in admiration of the fair, smooth face, the regular features, the kind eyes, the amiable air, the general glossiness and smartness of her prospective stepfather;” while Mrs. Wix immediately decides that Sir Claude “promised [Maisie] a future...on the strength of his charming portrait.”¹¹³ Yet by the end of this scene, Maisie correctly intuits the real meaning of the photograph, and it is one that has little to do with how beautiful Sir Claude’s cabinet photograph makes him appear. It is, in fact, the relations of the three women in this scene regarding who will possess the photograph that actually predict the truth of Sir Claude’s character. Despite her protestation against “touching anything belonging to Mrs. Wix,” it is Miss Overmore who ends up possessing the photograph, despite the earnest desires of both Maisie and Mrs. Wix to retain it for

¹¹² Taft 324-325.

themselves—just as, by the end of the novel, it will be Miss Overmore who possesses Sir Claude rather than Maisie or Mrs. Wix.

The ironic force of this scene lies not in what the photograph pictures, but in who possesses it. Snapshot photography—particularly as it was used to contribute sensational illustrations to the era’s popular newspapers and magazines—attached a new importance to the question of who possessed particular photographs. Such an importance is one that seems to inform Maisie’s immediate wish to possess the photograph: her desire reflects both the traditional belief in the photograph’s status as material proof of its subject’s character and the more modern threat of the snapshot’s potential to reshape its subject’s character—or at least, the public perception of that character—according to the will of the snapshot’s owner. The narrator, however, seems to believe even more fully in the connection between Sir Claude himself and his photograph. When Maisie asks for the photograph, she implores to keep “it,” referring to it correctly as a material object. Yet when the narrator describes Miss Overmore’s “theft” of the photograph, he refers to it as the man himself, noting that, as Maisie and Mrs. Wix embrace, “their companion had had time to lay a quick hand on Sir Claude and, with a glance at him or not, whisk him effectually out of sight.” The narrator seems to speak what Maisie only intuits, taking on the role of the naïve child who believes in the truth of appearances. In terms of the novel’s plot, however, Maisie’s childish intuition about the importance of possessing the photograph dovetails with the kind of privileged knowledge about the novel’s conclusion that only the narrator would have.

Even at this early moment in the progress of Maisie’s painful education, she knows as much as the enlightened, insightful narrator who painstakingly documents her

tale. Maisie's knowledge ultimately affords her a means of ordering and choosing the parameters of her own life: by the end of the novel, she is able to clearly see and compare what it would be like to live with Sir Claude and Mrs. Beale; or with Mrs. Wix. Maisie, in short, learns how *not* to be a brute, through a distinctly modern means of photographic sight—one that, through Kodak's ubiquitous snapshot cameras, was ready to teach the same lesson to anyone with the means and motive to learn..



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Figure 2. 1889. The Kodak Camera: Hands holding up camera with text "You press the button" Price \$25. From the George Eastman House Kodak Advertising Collection. Used with permission.



Figure 3. 1888 Kodak camera (barrel shutter) E131.00003. From the George Eastman House Kodak Technology Collection. Used with permission.

Chapter 4

Hearing the Real: Image and Sound in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Early Cinema

"I never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnation as she did...But when I found out what she was up to, the play was half over and it was then too late."¹¹⁴

In Kate Chopin's sardonic response to negative reviews of *The Awakening*, the author imagines an impossible literary character, one who comes to life with a force strong enough to determine the outcome of her own story. Blaming Edna Pontellier for what some reviewers found shocking or offensive may have been little more than Chopin's flippant refusal to apologize for her novel, but her playful characterization of *The Awakening's* protagonist also hints at the novel's fascination with observers, artists and storytellers who have a curious lack of control over their own perceptions and creations.

Despite what Chopin jokingly claims about Edna's mastery of her own story, *The Awakening* is full of instances in which Edna seems just as powerless over her own creations as Chopin claims to be. In terms of *The Awakening's* engagement with the themes and techniques of literary naturalism, such a lack of agency hardly seems surprising: the super-sensual Edna's inability to deviate—by way of her art or any other means—from what the narrator calls the "path to which Fate had directed her

¹¹⁴ Chopin, Kate. response to critics of *The Awakening*, published in *Book News*, July 1899. Quoted in Walker, Nancy A. "Biographical and Historical Contexts," in *The Awakening*. Ed. Nancy A. Walker. (Boston & New York: Bedford Books for St. Martin's Press, 1993). 14.

footsteps”¹¹⁵ seems to cast her as yet another of naturalism’s brutes, doomed by (among other things) their inborn vulnerability to the sensory onslaught of the modern world. Edna Pontellier epitomizes the kind of hypersensitivity to sensory stimuli that haunts naturalism’s brutes, but the intensity of her sensory life models a mode of knowing and representing experience that the novel’s narrator eagerly echoes and imitates.

The echoes of the kind of sensations and perceptions that I consider in the chapter that follows are precisely that: mimetic imitations of sounds and voices that seem to offer a newly “true” way of representing experience, one that embodies both the guarantee of accuracy suggested by the camera’s indifferent automatism and what was increasingly perceived as the “truer” reality of any individual’s uniquely subjective experience. The role of music in *The Awakening* has been well-studied¹¹⁶; however, the odd and often cacophonous soundscape that pervades the novel has received less attention. I argue that *The Awakening*’s aural details and metaphoric descriptions are a distinctly modern answer to the turn-of-the-century’s mounting skepticism of any realistic representation’s claim to truth or accuracy. Just as the unquestionable accuracy of photography was met with increasing skepticism in the final two decades of the century, so, too, was the preeminence of those literary styles that were defined by their investment in a kind of knowledge production that was profoundly visual. For *The Awakening*’s narrator, the

¹¹⁵ Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening*. Ed. Nancy A. Walker. (Boston & New York: Bedford Books for St. Martin’s Press, 1993) 25. All subsequent page numbers from this edition will be noted in the text.

¹¹⁶ For an overview of the critical treatment of music in *The Awakening*, see Nicole Camastra’s “Venerable Sonority in Katie Chopin’s *The Awakening*” *American Literary Realism* 40.2 (2008): 154-166. Camastra argues for the significance of Frederic Chopin on *The Awakening*, even as she acknowledges that most critics have focused on the parallels between Chopin’s novel and the themes and cultural milieu associated with Richard Wagner’s music. See also: Melanie Dawson, “Edna and the Tradition of Listening: The Role of Romantic Music in *The Awakening*,” *Southern Studies*, 3 (Summer 1992) 87–98; Carol S. Corum, “Music in *The Awakening*,” *Mount Olive Review*, 8 (1995–96) 36–43; Lynda S. Boren, “Taming the Sirens: Self-Possession and the Strategies of Art in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*,” *Kate Chopin Reconsidered: Beyond the Bayou*, ed. Boren and Susan deSaussure Davis (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1999) 181–96; Barbara C. Ewell, *Kate Chopin* (New York: Ungar, 1986) 154–55.

promise of a representation that actively courted the interplay of sound and image is the promise of an accuracy that could still exist in the wake of the era's scientific and aesthetic endorsement of subjective, individual perceptions and sensations as powerful influences on both the production of knowledge and the pleasures of spectatorship— influences that were at least as potent, if not more so, than the visually oriented realisms that had dominated the cultures of both science and entertainment throughout the century.

Literary naturalism and “silent” film were, arguably, the cultural forms that represented the late 19th century's most highly evolved forms of realistic representation— an evolution that, as many have argued, could not help but become the more sophisticated realisms of literary modernism and the “classic” Hollywood cinema that emerged in the early decades of the 20th century. *The Awakening's* narrative fascination with sound, sensation and metaphor articulates a fantasy of realistic representation that was eagerly shared by the makers and spectators of early film, and one that also relied on the potential of sound to define, shape or alter an image. In 1899, films employed a wide range of sound accompaniments, most of which were intended to intensify a film's overall realism. In the pre-talkie era, sound was the sign of a cinematic representation that would exceed all others: a representation of reality convincing enough to evoke the kind of naïve surrender to an illusion that, in 1899, hardly existed any longer among spectator well acquainted with the technological tricks and conventions of photography and film. The era's actual cinematic soundscapes, however, represented a reality that was quite different from this sort of overwhelming illusion. Rather than enhancing a completely convincing illusion of reality, the gaps between sound accompaniments and cinematic images offered audiences opportunities to shape their own experience of a film and

derive its meaning. Cinematic sound forced filmmakers and exhibitors to surrender at least some of their agency in the production of a film's meaning to their audiences, just as, by the end of Chopin's novel, her narrator surrenders her responsibility for bridging the impossible gaps between one person's subjectivity and another's.

