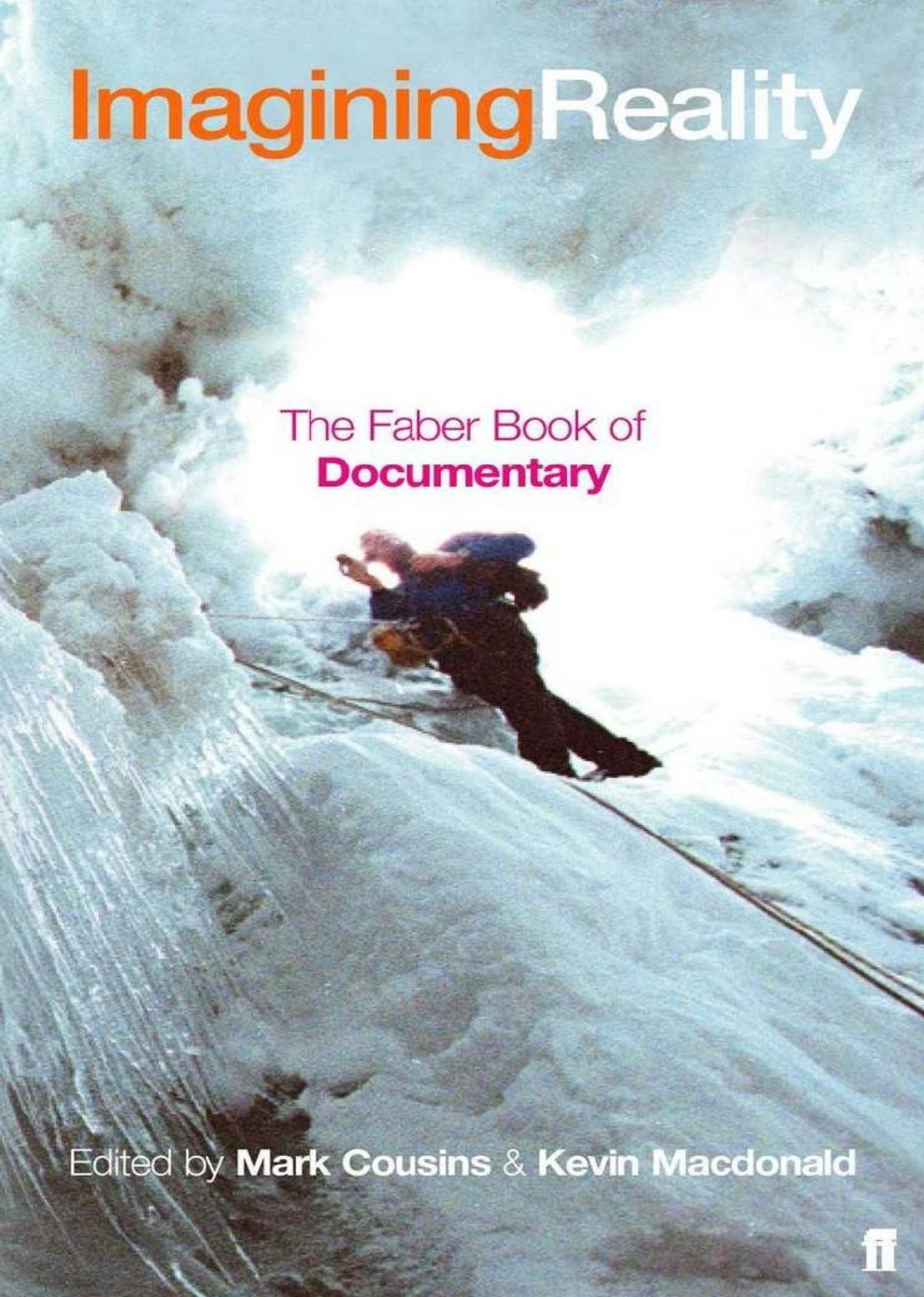


Imagining Reality

A photograph of a person climbing a steep, icy mountain slope. The climber is wearing dark clothing and a backpack, and is using ropes and ice axes. The background is a bright, snowy mountain peak under a clear sky.