Early Film And The Reality Of Sound

The characteristic entertainments—literary, visual and otherwise—of the American 1890s were those that openly courted their audiences' embodied sensations. As many historians have recently argued, audiences were increasingly resistant to being “taken in” by the illusions perpetrated by these visual entertainments. Such skepticism was not only due to the public's growing knowledge about the mechanisms and technologies that produced realistic representations; it was also about the growing awareness of how influential individual perception was on what were previously thought to be wholly objective senses, particularly vision. Not only were audiences wise to the tricks of realistic representations like photography and film, they were also well aware that individuals saw things differently. Jonathan Crary, in his investigations on the scientific and cultural history of vision and perception in the nineteenth century, identifies “the relatively sudden emergence of models of subjective vision in a wide range of disciplines during the period 1810-1840,” and his work traces the influence of such models on the most influential writers and artists of the late nineteenth century. The work of ocular physiologists like Hermann von Helmholtz, for example, revealed that the human eye's reception of light was, as Crary puts it, “anything but unmediated,”¹¹⁷ while

¹¹⁷ Crary explains Helmholtz's discovery in the following way, and suggests that it underscored his insistence—which was eventually widely accepted—that “the retina is effectively a part of the brain.”

other physiological investigations, like those of Gustav Fechner, attempted to “quantify subjective experience” in an effort to rationalize, manage and discipline the experiences of human perception and attention. As Crary notes, however, such efforts pointed just as emphatically to the unruly and subjective nature of human perception as they did to the potential of taming it:

Even as his [Fechner’s] work opened the vast rationalizing possibilities of psychometrics, at the same time it disclosed the qualitative discontinuities that irrevocably fragmented the apparently uniform fabric of perceptual experience... Even as attention is the site of quantification for Fechner, it simultaneously suggested subjective operations of repression and anesthetization, which were to be of considerable importance for Freud and others. [26]

Crary identifies the work of scientists like Helmholtz and Fechner as the basis for the notion “that the functioning of vision became dependent on the complex and contingent physiological makeup of the observer, rendering vision faulty, unreliable, and, it was sometimes argued, arbitrary.” [12] Cultural historians like James Cook, Miles Orvell, and, more recently, Nancy Bentley and Michael Leja, locate this notion of a “faulty, unreliable” or “arbitrary” vision in the late-nineteenth century penchant for visual media and entertainments that were obviously deceptions or “humbugs.” Cook’s work on both the notorious P.T. Barnum and his cultural milieu shows how a wide range of visual and performative entertainments—from the exhibition of sideshow-like “freaks” or mechanical wonders; to the vogue for *tromp l’oeil* painting—relied on some form of deception to attract audiences¹¹⁸. Miles Orvell, in his study of authenticity and imitation

When light enters this opaque “apparatus,” it is no longer as part of a geometrical optics, as rectilinear rays traveling from point to point, but as a form of luminous energy that strikes a dense mosaic of receptors, setting off a complex of processes in this compound organ that culminate in visual perceptions. (153)

Helmholtz’s optical discoveries underscored the kind of visual experimentation that defined the neo-impressionist work of painters like Georges Seurat.

¹¹⁸ Cook, James. W. *The Arts of Deception: Playing With Fraud In The Age Of Barnum*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001.

in nineteenth century America, identifies photography as a primary participant in the culture of deception that Cook describes, claiming that the “nineteenth century practice of photography was founded on an understanding of the medium as an illusion...in which the image offers the viewer a representation of reality, a typification, a conscious simulacrum—though a simulacrum that elicited a willing suspension of disbelief.”¹¹⁹ Michael Leja identifies the popular practice of spirit photography, in which studio photographers produced photographic portraits of a sitter that were magically able to capture and display the ghostly images of the sitter’s dead loved ones, as one such example. Citing evidence from the sensational trial of William H. Mumler, a spirit photographer accused of fraud, Leja notes that one fellow spirit photographer’s testimony that his own spirit photographs were “bogus” “suggests that a market existed for spirit photographs based on their being appreciated as technological curiosities, tricks, or creative visualizations of spirit life.”¹²⁰ Bentley suggests that “modern amusements” that traded on the body’s response to a perceived threat—the newly invented roller coaster, for example, or the “train films” that seemed to subject their audiences to the threat of an oncoming train,

evinced an eagerness for the “pleasurable vacillation between belief and doubt” that became possible only after the widespread decline of belief in miracles and marvels. Similarly, the “apparent miracles” performed by new mechanical amusements like the roller coaster were an exciting test of commonsense knowledge of physics at the same time that they channeled anxiety about modern technology into the electric sensation of the bodily thrill.¹²¹

Early film audiences reveled in the kind of “pleasurable vacillation between belief and doubt” that Bentley identifies as the era’s characteristic mode of spectatorship;

¹¹⁹ Orvell 77.

¹²⁰ Leja 35.

¹²¹ Bentley 254.

however, the new medium of film also suggested the possibility of a representation that was far closer to a “true” illusion than any of the era’s visual or aural entertainments. For the pioneering filmmakers and exhibitors during the late nineteenth century, the interplay of cinematic sounds and images provoked the fantasy of annihilating the skeptical resistance to illusion that characterized most film audiences. The possibilities for cinema’s sights and sounds to enhance, inspire or alter each other were a major preoccupation for those critics and filmmakers interested in the future of cinema. Taking Edison’s well-known mantra about film “doing for the eye what the phonograph does for the ear” as a succinct and telling example¹²², Tom Gunning emphasizes the film industry’s historic idealization of sound, claiming that for many of film’s early innovators, the technology began as “an image of sound,” one that was “part of a broader attempt to recreate and recapture the sensual world in several dimensions.”¹²³ And indeed, the delight—or even the necessity—of “hearing” as well as seeing a film’s images was frequently noted by commentators in the trade press. The tendency of contemporary viewers to find silent images unpleasantly eerie or uncanny has been well-documented by film historians, but cinema’s first spectators also seemed to perceive sound as a sensation that could enhance the visual experience of a film significantly enough to produce an experience quite different from that of viewing the film in silence. Noted film critic and sometime-lecturer Stephen Bush insisted on sound as not just a pleasant accompaniment to a film, but a necessary tool for making its images legible, “bringing out “by sound and

¹²² For more on the relationship between Edison’s experiments with visual and aural technologies, see Gitelman, Lisa. *Always Already New: Media, History And The Data Of Culture*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006) and Kittler, Friedrich. *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1999).

¹²³ Gunning, “Doing For The Eye” 28.

language the beauties that appear but darkly or not at all until the ear helps the eye.”¹²⁴

And, in 1899, for example, an anonymous contributor to the industry periodical the *Phonoscope* marveled at the wonder of the Stereophone, one of the latest nickel-in-the-slot, peepshow-style devices that provided lifelike sound effects along with its visual projections. Commenting on a series of “views” entitled “Going to the Circus,” the writer delights in an experience that evokes the possibility of multi-sensory spectatorship:

Looking at the first scene you see the circus procession approaching and hear the band play, gradually becoming louder as if growing nearer. The next scene is a near view of the elephants, and you hear street cries and the band in the distance. Then other procession views are shown in regular succession, with accompanying street noises, the tramp of horses’ feet, etc. Then a view of the circus grounds is shown and you hear the hucksters’ cries and other well known circus sounds. Then a view inside the first tent, and you see the animal dens, with near views of the lion and hippopotamus, and a good imitation of the growl of the lion is heard. Then inside the big tent you see the old familiar scenes and hear the old familiar cries, “Peanuts five a bag,” predominating; then “Tickets for the grand concert” is heard, finally ending with a chorus supposed to be sung by the concert troupe, and all in about three minutes and for five cents. Everything real as life except the odor of the sawdust and the animals, and doubtless this might be added.¹²⁵

For this writer, the realistic sound effects that accompany the images in “Going to the Circus” are part of a representation so “real as life” that it practically evokes the smells of the scene as well—or at least stimulates him to imagine the possibility of such a representations.

As Rick Altman notes in his study of early film sound, the enthusiasm of spectators like the writer quoted above was typical in its appreciation of the realistic sound effects that were nearly always a part of the late nineteenth century experience of cinema.¹²⁶ Typical, too, is the way in which a film’s combination of sights and sounds

¹²⁴ Lastra 109.

¹²⁵ Altman 83.

¹²⁶ Altman, Rick. *Silent Film Sound*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). 42. See also: Bottomore, Stephen. “The Story Of Percy Peashaker: Debates About Sound Effects in the Early Cinema” in

seems to provoke an imaginative leap towards an experience of spectatorship that seemed even “realer” than it actually was: the many and varied experiments with cinematic sound often inspired claims that films really could produce the kind of awe-struck, naïve spectators who, according to most film historians/etc., were more a fiction of the industry’s hyperbolic self-promotion than an actual phenomenon. Stephen Bottomore’s quotation of Ben Jolly, an early film exhibitor, on the value of sound accompaniment for any film, is an excellent example of this tendency:

If you ask me what brings in the crowds, I’ll say it’s the pipe organ and the effects box... Why, I can even make you believe some of those elephants are trumpeting in the jungle, and as for a lion roaring—say, I scared a lot of women this afternoon. And as for those ocean pictures—why, when I imitated the surf breaking on the rocks today, one girl screamed as if she had wet her feet!¹²⁷

What is notable about this quotation is the way in which Jolly credits the sounds of the film as the means of creating an illusion real enough to trick audiences—real enough, in fact, to make one spectator experience the “feel” of the film’s oceanic images as well as their look and sound. Jolly’s claims about his audiences’ extreme reactions may be largely exaggerated, but his evocation of their total-body response is nevertheless a telling example of the crucial link between a film’s sound and the possibilities for new modes of sensational spectatorship that it inspired.

Films with realistic sound effects may not have actually convinced spectators that their own bodies could be touched by a film, but they did produce a kind of cinematic realism that depended on/explicitly appealed to the embodied presence of the spectator in

Abel, Richard and Rick Altman, eds. *The Sounds of Early Cinema*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001) and Bottomore, Stephen. “An International Survey Of Sound Effects In Early Cinema.” *Film History* 11.4 (1999) 485-498.