The Faber Book of
Documentary

Edited by **Mark Cousins & Kevin Macdonald**



IMAGINING REALITY

*The Faber Book
of Documentary*

Mark Cousins
and Kevin Macdonald



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Introduction to the New Edition

Documentary has always been cinema's ne'er-do-well. Whereas live action film and animation have, almost from the start, rung the box office bell, audiences have never really flocked to see their less showy sibling, non-fiction cinema. Artistically, documentary has achieved great things over the last eleven decades, as this book reminds us; and from the serious and socially engaged parts of our culture, it has more than had its dues. From the days of John Grierson at least, its relevance has not been in doubt. Yet in all these years, despite master film-makers such as Vertov, Humphrey Jennings, Marcel Ophüls, the Maysles brothers, Shohei Imamura, Chris Marker, Frederick Wiseman, Juris Podnieks, Kim Longinotto and Viktor Kossakovsky, documentary didn't capture the imaginations of mainstream cinemagoers.

This began to change at the end of the 1990s. The first signs that the fortunes of documentary were shifting were when programmers of cultural cinemas found themselves hauling fiction films off their screens to milk the continuing box office of Wim Wenders' *Buena Vista Social Club*. In its wake came commercially successful documentaries as diverse as Nicolas Philibert's *Être et Avoir*, Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine*, Jeffrey Blitz's *Spellbound*, Morgan Spurlock's *Super Size Me* and Luc Jacquet's *The March of the Penguins*. There had been theatrically successful non-fiction films before this new wave, but with the exception of Steve James' *Hoop Dreams*, these were almost exclusively performance pieces such as Alex Keshishian's *In Bed with Madonna* and Jonathan Demme's *Stop Making Sense*. In the wake of *The Buena Vista Social Club*, something different happened. The desire of audiences to see cinematic documentaries developed a certain momentum. Those who cared about non-fiction conceived outside the narrower formats and templates of television couldn't quite believe what was happening. Sympathetic programmers, journalists and TV commissioning editors did what they could to sustain the momentum. This book is part of that spirit.

Imagining Reality: The Faber Book of Documentary was first published before this revival, but the beliefs that guided our first edition in 1996 remain intact in this update. Our book is unashamedly about the creativity of documentary. The list of books about the ethics and politics of non-fiction film continues to grow. We like some of these, and in no way deny the affinity the form has with social and political matters, but as filmmakers ourselves we find that documentary books sometimes ignore or underestimate the very aspect of documentary which we most admire – its formal range. Pick up a camera today and with it you can make an interview film, an essayistic one, a fly-on-the-wall observational film, one in which you construct the events which you record, a poetic or impressionistic work, a diary about your own life, a travelogue, a campaigning film, a piece of journalism or performance, or an experimental work, to name but some of the options. Your completed film might well

blur the boundaries between these approaches, as some of the best documentaries have. If this book aims to do anything, it is to remind moviegoers and filmmakers alike that documentary isn't simply one genre, but many. John Grierson's aim to establish the usefulness of documentary films for contemporary life and democracy was noble – and necessary if governments were to be convinced to fund such films – but non-fiction film has suffered from such utilitarian branding.

We have structured the book chronologically, but it does not aspire to be a comprehensive history of the documentary. Although we have tried to cover many of the major film-makers and movements, we have been restricted by lack of space and, in some cases, by the absence of appropriate pieces of writing. It was more important to us to include pieces that were readable and inspiring than ones that were merely representative of an era or body of work. If no good pieces existed (or we couldn't find them) then we were forced to leave those subjects out. Among the topics that we would like to have included were: Chinese documentary, and ethnographic film-making.

Wherever possible we have given precedence to pieces written by, or interviews with, film-makers themselves. It seemed important to keep the book as close to the actual films as possible.

In recent years it has become possible to see a greater number of these than ever before, either in arts cinemas or on DVD or on several of the new quality digital television channels in the UK and elsewhere. Programmers of the latter in particular are to be encouraged, not only to repeat the works of, say, Marcel Ophüls as they do the fiction films of Alfred Hitchcock or Orson Welles, but also to introduce new documentarists, from lesser known producing nations, into the canon.