¹²⁷ Bottomore, “International Survey” 485. Jolly’s statements are of a piece with other such hyperbole that contributed to the myth of extraordinarily naïve film spectators—the myth epitomized by that of people running from the theater at the sight of an oncoming train. What’s notable about this quote, however, is that it isn’t the images but the sounds that create this supposedly overwhelming trick.

the theater. Several film historians have argued persuasively that the appeal of sound in the pre-talkie era was largely due to the kinds of connections between the audience and the musicians or “sound men” who provided the soundtrack for early film performances. Norman King argues that a film’s sounds, particularly those produced “live,” like effects and music, “produced effects in the cinema that recorded sound could not, a sense of immediacy and participation. Live sound actualized the image and, merging with it, emphasized the presentness of the performance and the audience.”¹²⁸ James Lastra, in his study of American cinematic sound, provides a detailed articulation of this claim through a description of the way in which sound practitioners directly addressed and pushed audiences to participate actively in the film experience. A film’s soundscape, Lastra argues,

spoke directly to audiences in a celebration of their fleeting community. Whether through sing-a-longs, virtuoso musical or vocal performance, ethnic or national music, conspiratorial mockery of the film, or simply their bodily presence, musicians and sound performers decisively mediated the experience of silent films in the nickelodeon and in the picture palace...Like the barker, but in concert with the screen, the singer, pianist, and drummer directly acknowledged their audiences, and even elicited their response through cleverness, ingenuity, and above all spot-on performances stressing synchronism...these and other sound practices stressed performance to such an extent that audience attention often seemed split between the world on the screen and the performers in the theater.¹²⁹

The scene of spectatorship that Lastra describes is one in which the active participation of audience members depends on the degree to which a film’s sound practitioners are able to make a film “real.” This was a realism that, according to Miriam Hansen, had less to do with an audience being duped and much more to do with integrating the experience of

¹²⁸ King, Norman, quoted in Hansen, Miriam. *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991. 43.

¹²⁹ Lastra 97-104.

film with the actual experience of being in the world. The variety and variability of sound practitioners' contributions to a film

allowed for locally and culturally specific acts of reception, opening up a margin of participation and unpredictability. In this margin the cinema could assume the function of an alternative public sphere for particular social groups, like immigrants and women, by providing an intersubjective horizon through—and against—which they could negotiate the specific displacements and discrepancies of their experience.¹³⁰

In Hansen's description, a film's soundscape offered audiences an opportunity to claim a film as specific to their own social and cultural experience, even if the images on the screen had little to do with who they were. That sound practitioners frequently tailored a particular film's soundtrack to the specific tastes of their local audiences meant that they cast these spectators as the experts on how well or poorly an overall film was exhibited in the context of reception. And, as Lastra argues, the criteria by which such "experts" judged had a great deal to do with the various ways in which a particular film could be made "real" through sound. Referring to the timing of music and sound effects, Lastra notes that "both lecturers and prop men understood "synchronization" as a category of evaluation." According to Lastra and others, audience approval of a film's soundtrack was based largely on a particular concept of realistic representation, one that readily acknowledged the production of cinematic sound as a trick engineered by skilled (or not so skilled) illusionists: "the tension between realism and the flamboyant displays of skill it took to produce it," Lastra argues, "profoundly shaped attitudes toward sound effects."¹³¹

¹³⁰ Hansen 43-44.

¹³¹ According to Lastra, skilled sound practitioners like Howe and others emphasized the question of how a real film could, should and did sound as a crucial part of the early film spectator's experience of a film, one that effectively challenged the industry's growing focus on film's narrative potential:

Both the “intersubjective horizon” that Hansen describes and Lastra’s argument for the relationship between sound practitioners and audiences suggest that, for many spectators, the experience of cinematic sound emphasized their identities as knowledgeable, discerning listeners and viewers. Eliding or resisting the fact that early film audiences often played this role has been part of film history’s now-debunked myth of the exaggeratedly naïve spectator who is taken in by every cinematic trick in the book, no matter how familiar or transparent. On account of both this projected identity and their actual identities, in the preponderance of contexts, as ethnic and social “others,” early film audiences were often portrayed by the trade and popular press as a particular version of naturalist brutes, defined (among other things) by their innate vulnerabilities to the sensations and vicissitudes of the physical world. The relationship between sound and realism in early film is only one of many characteristics of the early film experience that points to the inaccuracy of this characterization, but it is one that offers a particularly intriguing analogue to the ways in which *The Awakening*’s depiction of sound complicates the conventional trope of the brute in naturalist literature. The narrator’s fascination with aural details and especially with Edna Pontellier’s sensual vulnerability to music in *The Awakening* blurs the boundary between naturalism’s privileged, knowledgeable narrator and the (supposedly) brutish protagonist she describes. The narrator’s interest in Edna’s aural sensitivity echoes the myriad ways in which an early film’s audible narrators—lecturers, “sound men” or musicians—deferred their authority

By adhering to a practice that was discursive and performative, the effects man created new hierarchies within the image, drawing spectator attention to incidental features because they could make noise. Under his gaze, the image ceased to signify in a predictable way, but became a pretext for virtuoso displays of sound. (105)

Lastra describes a performative practice that privileges a mimetic reproduction of detail over and against the delivery of narrative information, one that caters both to an audience’s delight in and capacity to judge the effectiveness of a well-wrought illusion.

to audiences whose “brutish” ears were as discerning—perhaps even more so—than their own.

Sounds That Tell Without Knowing: Narrative Echoes And Transcriptions In The Awakening

As the prophet of a tantalizingly lifelike brand of realism that foretold ever-greater thrills of spectatorship, cinematic sound shares something with the elaborate soundscape that occupies the narrator of *The Awakening*. Like film’s evolving soundtracks, the aural details of the novel function not only as contributors to an overall reality effect, but also as a suggestion of a representation whose “reality” could supersede that of even the most lifelike mimetic illusion.¹³² Sound in *The Awakening* is both the provocation for and the sign of the narrator’s longing to tell a story that might exceed its own investment in a visually oriented realism—a desire to tell a tale so accurate, so convincing—so real—that it could overcome the skepticism of a public that was increasingly put off by realism’s literary and visual tricks and techniques.

Leja, in his study of American art at the end of the nineteenth century, claims that such skepticism was part of a broader cultural tendency in which “modern life was coming to be distinguished by a gaping separation between appearance and truth.”¹³³ According to Leja, such a tendency was responsible for the growing skepticism with which the realist aesthetic was regarded more generally:

¹³² I refer here to Roland Barthes’ definition of the term as those details that seem to fall outside the structural meaning of a text, those that “denote what is ordinarily called “concrete reality” (insignificant gestures, transitory attitudes, insignificant objects, redundant words).” Barthes, “The Reality Effect.” *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism, 1900-2000*. 233.

¹³³ Leja 11.

...for the artists and critics who believed that truth was behind, beyond, above, or otherwise removed from appearances, realism and naturalism were humbug; artists like George Inness and Albert Pinkham Ryder found truth in vague, abstract, and disembodied visions.¹³⁴

Leja's account of the "gaping separation between appearance and truth" is essentially an account of a broader representational crisis, one that produced not just the visual experimentations of artists like Inness and Ryder, but also one that informs the puzzling conflicts that seem to trouble Edna Pontellier and, even more especially, the narrative voice that tells her story. *The Awakening's* narrator often seems torn between a commitment to the kind of objective, concrete descriptions so often associated with realism and naturalism; and the pursuit of the kind of "vague, abstract, and disembodied visions" that Leja identifies as the mark of truth for the period's visual artists. What this conflict ultimately produces is a narrative focus on the sensory immediacy of Edna's experience: a kind of compromise between the accuracy of observable physical detail and the subjective "truth" of individual experience—a truth that is often more easily heard than seen. Throughout the course of the nineteenth century, scientific progress pointed more and more emphatically toward the essentially subjective and highly variable nature of human sensation and perception; at the same time, however, the rapidly evolving technologies of scientific investigation promised ever more precise ways of measuring, quantifying and controlling these faculties.¹³⁵ Nancy Bentley's study of the impact on realist literature of the era's preoccupation with sensory realities gestures toward the notion of sensory information as a solution to a problem faced by a number of disciplines whose methods of knowledge production were regarded ever-more skeptically. As she

¹³⁴ Leja 15.

¹³⁵ As Crary and others have persuasively argued, the project of detecting, measuring and reproducing human sensation was a key component of what historians have described as the era's decisive turn toward a systematic disciplining of the human body by social and political entities.

puts it, “for thinkers in a number of different disciplines, the textures of everyday experience and perception seemed to hold the secret to acquiring new knowledge.”¹³⁶

Bentley discusses Chopin specifically in this context, remarking on the crucial role of sensory experience in *The Awakening*:

...once again, observation is a woman’s path toward agency, but the new consciousness Edna acquires is not purely cognitive; here and elsewhere the “awakening” or her understanding is more physical than analytical. Consciousness in Chopin is always sensory consciousness, awareness of and through the body’s senses.¹³⁷

According to Bentley, Edna’s “sensory consciousness” is inseparable from the insight about herself and her social reality that she will eventually gain, and an inextricable element of the newly acquired social mobility that Edna explores throughout the novel. Especially notable in terms of the relationship between naturalism’s observant narrators and their inarticulate subjects is the notion of this newly acquired power as a particular kind of resistance to being easily read and analyzed by an observer. For example, in a passage from Chopin’s short story “A Pair of Silk Stockings,” in which the protagonist, Mrs. Sommers, presents an unreadable exterior self—one that “puzzles” a fellow traveler on a streetcar—Bentley identifies such an attitude as a kind of affect that offers women a new measure of self-knowledge and a new measure of social power, what she calls a “site of sensory perception that is precognitive yet still socially meaningful.” Such unreadability offers its subjects the opportunity to elude the kind of precise and detailed scrutiny that—according to the tenets of realism—the landscape of urban modernity made perpetually available to even the most casual observers. In “Stockings,” as in “The Awakening,” “the real” comes to encompass more than the accurate appearances and

¹³⁶ Bentley, Nancy. *Frantic Panoramas: American Literature and Mass Culture, 1870-1920*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009). 247

¹³⁷ Bentley 140.

recognizable social realities that were the stock and trade of conventional realist fiction, becoming, according to Bentley, something that “cannot be grasped by even the keenest outside observer who expects to find knowledge in legible social facts or relations.”

Bentley’s commentary here about the unavailability of “real” information about a fictional protagonist evokes the fraught relationships between naturalism’s privileged, articulate observers and the subjects they describe. In *The Awakening*, the narrator’s engagement with sound signals a desire to know a story at the level of sensation and perception—a terrain far more closely associated with naturalism’s markedly embodied brutes than with its distanced spectators.¹³⁸ Even more significantly, sound in *The Awakening* signals the narrator’s desire to tell through reflection rather than representation; through mimetic imitation rather than interpretation. Such modes of knowing and telling echo Edna’s curiously passive and seemingly unconscious—yet highly embodied—way of being in the world. The narrator frequently notes her lack of awareness about even her most significant emotions or decisions—as most notably with her suicide, the ostensible reasons for which the narrator claims “she was not thinking of” as she walks “rather mechanically” [136] toward the ocean. The narrator’s account of the moments before her death are instead suffused with Edna’s sensory experience of being naked on the beach, “the water of the Gulf...gleaming with the million lights of the sun; the voice of the sea...whispering, clamoring, murmuring.” The voice of the sea “invites the soul to wander in abysses of solitude,” but given the narrator’s focus on Edna thrilling to the “delicious” experience of “standing naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun,” feeling “the breeze that beat upon her,” [136] it seems that Edna’s body accepts the

¹³⁸ See Howard, *Form and History*, especially chapter 4: “Slumming in Determinism: Naturalism and the Spectator” 104-141.

invitation more pointedly than her soul. The narrator's account of one of Edna's earliest instances of what is ostensibly an existential crisis is also strangely caught up with her immediate sensory experience. When Edna has "a good cry all to herself," after her husband reprimands her about her mothering skills, the narrator emphasizes Edna's mental experience of this episode as a kind of blank mystery, describing her feeling as one of

indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in an unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow, like a mist passing across her soul's summer day. It was strange and unfamiliar; it was a mood. She did not sit there inwardly upbraiding her husband, lamenting at Fate, which had directed her footsteps to the path which they had taken. She was just having a good cry all to herself. [25]

And although the narrator later identifies the incident described above as a significant one in the beginning of Edna's "realization of her position in the universe as a human being," the narrator is quick to point out that Edna is shaken out of her despair by the minor physical annoyance of the mosquitoes, whose "stinging [and] buzzing succeeded in dispelling a mood which might have held her there in the darkness half a night longer." [25]

Even Edna's artistic practice, arguably her most active expression of the "awakening" she experiences, is described as the result of her "natural aptitude" rather than any consciously practiced skill. When Edna tries to paint a portrait of Adele Ratignolle, for example, the resulting picture suggests that Edna's intent is woefully irrelevant to influence the workings of her "natural" talent. Robert insists that the picture is "not bad," that Edna "knows what she is doing;" however, the narrator claims, "the picture completed bore no resemblance to Madame Ratignolle." Edna's reaction to her work sounds as if she has only just noticed the picture rather than painted it herself—she

“finds”, to her “great disappointment,” that the picture “did not look like [Adele].” [30] Mme. Reisz, the novel’s prototypical “true artist,” offers an even more explicit statement about the separation of “natural” ability from acquired skill, claiming that being an artist “includes much; one must possess many gifts—absolute gifts—which have not been acquired by one’s own effort.” [83]

The notion of a mode of representation whose truth is guaranteed by an involuntary, mechanism over and above any conscious thought or skill evokes the shopworn promise of nineteenth century photography. That photographs could produce tricks and illusions just as well as any other medium was common knowledge; however, the ideal of a representation whose truth was guaranteed by its automatism was one that still had purchase.¹³⁹ For *The Awakening*’s narrator, capturing and reproducing the sounds of her story as well as its visual details offers a means of approaching this ideal. The narrator’s experiments with particular combinations of sound and image in the novel range from transcriptions and echoes of the sounds that we might expect to emanate from the novel’s visual landscape to metaphorical descriptions that are virtually synesthetic in their insistence on the links between sight and sound: they are the hint of a representation that could be even realer than it was accurate¹⁴⁰.

The narrator’s attention to the sounds of the LeBrun’s Grand Isle resort in the novel’s opening scene gestures toward a way of knowing characters and telling their

¹³⁹ See, for example, Walther Benn Michaels’s claims in *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*, about the appeal of photography and automatic writing as modes of representation whose arbitrariness guaranteed their accuracy. And Andre Bazin, in “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” Trans. Hugh Gray. *Film Quarterly* 13.4 (Summer 1960): 4-9, asserts the notion of automatism as a guarantor of authenticity or accuracy as late as 1960.

¹⁴⁰ As a neurological phenomenon in particular, synesthesia evokes the promise of a representation whose truth is guaranteed by a certain kind of automatism. The communication between the senses—the way in which they confirm each other’s impressions—experienced by the synesthete suggests that, at least for some, there is an objective standard for the evaluation of sensory perceptions.

stories through access to their sensations rather than their thoughts; that is, by sharing in a subjective experience of mingled sights and sounds that challenges the model of objective, visually oriented description that informs the naturalist novel. For both the narrator and Monsieur Pontellier, the array of irritating sounds at Madame Lebrun's resort dominates their experience of the scene. The repetitive screechings of Madame Lebrun's parrot make it impossible for Mr. Pontellier to "read his newspaper with any degree of comfort," while the parrot's mockingbird companion sings with a "maddening persistence." The young Farival twins practice a duet on the piano; and Madame Lebrun continually gives orders in a voice that the narrator twice describes as "high" in a single sentence. Such sounds are powerful enough to disrupt Mr. Pontellier's visual as well as his aural experience of the scene, even after he has quit the main house in an attempt to escape them. Still unable to concentrate on his newspaper, Mr. Pontellier "glanced restlessly" at "editorials and bits of news" and "once in a while...withdrew his glance from the newspaper and looked about him." What Mr. Pontellier sees, however, are sounds rather than sights: the sentence that follows the narrator's description of Mr. Pontellier "looking about him" states that "there was more noise than ever over at the house," as if what Mr. Pontellier sees is more noise than image:

The chattering and whistling birds were still at it. Two young girls, the Farival twins, were playing a duet from "Zampa" upon the piano. Madame Lebrun was bustling in and out, giving orders in a high key to a yard-boy whenever she got inside the house, and directions in an equally high voice to a dining-room servant whenever she got outside. She was a fresh, pretty woman, clad always in white with elbow sleeves. Her starched skirts crinkled as she came and went. Farther down, before one of the cottages, a lady in black was walking demurely up and down, telling her beads. [20]

The narrator's assumption of Mr. Pontellier's aural as well as his visual perspective emphasizes a kind of sensory intimacy with her character, one in which the narrator's

privileged knowledge about her character is sensual rather than rational; embodied rather than cognitive. Here, the narrator's privilege is evident not in what she knows about Mr. Pontellier, but in her uncanny ability to hear *for* Mr. Pontellier. It seems possible that Mr. Pontellier could still hear the birds and piano music, and perhaps even Madame Lebrun's orders, from the porch of his own cottage, but highly unlikely that he could hear the crinkle of starched skirts or the sound of the lady in black "telling her beads." These sounds of crinkling and telling, rather, are the privileged experience of a narrator who can be both everywhere and nowhere, both bodiless and keenly attuned to the sensory realities of bodily experience. In this passage, aural detail emphasizes the narrator's omniscience at the level of perception rather than cognition—an emphasis that highlights a character's subjective experience rather than the narrator's informed interpretation of its meaning.

Hearing what Mr. Pontellier sees suggests that the narrator is determined to know her characters not only through naturalism's privileged mode of distanced observation, but also by way of experiencing the subjective sensations and perceptions of the characters she describes. The narrator's quotation of Madame LeBrun's parrot, however, signals her pursuit of a new mode of telling—a mode that seems to place the same kind of emphasis on the subjective experience of a character as the aural details that are produced by the sights that Mr. Pontellier sees. The scene opens with the narrator's quotation of a parrot—an animal whose characteristic chatter is both highly mimetic and (presumably) non-intelligent:

A green and yellow parrot, which hung in a cage outside the door, kept repeating over and over:
"Allez-vous-en! Allez vous-en! Sapristi! That's all right!" ["Go away! Go away! For god's sake!"]