That is what you will encounter in what follows: a rough canon of a hundred or so of the greatest documentaries ever made. There are many gaps, oversights and contestable inclusions. We regret some of these – many great documentarists do not appear between these covers. We hope that reading this book is enjoyable in itself, but what we would really like is if it encourages you to see a Podnieks film for the first time, or find and be shocked by *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On* or *Shoah*, or Maximilian Schell's *Marlene*. Or, best of all, to pick up a camera yourself.

Mark Cousins & Kevin Macdonald
December 2005

Part 1

1 The Kingdom of Shadows

INTRODUCTION

Even in its infancy, when films were composed of a single shot and lasted less than a minute, film-makers were divided into two camps: those who looked to the real world for their subject matter, and those who filmed performances. At the forefront of the latter group was Thomas Edison. His first film – *the first film?* – was *Fred Ott's Sneeze*, a brief record of his assistant pretending to sneeze. Among Edison's other early titles, all shot in a tiny studio known as 'the Black Maria' in upstate New York, were *Anabelle Butterfly Dance*, showing the celebrated dancer Anabelle Moore in a diaphanous dress, gyrating against a black background, and a more risqué film of a belly-dancer called *Fatima*. When these films were first shown, the *New York Journal* (4 April 1896) ran the headline: 'Lifeless Skirt Dancers In Gauzy Silks They Smirk and Pirouette at Wizard Edison's Command.' For Edison, film-making was a matter of contrivance and control.

On the other side of the divide, were the Lumière brothers. If Edison was the originator of the fiction film, they were the fathers of documentary. The audiences who came to see their first *cinématographe* programme in Paris in December 1895 were confronted not by exotic performances, but by vignettes and incidents from everyday life: workers passing through factory gates, a train pulling into a station, a baby being fed, a small boat leaving harbour.

Judging from contemporary reports, the Lumière films made a more profound impression on audiences than their Edison counterparts. Famously, Parisian spectators panicked and dodged aside when a train projected on the screen appeared to be heading towards them. Nothing as dramatic happened at early Edison screenings; the Americans merely marvelled at the 'life-like' quality of the moving images ('So true to life were the figures ... that the spectator would almost believe that the girls were real and that the machine which clicked and sputtered had nothing to do with the performance,' wrote the man from the *New York Journal*).



1 The first documentary. Workers leaving the Lumière factory (1895).

A more subtle and telling reaction to the Lumière's proto-documentaries – one which the Edison films singularly failed to provoke – was recorded by the future filmmaker Georges Méliès, a guest at an early screening. Referring to the film *Le Déjeuner de Bébé*, in which Auguste Lumière and his wife are seen feeding their baby, Méliès noted that the spectators were transfixed, not by the animated figures themselves, but by the rustling foliage in the background. Similarly, in *A Boat Leaving a Harbour*, it was the random movement of the waves which attracted their attention, and in *Demolishing a Wall*, the free-floating brickdust that filled the air. Why? Méliès suggests that the audience readily accepted the movements of photographed people because they were accustomed to the theatre, and to the idea of performers colluding in an illusion. But the brickdust, the rustling leaves and the waves were astonishing because they showed that the Lumière films were not an illusion, or a performance, but a grey, flickering mirror of a *past reality*. The cinema, unlike any previous art form, was able to represent the *spontaneous* – the very essence of life itself.

Even today the Lumière films of 1895–1900 retain much of their freshness and peculiar sense of 'naturalness'. They certainly make for more compelling viewing than the simplistic dumb show of most early fiction films. Purely from an historical point of view, it is fascinating to see how Paris, Peking or Piccadilly looked in the 1890s, to see how people dressed, how they walked and how the horse-drawn trams passed through the streets. But there is also something undeniably poignant about seeing moments from the relatively distant past preserved, knowing that everyone who appears in those films is long dead and buried. 1895, the year the cinema is said to have truly begun, was also, coincidentally, the year H.G. Wells published *The Time Machine*. The

cinema is still the closest we can come to travelling in time.

Of course, for all their sense of spontaneity, of 'life caught as it is', the Lumière films (like every documentary to come) tampered with, and organized, 'reality'. Most of their films were, literally, 'set up': subjects can sometimes be seen responding to a signal from behind the camera before starting their activities; often, as in *A Train Arrives at the Station* the people involved were not anonymous members of the public, as one might think, but members of the Lumière family, obviously rehearsed and positioned and then told to ignore the camera and *act naturally*.