He could speak a little Spanish, and also a language which nobody understood, unless it was the mockingbird that hung on the other side of the door, whistling his fluty notes out upon the breeze with maddening persistence. [19]

The image of a parrot chattering suggests a specific, predictable sound, but not necessarily the words that it says: quoting the parrot directly makes its voice not just an accompaniment to its image, but also a sound with a message of its own. Its chatter may be only an imitation of human speech, empty of thought or intelligence. It nevertheless becomes a kind of narrative directive when Mr. Pontellier “obeys” the parrot and leaves the main house to read his paper in front of his own cottage.

Madame Lebrun’s parrot is both an invocation and a challenge to the conventional naturalist trope of the “dumb beast,” the brute who is marked as such by—among other things—his or her inability to speak. In this scene and elsewhere, the parrot’s apparently senseless chatter carries a certain narrative power that rivals that of the privileged, knowing narrator. In conventional realist/naturalist narrative, it is the narrator who is the master of an articulate, privileged mode of speech, one directed toward an audience whose social and ethnic makeup mirror his own, and one unintelligible to the brutish characters whose stories he tells. In Chopin’s opening scene, however, the parrot speaks a “privileged” language as well, one that “nobody” but one of his own kind (the mockingbird) understands. Yet the parrot’s language is not only privileged in the sense that it is intelligible only to an exclusive few. The parrot is free to speak whatever and whenever it likes, precisely because it is more brute than human: as the pet of the Lebrun family, the parrot “has a right to make as much noise as it wished,” protected from annoyed summer guests by its status as the property of the resort owner. Even the rudest utterances are permissible—not only because of who owns the parrot, but also because of

its lack of intelligence. During the piano performance of the young Farival twins, for example, the parrot utters its familiar refrain of “Allez vous-en! Sapristi!” [42] The narrator identifies this “impetuous outburst” as one that expresses a certain truth about the situation that no one has been willing or able to express, conceding that the parrot “was the only being present who possessed sufficient candor to admit that he was not listening to these gracious performances for the first time that summer.” The parrot’s outburst may be only another repetition of his familiar refrain, but it nevertheless expresses a hidden reality about the situation. Such candor seems to inspire the narrator to be just as truthful as the parrot: her account of the next “act” in the show bluntly states that “every one present had heard [the recitations given by a brother and sister] many times at winter evening entertainments in the city.” [42]

The parrot’s speech is senseless and virtually involuntary, an aural detail that seems to have little more than ornamental significance—and yet its words ultimately represent a uniquely true perspective on reality, one that is only made available to the narrator by a (presumably) senseless brute. Audible details that, like the parrot’s speech, index an alternatively “real” perspective through purely mimetic representations, abounded in the soundscapes of early film. The sound effects and music that accompanied early films may have sounded like little more than imitative, audible versions of a film’s images, but they were actually sophisticated registers of audience response. In much the same way, *The Awakening’s* details of sound and sensation—particularly those that emphasize Edna’s passivity and sensual vulnerability—suggest a protagonist whose complex perceptual capacity belies the conventional notion of the ignorant, inarticulate naturalist brute. Sound effects and music were often received as part

of a film's overall reality effect, but they were also often the index of a reality more palpable than the images on the screen: that of the audience's store of knowledge, experience and perceptions. Like the parrot's inadvertent revelation of what the audience of vacationers really thinks about the tired performances they witness, the sound effects and music that accompanied early films were often attempts to voice what the individual audience might think or feel about a particular film. These expressive "voices" were nearly always mimetic reflections/echoes of the on screen images, a characteristic that Rick Altman has called the "cued sound aesthetic." The latter, he argues,

is entirely based on the presence of sound cues (whether for music or effects) within the image. Note that this aesthetic is operative even when no accompaniment is provided. As we have seen, early witnesses to silent projections regularly express their experience as a lack, and what they claim to need is not just sound in general, but the specific sounds implied by the image. [92-93]

Altman traces the "cued sound aesthetic" to the "values and practices" established by the popular phonograph concerts that both preceded and continued to flourish during the last two decades of the nineteenth century—"values and practices" that, in the context of a film, emphasized sound "as a product" of the cinematic image's newly accurate representation of reality.

What Altman describes is a harmony between sound and image, in which both work together to produce the most lifelike "transcription" of reality possible.¹⁴¹ Sound was always tied to a film's images in some way, but it could also work against the implied message or meaning of a film's images in a way that played up the specific bits

¹⁴¹ As Altman explains, "just as the phonograph was primarily considered as an instrument capable of producing a record of reality, so early cinema was understood as a device for the reproduction of reality... Whether the film is complemented by "sound effects" or "music," the sound is meant to be understood as a product of the image; the sound-makers are thus implicitly within the space implied by the image... The whole point of this early sound standard is to make the sound seem to be coming from the image, thus reinforcing the latter's transcriptive powers." Altman, *Silent Film Sound* 92.

of local knowledge or preferences that exhibitors and theater staff perceived in their audiences. Altman notes that films could and often were radically transformed by the sound effects and music that accompanied a film—an accompaniment that depended primarily on the film's venue, and as such was often provided by local "sound men" and/or musicians

Madame LeBrun's parrot is hardly the only representative of an aural reality that is as mimetic as it is telling. In the scene that details Robert LeBrun's conversation with his mother in her sewing room, the narrator's account includes several onomatopoeic imitations of the sewing machine's repetitive noise, interspersed with a transcription of the conversation between the two characters. The narrator's attention to an ordinary, irritating sound of domestic work is perhaps the novel's closest analogue to what Altman would describe as the "cued sound aesthetic," and the scene as a whole looks and sounds a great deal like films that delighted audiences with their lifelike representations of "everyday," often domestically oriented, scenes. The array of sounds in the scene between Robert and his mother produce one of the novel's most pointed reversals of the relationship between the narrator and the "brutish" characters she describes—a reversal that was also suggested by both the "soundtracks" that accompanied films showing scenes of mundane domestic work and by stand-alone musical performances that also echoed the sounds of everyday work. Such "descriptive music," as it was known, was a popular genre in its own right, and its popularity derived from its aural references to an everyday world of sound that was undergoing radical change. New machines for household work, communication and transportation proliferated at the end of the nineteenth century, and virtually all of these mechanized wonders made noise.

Sometimes the main event in musical programs,¹⁴² descriptive pieces relied on an audience's delight in hearing what were often the mundane and monotonous sounds of work—like those of the newly introduced sewing machines—translated into a musical language. Descriptive music and the films that mimicked it emphasized the sounds and rhythms of the audiences' everyday domestic chores, re-presenting sounds and sights that were both familiar and mundane as narrative events. Listeners or spectators—especially female ones—would likely have been experts on how accurate the sounds of a descriptive piece or film were, and it was their enjoyment of a descriptive piece or film that would have determined its success: not only did these songs and films foreground the “brutish” work of wives and domestics, they also targeted these women as knowledgeable, discerning spectators.

Descriptive music and films of everyday chores challenge the notion of a “brutish” audience in need of instruction or edification from the popular entertainments they patronized. In these songs and films, sound is the sign of the brute's expertise and agency. Similarly, in the scene that takes place in Madame LeBrun's sewing room, sound signifies a brutish freedom and power that explicitly eludes the narrator. Throughout the dialogue between Robert and his mother, the narrator “quotes” the sewing machine's “clatter clatter bang,” as though it is not enough to state, as the narrator does at the beginning of the scene, that “the sewing machine made a resounding clatter in the room.” These onomatopoeic quotations alternate with the narrator's running explanations of the people and events referred to in the conversation between mother and son—a “back

¹⁴² Altman 49. Altman notes the sewing machine as one of the modern “devices and events” that descriptive music “rushed to imitate,” citing the example of “Blind Tom's “Sewing Song: Imitation of a Sewing Machine (1888).” 47.

story” that signals the narrator’s knowledge of the interior of her characters. Such knowledge is the purview of most realist and naturalist narrators: it signals their uniquely privileged position within the novel. Yet in this scene, this special knowledge is formally linked to a repetitive noise that the narrator seems to “speak” as she listens to and explains the conversation between Robert and his mother. The narrator’s imitation of the sewing machine suggests that she can “hear” the sewing machine as well as they do; that she, too, experiences the annoyance of its interruptions to the conversation that she transcribes. The narrator becomes like a phonograph herself—like a machine that can’t help but hear and re-present what she hears. The narrator seems helpless before the noise of the machine—a condition that contrasts sharply with the scene’s other “annoyance,” Robert’s brother, Victor. When Robert and his mother see Victor from the window, he pointedly refuses to hear either Robert’s summoning whistle or his mother’s call:

“Call him.” Clatter, clatter!

Robert uttered a shrill, piercing whistle which might have been heard back at the wharf.

“He won’t look up.”