On a more subtle level, even when these, almost the simplest films we can imagine, are not actually 'set up', they do what all art does: they give form to the chaos of life and make it meaningful. Take, for example, *The Workers Leaving the Factory*. Unlike the 'reality' from which it is drawn, the film is discrete; it has a beginning and an end and it is carefully structured so that it begins with the big, wooden gates of the factory opening and ends as they are about to close again. It has a circular narrative. And then there's the framing. What are we not seeing? Where is this factory situated? Once a segment of 'reality' has been chosen, isolated and recorded it takes on significance and we are tempted to interpret it. Take *Le Déjeuner de Bébé*. Its themes are perhaps parenthood, familial joy and nourishment. Even in the simplest non-fiction film, the relationship between film and reality is not a straightforward or literal one, but that of a metaphor.

*

For almost a decade after the Lumières, the cinema was infatuated with reality. Fiction films remained comparatively rare. Up until as late as 1903, seventy-five per cent of films were so called *actualities*. Initially, subjects were chosen almost indiscriminately – the only important thing being that the films contained plenty of movement. Gradually, however, as the length of the films increased from one minute to five or more, subjects were chosen more carefully, designed to inform or entertain in their own right. They included topical events (disasters, parades and battles), famous personalities, scenic views from around the world and sporting fixtures; boxing films were the most popular.

But the dominance of factual cinema was short lived. Around 1903 fiction film-makers began to develop the techniques of editing, allowing ever more complex and effective stories to be told in an ever more subtle and sophisticated manner. The possibilities for creating tension and comedy in particular were enormous, and the popularity of fiction films grew astronomically.

Suddenly, films of unmanipulated reality seemed very dull indeed, and *actualities* were relegated to the bottom of the bill. Non-fiction film-makers had failed to advance their techniques since the days of the Lumières. A single shot was still deemed sufficient to cover an entire event. Their films lacked a strong, engaging narrative and characters with whom an audience could empathize. In the open market, only the most spectacular factual footage could now compete with the pleasures of fiction.

The Kingdom of Shadows

MAXIM GORKY

In April 1896 the young writer Maxim Gorky (1868–1936) attended one of the first Lumière *Cinématographe* shows in Russia in his home town of Nizhni-Novgorod. He wrote the following report for the local newspaper.

Last night I was in the Kingdom of Shadows.

If you only knew how strange it is to be there. It is a world without sound, without colour. Everything there – the earth, the trees, the people, the water and the air – is dipped in monotonous grey. Grey rays of the sun across the grey sky, grey eyes in grey faces, and the leaves of the trees are ashen grey. It is not life but its shadow, it is not motion but its soundless spectre.

Here I shall try to explain myself, lest I be suspected of madness or indulgence in symbolism. I was at Aumont's and saw Lumière's *cinématographe* – moving photography. The extraordinary impression it creates is so unique and complex that I doubt my ability to describe it with all its nuances. However, I shall try to convey its fundamentals.

When the lights go out in the room in which Lumière's invention is shown, there suddenly appears on the screen a large grey picture, *A Street in Paris* – shadows of a bad engraving. As you gaze at it, you see carriages, buildings and people in various poses, all frozen into immobility. All this is in grey, and the sky above is also grey – you anticipate nothing new in this all too familiar scene, for you have seen pictures of Paris streets more than once. But suddenly a strange flicker passes through the screen and the picture stirs to life. Carriages coming from somewhere in the perspective of the picture are moving straight at you, into the darkness in which you sit; somewhere from afar people appear and loom larger as they come closer to you; in the foreground children are playing with a dog, bicyclists tear along, and pedestrians cross the street picking their way among the carriages. All this moves, teems with life and, upon approaching the edge of the screen, vanishes somewhere beyond it.

And all this in strange silence where no rumble of the wheels is heard, no sound of footsteps or of speech. Nothing. Not a single note of the intricate symphony that always accompanies the movements of people. Noiselessly, the ashen-grey foliage of the trees sways in the wind, and the grey silhouettes of the people, as though condemned to eternal silence and cruelly punished by being deprived of all the colours of life, glide noiselessly along the grey ground.