Madame Lebrun flew to the window. She called “Victor!” She waved a handkerchief and called again. The young fellow below got into the vehicle and started the horse off at a gallop. [40]

Victor—unlike the narrator, who seems unable to ignore the irritating clatter of the sewing machine that interrupts her account of the scene—pointedly ignores the irritating attempts of Robert and his mother to summon him. His refusal to respond to Robert’s whistle is an explicit rejection of any attempt by the narrator or anyone else in the novel to characterize him as a brute. Dogs can hardly choose whether or not to respond to a whistle, but Victor can and does choose to ignore it. Victor employs a selective hearing that seems to elude the narrator, who is unable to keep from hearing—or, like Madame

Lebrun's parrot, from imitating—the noise that continually interrupts her story. The disconnects between seeing and hearing; between speech and understanding in this scene contribute to its general atmosphere of frustrated communications. Robert flees to his mother's room after a conversation with Adele Ratignolle, in which she cautions him against paying too much attention to Edna, lest Edna should make “the unfortunate blunder of taking you [Robert] seriously.” [38] Annoyed at the realization that his attentions to Edna can only continue if they are regarded as something of a joke, Robert heads toward his mother's house. In the narrator's account of what he sees on the way, Robert's despair is evident in the description of the pension's eternal lovers and lady in black:

The lovers were just entering the grounds of the pension. They were leaning toward each other as the water-oaks bent from the sea. There was not a particle of earth beneath their feet. Their heads might have been turned upside-down, so absolutely did they tread upon blue ether. The lady in black, creeping behind them, looked a trifle paler and more jaded than usual. [39-40]

The narrator's exaggeratedly deadpan description of the lovers' infatuated attitudes seems inflected by Robert's romantic frustration, and the lady in black's “more jaded” expression seems like a knowing reflection of Adele's reminder to Robert about how his attentions to married women are perceived. When Robert enters his mother's sewing room, however, the narrator shifts her focus from the kind of interpretive, visual illustration of a character's (i.e., Robert's) emotional state to a mode of description that hears and transcribes more than it interprets and describes. The narrator surrenders the task of seeing this scene to Robert and his mother, while her own senses are made “audible” to the reader through her repetitive representations of the sewing machine's clatter. Robert and his mother have a view that, like that of naturalism's most familiar

narrators, is virtually boundless: they perch in a room “at the top of the house,” furnished with “two broad dormer windows” that, like eyes, “look out toward the Gulf, and as far across it as a man’s eye might reach.” [40] By the end of the scene, in fact, the narrator has ceased to describe anything visual at all: the reader deduces that Robert sees Edna returning from the beach from the narrator’s transcription of the conversation between Robert and his mother, in which what must be some change in attitude on Robert’s part prompts her to ask him if he sees Mrs. Pontellier and where he is going. Robert then asks his mother where the book that she has meant to lend Edna is, a question that seems to confirm that he has in fact seen Edna.

By the end of this scene, the narrator has surrendered her own expansive view to Robert, choosing instead to act more like a transcribing machine than a knowing narrator. This scene is a particularly extreme experiment with the potential of a reflective mode of narrative, one that the narrator ultimately rejects in favor of a mode of description more literary than mechanical. At the end of this scene, Edna’s appearance is signaled by Robert’s mention of “the Goncourt,” a book that his mother mentions to Robert earlier in the scene as one she has promised to lend to Edna. That a novel by the Goncourt brothers is as racy as another that has “gone the rounds of the pension” is highly likely¹⁴³, and the symbolism of Robert presenting Edna with such a novel just after he has been cautioned against expressing his feelings directly suggests that, perhaps, the novel speaks for him.

¹⁴³ The novels of Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, the first of which was published in 1851, were among the first examples of the sort of French naturalism (epitomized and made famous by Emile Zola) that was notable not only for its commitment to a “scientific method” of literary representation, but also for its frank depictions of sexuality and vice.

Metaphor And Descriptive Surrender

Robert's use of the Goncourt novel as a material symbol of his feelings is a doubly literary gesture. The book itself is, of course, a work of literature, but even more significantly, Robert's recourse to a symbolic mode of expression echoes the metaphoric symbols and substitutions that are the novel's most explicitly "literary" narrative technique. And although the narrator's metaphoric descriptions seem more sophisticated than the transcriptions and echoes of a parrot or a sewing machine, they attempt to capture the same accuracy that characterizes her thoughtless mimicry of either bird or machine. By imitating the novel's brutes and machines, the narrator surrenders her own (purportedly) more sophisticated interpretations to their instinctual or mechanical representations. The narrator's metaphoric descriptions in *The Awakening* enact a similar surrender of authority, both to the bodies of her characters and ultimately, to an audience of readers.

In *The Awakening*, the deferral of "the thing itself" associated with any metaphoric description—its substitution of the thing being described with something just like it in some important way—is a literary mode that carries the potential for a kind of subjective truth that is nevertheless confirmed by the concrete reality of particular sound and sight combinations. The narrator's metaphoric substitutions strive for a similarly embodied guarantee of truth, one that is enacted by the bodies of characters, most notably Edna. Yet such a guarantee only holds for the body that produces it—a realization that shifts authority from the narrator who tells the story to the characters who experience it. By the end of *The Awakening*, the narrator's metaphors are gestures that surrender the authority of being the one who knows and tells: like the novel's constantly murmuring

sea, they invite the reader to discern not only what Edna's story means, but what it looks and sounds like as well.

As an exceptionally sensitive artist whose craft seems to elude her conscious control, Edna is both a model for and a reflection of the narrator's metaphoric practice. One of the narrator's more detailed descriptions of Edna is a particularly pointed expression of the dynamic between character and narrator that persists throughout the novel, one in which Edna inspires the narrator's unique mode of observation and narration:

The charm of Edna Pontellier's physique stole insensibly upon you. The lines of her body were long, clean and symmetrical; it was a body which occasionally fell into splendid poses; there was no suggestion of the trim, stereotyped fashion plate about it. A casual and indiscriminating observer, in passing, might not cast a second glance upon the figure. But with more feeling and discernment he would have recognized the noble beauty of its modeling, and the graceful severity of poise and movement, which made Edna Pontellier different from the crowd. [33]

This passage is ostensibly a description of Edna, but it provides at least as much information about the narrator's perceptual abilities as it does about Edna's appearance. "Casual and indiscriminating observers" might not even notice Edna; however, this is not the case for a narrator who has obviously cast more than a "second glance" upon the figure of her protagonist. The narrator's opening statement about the "insensibility" of Edna's beauty suggests that the "feeling and discernment" required to perceive the "truth" of Edna are as random and arbitrary as the novel's ideal of artistic talent as an "absolute gift": some have it, and some do not. We can only assume that the narrator "has it," and the lack of specific physical details about Edna in this description suggests that her own impression of Edna is difficult to express in terms of an objective, physical description. That Edna's beauty is "noble," or that her movements have a "graceful

severity” are descriptions that leave considerable room for interpretation from the reader or observer—a person referenced by the “you” that appears in the first sentence.

In this early description of Edna, the narrator strives to keep the concrete reality of Edna’s appearance open to interpretation—an impulse that seems to resist the specific imagery of metaphoric description. The narrator’s frustration with the limitations of this kind of metaphoric specificity are apparent in her description of Adele Ratignolle—a description that is rife with metaphors that, by the end of the description, suggest nothing so much as their own limitations as an “accurate” mode of description:

There are no words to describe her save the old ones that have served so often to picture the bygone heroine of romance and the fair lady of our dreams. There was nothing subtle or hidden about her charms; her beauty was all there, flaming and apparent: the spun-gold hair that comb nor confining pin could restrain; the blue eyes that were like nothing but sapphires; two lips that pouted, that were so red one could only think of cherries or some other delicious crimson fruit in looking at them. She was growing a little stout, but it did not seem to detract an iota from the grace of every step, pose, gesture. One would not have wanted her white neck a mite less full or her beautiful arms more slender. Never were hands more exquisite than hers...[26-27]

Unlike Edna, whose beauty is distinctly not “stereotyped,” Adele’s appearance embodies the most typical standards of feminine beauty—standards that inspire a string of clichéd metaphors about her hair, lips and eyes. Throughout this description, the narrator repeatedly emphasizes that there is only one “correct” or accurate way to describe Adele: no words but the old ones can serve to picture her; her eyes are no other blue than that of sapphires, her lips no other red than that of crimson fruit. It seems as though the narrator is quoting the “old words” that have always been used to describe Adele’s particular kind of beauty, and despite the narrator’s insistence that these words are the only ones suitable for describing Adele, they ultimately invite speculation about ways of seeing Adele that are quite different than the image of her as “the fair lady of our dreams.” The narrator’s

repeated use of a negative construction to introduce both the metaphors and the other descriptions of Adele beg the reader to imagine what else is possible—surely the color red suggests more than crimson fruit; surely some might want Adele’s neck to be just a “mite less” full. When the narrator takes care to assure us that even Adele’s “stoutness” contributes to her beauty or muses that “one would not have wanted” Adele to be any more slender calls attention to the individual spectator’s desire: saying what “one” wants calls attention to the fact that different “ones” want, or could want, to see different things.

Yet metaphor is at least as appealing as it is frustrating for *The Awakening’s* narrator. Just as the representation of subjective sensation was a response to the growing skepticism towards the idea of a realist aesthetic as a viable means of knowledge production, the metaphoric mode of description that is eventually deployed by *The Awakening’s* narrator strives to strike a balance between the accuracy of observable detail and the kind of subjective truth that can only ever be known by a single individual. And again, it is Edna who inspires this kind of description—but as a conscious observer and narrator rather than the object of the narrator’s observation. Edna’s explanation of her thoughts to Adele as she gazes out to sea weaves her immediate sensory experiences, thoughts and childhood memories into an elaborate metaphor that strikes a balance between the truth of Edna’s subjective experience and the kind of specific detail and narrative gestures that make her story intelligible to Adele, her listener. Edna’s response to Adele’s inquiry about what she is thinking follows a path marked out by a kind of bodily metaphors, in which Edna’s sensations and bodily gestures, both present and past, provide her with the means of knowing and telling the reality of her inner life. Admitting that she “was not really conscious of thinking of anything,” Edna relies on a

sensory consciousness rather than a purely cognitive one in order to recall her line of thinking. She begins by noting the visual yearning stimulated by “the sight of the water stretching so far away, those motionless sails against the blue sky,” describing the scene before her as a “delicious picture that I just wanted to sit and look at.” Edna continues to trace her sensations, remarking that

The hot wind beating in my face made me think—without any connection that I can trace—of a summer day in Kentucky, of a meadow that seemed as big as the ocean to the very little girl walking through the grass, which was higher than her waist. She threw her arms as if swimming when she walked, beating the tall grass as one strikes out in the water. Oh, I see the connection now! [34-35]

For Edna, the sensation of “hot wind” produces a kind of Proustian recollection of a childhood experience, one that she eventually perceives as intimately “connected” to her present emotions. This connection is not immediately available to Edna—it only becomes so as she strives to make the scene of her memory visible to Adele through a series of metaphors that connect her memory to the ocean scene before her: a meadow “as big as the ocean;” a little girl who “threw her arms as if swimming when she walked, beating the tall grass as one strikes out in the water.” Her concluding statement that she “feel[s] this summer as if I were walking through that green meadow again; idly, aimlessly, unthinking and unguided” [35] insists on the specificity of her childhood memory as a metaphoric expression of Edna’s feeling of malaise. The tools that Edna uses to make her story intelligible to Adele are the tools of her own subjective experience, both in terms of the immediate sensations of the scene and her childhood memories. Yet despite the introspective character of Edna’s musings, she strikes the pose of a narrator when she assumes the third person in describing her childhood memory—a pose that seems to

produce the immediate realization of the links between her memory, the scene before her, and her emotional state.

Synesthesia: Metaphor And Bodies

When Edna traces her thoughts for Adele, she begins by describing the scene of the boats and sea before her as a “delicious picture.” Her metaphor suggests that the visual impression of the scene is intense enough to exceed the boundaries of one sense and stimulate another: what she sees is beautiful enough to appeal not only to her vision, but also to her sense of taste. Edna’s mention of her “delicious picture” references her capacity for synesthetic perception—a “talent” that represents the most extreme version of the novel’s narrative fantasy about the particular kind of realism that interplays between sight and sound could produce. The scene of Edna’s response to the masterful piano performance of Mme. Reisz is a particularly clear illustration of how the narrator models her metaphoric practice on Edna’s particular sensory tendencies. Edna and Mme. Reisz are both clearly depicted as unique in their abilities to appreciate and perform music, respectively—a pairing of exceptional listener and performer that echoes the narrator’s insistence on both Edna’s unique beauty and the narrator’s unique ability to perceive it. Mme. Reisz’s talent is well known at the pension: “Of course Edna would like to hear Mme Reisz play,” the narrator states, and the pianist’s appearance before the audience provokes “a general air of surprise and genuine satisfaction.” Edna, for her part, is described as a unique sort of listener, one whose profound appreciation for music takes the form of synesthetic hearing:

Edna was what she herself called very fond of music. Musical strains, well rendered, had a way of evoking pictures in her mind. She sometimes liked to sit in

the room of mornings when Mme. Ratignolle played or practiced. One piece which that lady played Edna had entitled "Solitude." It was a sort, plaintive, minor strain. The name of the piece was something else, but she called it "Solitude." When she heard it there came before her imagination the figure of a man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore. He was naked. His attitude was one of hopeless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him. Another piece called to her mind a dainty young woman clad in an Empire gown, taking mincing dancing steps as she came down along an avenue between tall hedges. Again, another reminded her of children at play, and still another of nothing on earth but a demure lady stroking a cat. [44]

Edna's synesthesia marks her as an exceptional listener, but this perceptive faculty also seems to signal her capacity to hear a musical "truth" that, though uniquely hers in its force and clarity, is nevertheless heard dimly by the other audience members. Rather than seeing the familiar pictures that accompany music, Edna experiences "the very passions [of hope, of longing, or of despair] themselves" rather than their representative pictures. Yet despite what seems like an endorsement of the greater truth or accuracy of Edna's experience of the "passions themselves" over and above the production of synesthetic images, the narrator employs a synesthetic metaphor to explain the effect that the music has on Edna, musing that this evening was "perhaps the first time her being was tempered to take an impress of the abiding truth." Both the terms "temper" and "impression" as metaphoric descriptions of the effect the music has on Edna's "being" evoke both visual and aural media. Photographic plates take impressions; but so do the wax cylinders of a phonograph; in a similar way, either a metal substance or a musical instrument can be "tempered." Edna's experience of "the passions themselves" may be superior to her visual experience of seeing musically inspired images, but the narrator's synesthetic metaphor insists on a concretization of her experience, one in which each of her doubly tempered senses guarantee the reality of the other's impressions. And indeed, Edna's body does become a site that represents the "true" meaning of Mme. Reisz's playing.

Rather than a viewer of representative images, Edna herself becomes a visible register of the music's intensity:

She saw no pictures of solitude, of hope, of longing, or of despair. But the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body. She trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her. [45]

Mme. Reisz “perceived her agitation and even her tears,” and takes this bodily response as proof that Edna is “the only one worth playing for.” Yet the narrator insists that this is not so, and proceeds to quote several appreciative exclamations from the audience, one of which is a metaphor that precisely describes Edna’s bodily response, the claim that “it shakes a man!” This correspondence between the actual appearance of Edna’s body and the audience member’s metaphoric exclamation attaches another sort of accuracy to Edna’s sensing body, one that exists not only for Edna and Mme. Reisz, but also for the larger shared space of the audience.

Edna’s bodily response in this scene is a register of a unique sort of truth, and the narrator makes it clear that such a register can only be that of a brute. The narrator’s other metaphoric concretization of “the passions themselves” as the waves of the sea evokes not just the churning waters of the Gulf, but also the captive brute, one who is regularly “lashed” and “beat upon.” In addition, the most cerebral—i.e., the least brutish—of Edna’s sensory and expressive faculties¹⁴⁴—her sight and her voice—are suppressed throughout the scene. Edna is blind in that she fails to see the pictures that she is accustomed to seeing; she is also blinded by tears by the end of Mme. Reisz’s

¹⁴⁴ Historical perceptions of the hierarchy of sensation and perception have long insisted on the elevation of sight above the supposedly “lower” faculties of touch, taste and smell. Hearing’s rank in this hierarchy, however, has been much debated. The exalted role of music in *The Awakening* illustrates a concept of hearing as a faculty that brought one closer to the truth of experience than any other, one that elevated the abstract nature of music over and above the concrete reality of visual data.

performance. The narrator also suppresses Edna's speech by never quoting her directly, even when doing so seems expected:

“Would you like to hear Mademoiselle Reisz play?” asked Robert, coming out on the porch where she was. Of course Edna would like to hear Mademoiselle Reisz play; but she feared it would be useless to entreat her.
“I’ll ask her, he said. “I’ll tell her that you want to hear her. She likes you. She will come.” [43]

The narrator's quotation of the question that Robert poses to Edna suggests that her response, too, will be quoted—but instead, the narrator paraphrases Edna's response. Edna's silence is here enforced by the narrator, but after listening to Mme. Reisz's performance, it is the music itself that renders her “unable to answer” Mme. Reisz's query about her enjoyment of the music. Edna's speechlessness is the sign of a brutishness that initially functions primarily as a means of distinguishing her from the speaking, articulate narrator; however, by the end of the scene, Edna's mute yet distinctly embodied responses to Mme. Reisz's music mark Edna as the most “accurate” narrator of this particular scene. Edna's visible appreciation of Mme. Reisz's music speaks for the entire audience, showing the novel's fantasy of creative greatness on her body more effectively than any narrator could tell it.

Conclusion

Whether Edna Pontellier's suicide makes her a feminist hero, a hapless victim of social forces, or simply a fool is a question that continues to occupy readers of *The Awakening*. Edna may be one—or all, or some—of these things. The narrator refuses to decide, insisting instead on a representation that mirrors Edna's subjective, embodied experience rather than one that interprets or judges her motives. Edna's final musings

suggest that her suicide is at least partly a surrender to the belief that no one will ever understand her—a belief that both the power and the limitations of Edna’s body ensures will come true. Robert, she reflects, “did not know; he did not understand. Perhaps Doctor Mandelet would have understood if she had seen him—but it was too late; the shore was far behind her, and her strength was gone.” The question of whether or not Doctor Mandelet could have understood the fullness of Edna’s “awakening” becomes pointless in the face of a suicide whose certainty is guaranteed by both the strength and the weakness of her body: Edna marshals the strength to swim far enough away from shore to ensure that she will be too weak to swim back, even if she wanted to.