Their smiles are lifeless, even though their movements are full of living energy and are so swift as to be almost imperceptible. Their laughter is soundless, although you see the muscles contracting in their grey faces. Before you a life is surging, a life deprived of words and shorn of the living spectrum of colours – the grey, the soundless, the bleak and dismal life.

It is terrifying to see, but it is the movement of shadows, only of shadows. Curses and ghosts, the evil spirits that have cast entire cities into eternal sleep, come to mind

and you feel as though Merlin's vicious trick is being enacted before you. As though he had bewitched the entire street, he compressed its many-storied buildings from rooftops to foundations to yard-like size. He dwarfed the people in corresponding proportion, robbing them of the power of speech and scraping together all the pigment of earth and sky into a monotonous grey colour.

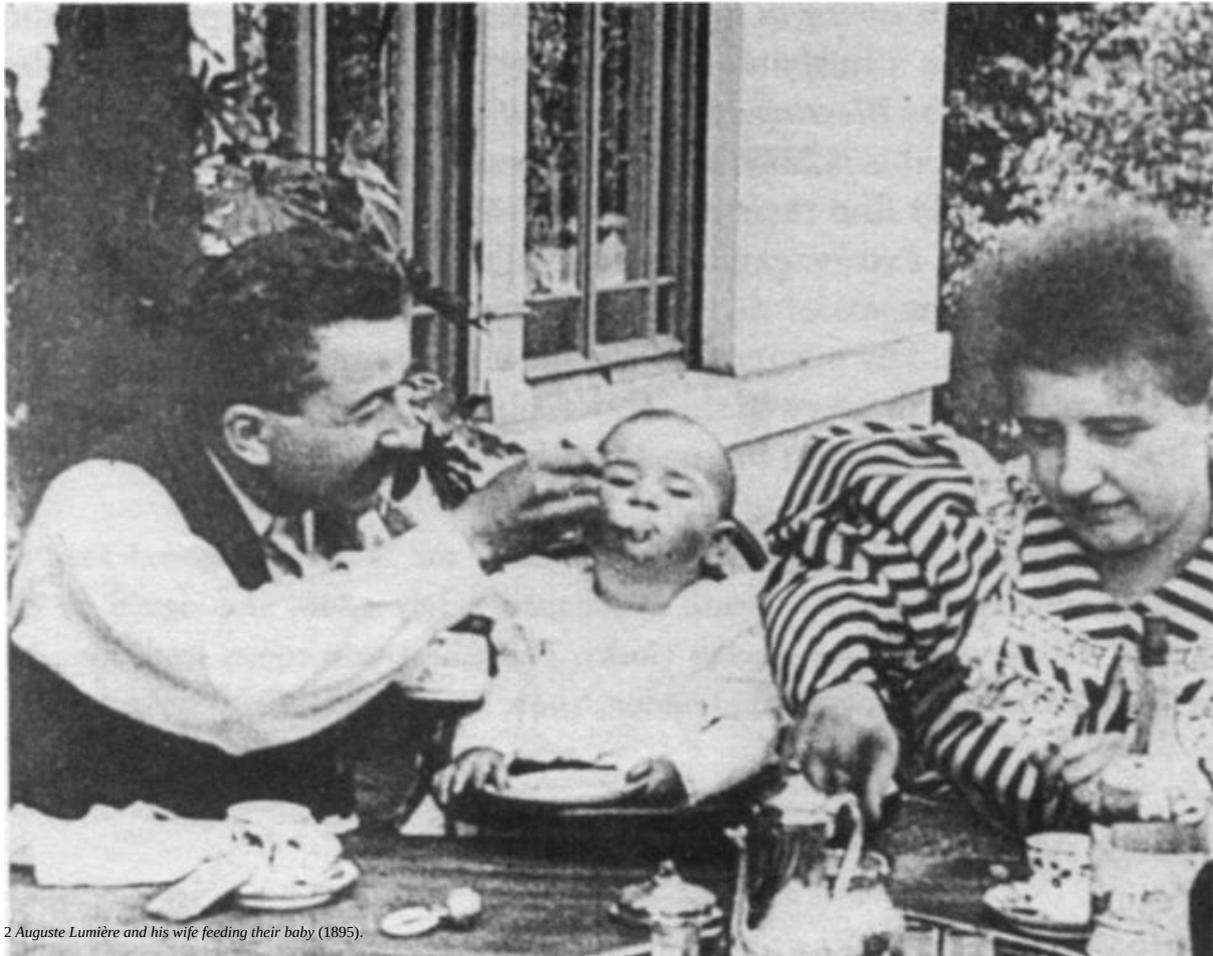
Under this guise he shoved his grotesque creation into a niche in the dark room of a restaurant. Suddenly something clicks, everything vanishes and a train appears on the screen. It speeds straight at you – watch out! It seems as though it will plunge into the darkness in which you sit, turning you into a ripped sack full of lacerated flesh and splintered bones, and crushing into dust and into broken fragments this hall and this building, so full of women, wine, music and vice.