The narrator’s final descriptive gestures in this scene suggest that she, too, is enacting a particular kind of surrender, one that, like Edna’s, is motivated by doubts about how deeply her story can really be understood. And, like Edna’s surrender of what might be an as-yet-to-emerge wish to survive to the certainty of her body’s limitations, the narrator’s representation of Edna’s final moments subsumes any kind of rational desire to interpret or understand the meaning of Edna’s death to the stubborn unknowability of her bodily sensations and perceptions. Edna’s suicide is an enactment of the synesthetic vision of “solitude” evoked by Adele’s rendition of an otherwise nameless piece of music on the piano: like the naked man in her vision, Edna “was there beside the sea, absolutely alone...she stood naked in the open air.” She then walks into the sea and swims too far to return, and in doing so, claims an experience that truly is unknowable by anyone else. The dead, of course, can never describe what it’s like to die: more so than any other, the sensation of death resists the kind of “accurate” description privileged by a realist aesthetic. The narrator’s final statements represent Edna’s death in

a way that accepts its resistance to meaning, focusing on the sensory details of memory that occupy Edna as she drowns:

Edna heard her father's voice and her sister Margaret's. She heard the barking of an old dog that was chained to the sycamore tree. The spurs of the cavalry officer clanged as he walked across the porch. There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air. [137]

The narrator begins by describing what Edna hears with an objectivity that maintains some distance between the narrator and Edna—a space that might allow for some interpretation of what Edna's death means. However, in the final two sentences, the narrator's free indirect discourse suggests that the only reality is the reality of what Edna hears, smells and sees. The hum of bees is not just the product of Edna's subjective aural perception, they are simply what "was" making noise; in a similar way, the musky floral odor is not what Edna smells, it is what "filled the air." The narrator claims an intimacy with Edna, surrendering her narrative distance to a belief that what it means to die cannot be penetrated by an observer's insight or a narrator's skill: it can only ever mean what it looks, sounds, smells or tastes like to a particular individual.

The narrator's experience of sounds at this moment is far closer to Edna's synesthetic visions of dancing ladies and playing children than it is to her overwhelming experience of "the passions themselves" in response to Mme. Reisz's playing: assuming Edna's sensory "point of view" suggests that the meaning of Edna's death is as difficult to penetrate as the puzzle of the synesthete's arbitrary associations of one sense impression with another. For all the narrator's fascination with the potential of sound to bring forth a representation that exceeds even the ideal of synesthetic response—one that is hardly representation at all, but the pure expression of "the passions themselves"—in

the final moment, the narrator's sensory intimacy with Edna brings forth a representation that reflects the concrete sounds, sights and smells that are unique to Edna's memory. The narrator's reflection of Edna's final memories contains one last reference to synesthesia, but it is one that evokes the possibility of synesthesia without claiming it directly. The phrase "musky odor of pinks" refers to a flower called a "pink;" read differently, however, the phrase looks and sounds like a description of a synesthete's impression of what various shades of pink might smell like. The narrator's final evocation of synesthesia is a reminder of the ultimate unknowability of experience: the smell that fills the air could be a familiar one of flowers that many readers would recognize, but it could also be the scent of a color—a scent that only exists for a single individual.

The narrator's references to sound and synesthesia in the final scene refuse to make the kind of sense out of Edna's death that would elide the subjective and ultimately unknowable reality of Edna's bodily sensations. Evoking another of the novel's previously deployed metaphors—that of the bird with the broken wing—ensures that an explicitly literary sense cannot easily be made out of Edna's final moments, either. As Edna stands on the beach, the narrator describes "a bird with a broken wing...beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water," an image that is a precise illustration of Mme. Reisz's gesture of feeling Edna's shoulder blades

...to see if my wings were strong, she said. 'The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth. [103]

The appearance of a bird just before Edna's death that is so much like the imagined weaklings that Mme. Reisz evokes seems blatantly symbolic, an obvious indication of

exactly what Edna's suicide means: she is weak, unable to "soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice" that defines her place in the world. Yet the narrator also makes it difficult to determine whether or not the circling bird on the Grand Isle beach really exists. In the sentence just before the description of the bird, the narrator states that "all along the white beach, up and down, there was no living thing in sight." These contradictory descriptions emphasize the instability of any literary representation: the bird might exist only in Edna's imagination, or the narrator's, or maybe it is perceptible by other characters in the novel. Insisting on these multiple possibilities frustrates any interpretation of Edna's suicide that would find support in a physical environment that seems to both signal the inevitability of her death and to offer the reader an easy answer to the question of what Edna's suicide means.

Epilogue

In *The Awakening's* final descriptive moments, the narrator's dubious perceptions of the physical world that surrounds Edna Pontellier at the moment of her death produce a narrative instability that stubbornly resists any reader's attempt to fully know what "really" happens to Edna. I would like to use these final moments in the life of a character who I have identified as a unique sort of naturalist brute to reflect on how and why literary naturalism functions as an interpretive framework for this project. Certainly, the fact that *The Awakening's* final moments of narrative instability derive from descriptions of both an untamed natural environment and the death of a protagonist who has been persistently troubled by "fate" seems like a deliberate affront to the genre's well-known commitments and assumptions. In so many naturalist novels, it is, after all, the powerful, arbitrary forces of the natural world that symbolize the grim certainty and inescapable fated-ness to which so many of the genre's best-known character succumb. Yet in *The Awakening*, the environmental details are among the narrator's most profound expressions of uncertainty; furthermore, the narrator's sensory intimacy with Edna just before her death suggests that even the most "naturalistic" of endings—i.e., the death of a protagonist at the hands of a merciless environment—cannot be truly known through any means other than a passive registry of the dying individual's unique sensory experience. Even the nature of Edna's suicide is a pointed challenge to naturalism's insistence on the helplessness of human beings in the face of all-powerful environments: Edna may die

because she succumbs to the force of the sea, but it is the strength of her own body and will that take her far enough to ensure her own death.

The ending of *The Awakening* is only one of many features that mark the novel as a challenge to naturalism's defining ideas and assumptions. The same could also be said about *What Maisie Knew*: the novel's intense and subjective narrative focus on the evolving, private psychology of a subject who shrewdly learns to understand and shape her own social environment hardly evokes the kind of helpless confrontation between human being and environment associated with the naturalist novel. My intent, however, has not been to argue for the inclusion of either Chopin's or James's novel in naturalism's canon: I am far more interested in investigating whether and how certain ideas associated with naturalism speak to and against the social and perceptual changes wrought by the late nineteenth century's evolving visual technologies. Foremost among these ideas has been the trope of the brute.

The significance of Edna's body in *The Awakening*'s final scene indicates much about what naturalism's trope of the doomed, inarticulate—and above all, the embodied—brute expresses about the relationships between visual technologies, perception and knowledge at the end of the nineteenth century. Edna's bodily strengths and limitations ultimately guarantee the “truth” of her suicide, in more ways than one: her bodily exhaustion ensures that she really will die, and the narrator's assumption of Edna's sensory point of view suggests that her bodily experience represents a sort of truth that resides most powerfully in the material world of bodies and things. This preoccupation with a new sort of truth associated with the material is one that marks both the texts and the novel practices of visual representation and entertainment that I have considered in

this project. At the turn of the nineteenth century, the photograph's identity as a material object that was ever more obtainable, usable and transportable exerted a compelling influence on how many Americans came to understand both themselves and others; and the emergence of early film as an entertainment that frankly sought to engage the body at least as much as the mind emphasized the material and the embodied as standards of accuracy, truth and pleasure.

Naturalism's topos of the brute is nothing if not a testament to the power of material, physical forces, whether they be biological or environmental, and the brute's peculiar inarticulateness represents both the threat and the promise represented by emerging visual technologies. I say "peculiar" because, as I have tried to show, the brute's inarticulateness is hardly as uncomplicated or naïve—whether expressed as Maisie's wordless, involuntary spasm as she realizes the impossibility of a life with Sir Claude; or Edna Pontellier's deathbed fantasies of smell and sound—as we might expect. The final moments of both Maisie and Edna are troubled by a certain failure to speak. But even so, the narrators who tell their stories attempt to appropriate these embodied modes of expression—gestures that endorse a truth that is both observable and subjective; perceptible and unknowable; one that exists quite apart from the kind of objective cataloguing of detail, or cause and effect, that occupies most narrators of realistic fiction. Foregrounding the idea of the brute as a kind of perceptual apparatus, one whose privileged point of view both challenges and competes with that of a supposedly more articulate narrator, enacts the same dilemmas of show and tell that were introduced by the late nineteenth century's newly affordable, vivid and ubiquitous visual technologies and entertainments. Documentary photography, the emergence of the Kodak, and sensational

cinema made it impossible to ignore one's own body, whether as a cumbersome limitation on the kind of experiences that could be meaningfully seen or understood, or as a uniquely accurate register of experience that seemed able to sense and tell a certain sort of undeniable truth. Fictional characters who are at once highly sensitive and seemingly inarticulate are illuminating reflections of the tensions and contradictions suggested by these varied perspectives on embodiment, observation and experience. The novels that are most often identified as part of the naturalist canon are full of such characters. However, as my final two chapters in particular suggest, naturalism's brutes see and tell well beyond the boundaries of their habitual genre: far more than just the victims of fate, "naturalism's" brutes are indices of the broader and more pervasive tension between sensing and making sense of the modern world.

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