But this, too, is but a train of shadows.

Noiselessly, the locomotive disappears beyond the edge of the screen. The train comes to a stop, and grey figures silently emerge from the cars, soundlessly greet their friends, laugh, walk, run, bustle, and ... are gone. And here is another picture. Three men seated at the table, playing cards. Their faces are tense, their hands move swiftly. The cupidity of the players is betrayed by the trembling fingers and by the twitching of their facial muscles. They play ... Suddenly, they break into laughter, and the waiter who has stopped at their table with beer laughs too. They laugh until their sides split but not a sound is heard. It seems as if these people have died and their shadows have been condemned to play cards in silence unto eternity ...

This mute, grey life finally begins to disturb and depress you. It seems as though it carries a warning, fraught with a vague but sinister meaning that makes your heart grow faint. You are forgetting where you are. Strange imaginings invade your mind and your consciousness begins to wane and grow dim ...

But suddenly, alongside of you, a gay chatter and a provoking laughter of a woman is heard ... and you remember that you are at Aumont's, Charles Aumont's ... But why of all places should this remarkable invention of Lumière find its way and be demonstrated here, this invention which affirms once again the energy and the curiosity of the human mind, forever striving to solve and grasp all, and – while on the way to the solution of the mystery of life – incidentally builds Aumont's fortune? I do not yet see the scientific importance of Lumière's invention but, no doubt, it is there, and it could probably be applied to the general ends of science, that is, of bettering man's life and the developing of his mind. This is not to be found at Aumont's where vice alone is being encouraged and popularized. Why then at Aumont's, among the 'victims of social needs' and among the loafers who here buy their kisses? Why here, of all places, are they showing this latest achievement of science? And soon probably Lumière's invention will be perfected, but in the spirit of Aumont-Toulon and Company.



2. Auguste Lumière and his wife feeding their baby (1895).

Besides those pictures I have already mentioned, is featured *The Family Breakfast*, an idyll of three. A young couple with its chubby firstborn is seated at the breakfast table. The two are so much in love, and are so charming, gay and happy, and the baby is so amusing. The picture creates a fine, felicitous impression. Has this family scene a place at Aumont's?

And here is still another. Women workers, in a thick, gay and laughing crowd, rush out of the factory gates into the street. This too is out of place at Aumont's. Why remind here of the possibility of a clean, toiling life? This reminder is useless. Under the best of circumstances this picture will only painfully sting the woman who sells her kisses.

I am convinced that these pictures will soon be replaced by others of a genre more suited to the general tone of the Concert Parisien. For example, they will show a picture titled: *As She Undresses*, or *Madam at Her Bath*, or *A Woman in Stockings*. They could also depict a sordid squabble between a husband and wife and serve it to the public under the heading of *The Blessings of Family Life*.

Yes, no doubt, this is how it will be done. The bucolic and the idyllic could not possibly find their place in Russia's markets thirsting for the piquant and the extravagant. I also could suggest a few themes for development by means of a *cinématographe* and for the amusement of the market place. For instance: to impale a fashionable parasite upon a picket fence, as is the way of the Turks, photograph him, then show it.

It is not exactly piquant but quite edifying.

Sources: A review of the Lumière programme at the Nizhni-Novgorod Fair, as printed in the *Nizhegorodski listok* newspaper, 4 July 1896, and signed 'I. M. Pacatus' – a pseudonym for Maxim Gorky. This translation comes from *Kino* by Jay Leyda, Allen and Unwin Ltd., London, 1960, translated by Leda Swan.