Fictions of Intimacy and the Intimacy of Fiction: “Going into People’s Houses” and the Remediation of 1920s Film Reception

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This chapter proposes to situate intimacy, both the intimacy of the home and the intimacy of the body, at the heart of the encounter of 1920s audiences with cinema, via the examination of a few examples of the remediation of cinema’s reception through the domestic media of radio and print. It has become fairly common in film studies today to look at cinema as a blurred, cross-border media phenomenon: as a medium deploying its fictions through several media (Jenkins 2006), scattered among a multiplicity of reception sites—the movie house, the home, but also any place where one can use a small-screen multimedia player—raising issues about the very nature of the media identity of cinema (Elsaesser 1998; Manovich 2001; Gaudreault 2008). If, as Philippe Marion has singularly proposed, each medium has “a specific ‘imaginary’” (“Narratologie médiatique” 79), one of the issues of film studies today, and of cinema audience and reception studies more particularly, is to understand how such a constant crisscrossing of media borders may re-mediate cinema’s imaginary. Remediation is a concept introduced by Bolter and Grusin in their 1999 breakthrough work to describe what happens when one media contains, deploys, or expands on another. Our analysis will focus on the paradoxical “double logic” of remediation (Bolter and Grusin, 5-6)—on how one media’s quest for “immediacy,” which Bolter and Grusin use to designate the cultural desire “to erase all traces of mediation,” “depends on hypermediacy” (6), that is, on the reliance on other multiple and non-transparent media.

In what follows, I take an archeological view of this question in film history by proposing to look at two examples of how 1920s American cinema explored remediation possibilities offered by emergent media (radio) or more established ones (print) that had, contrary to cinema, a decidedly domestic reception horizon. I seek to understand how these two media were deployed to move film fictions beyond the reception sites and media-specific limits of cinema—then public, and often spectacular, in its main modes of reception—with the aim of making cinema an intimate and familiar object of reception. Thus, I contend that the use of other media to market films was not just good publicity practice—the age-old publicity impulse to “make some noise” by any means necessary (Reel Journal, 20 November
— but impacted cinema’s imaginary by allowing it to expand in a more intimate direction, by making it, so to speak, homebound. Cinema, thanks to radio and print ads, managed to project itself not just as public event, but also as private, domestic occurrence—not just as glamorous, but also as decidedly down-to-earth. The remediation of cinema through radio and print allowed 1920s audiences to navigate across reception spaces and reconcile conflicting expectations of where film worlds could take them.

This investigation was inspired by a curious scene in a film meant as a vehicle for Harry Houdini: *Terror Island* (James Cruze, 1920). In the film, Houdini plays an inventor whom a friend hires to salvage treasure from sunk ships. For the benefit of his friend, our inventor demonstrates one of the advanced features of his new, secret submarine: a device he calls the “electric periscope,” a wired display transmitting live images to a remote observer. An early example of remediation, this filmic representation of the emergent technology of the (soon to be wireless) transmission of live sound and images—namely radio and television—seemed too intriguing to ignore. What, I wondered, could have been the nature of cinema’s relationship with emerging media in the 1920s, at a time when radio, but also print media, were helping to define the media landscape of the modern world? Though movie-going in the 1920s was a very loud, public affair (Hall 1961), did those technologies, with their decidedly domestic and private horizon, have any sort of influence on the reception of films at the time? Could a model (albeit a minority, and possibly failed, model) be constructed for a reception horizon that, even in the 1920s, would have included the intimacy of the home?

The second jolt in this inquiry came from an article published in the *Los Angeles Times* of April 23, 1929 by Irving Thalberg, then MGM Vice-President, where he expressed his thoughts on the still on-going transition to sound by Hollywood producers:

> The great quality that made motion pictures a success is realism. One has a feeling of going into people’s houses, of looking into their eyes and seeing their thoughts, of gazing into their hearts and of understanding their emotions. Now voice has been added to pictures, making them just that much more intimate, more real.

Realism, domesticity and intimacy. One would not necessarily, offhand, associate this trio of concepts with Hollywood productions of the 1920s, with their oft-studied emphasis on spectacle to be consumed in the splendor of large movie palaces. Yet Thalberg is far from the only Hollywood producer at the time to claim this realistic horizon as the legitimate, ultimate objective for Hollywood productions. Indeed, by 1929, Hollywood already had a long history of yearning for *social* legitimacy by seeking recognition for the *artistic* achievements of its
products thanks to an emphasis on realism. This is a trick that Hollywood may have simply borrowed from older literary and theatrical traditions in which “realism” had become, during the 19th century, the ultimate test of the artistic worth of all fictional endeavors—becoming, as Peter Brooks has noted, “the norm [of] what we expected fiction to be” (5). Even more intriguingly, in 1929, Thalberg was also channeling another part of the history of realism that fixes the intimacy of the home as a hallmark of a realist style, a history that stretches back, at least, to Alain-René Le Sage’s *Le Diable boîteux* (1707) and the character of Asmodée, the Devil. In a well-known passage of this early novella, the Devil takes the hero (and the reader) up to the top of the highest tower in the city of Madrid, then removes all the city’s rooftops to reveal what is happening in the rooms thus exposed to view. “Seeing through the roofs and facades of the real to the private lives behind and beneath,” a gesture that Peter Brooks (from whom I borrow this reference) uses as a starting point in his discussion of literary realism (3), is what Thalberg in 1929 suggested cinema did best. It is, indeed, on the part of Hollywood producers, a diabolical effort—or, as the reference to Houdini suggests, a diabolically magical effort—to try and conflate realism with domestic intimacy, an effort I would like to call Hollywood’s *intimacy project*. It is this project and its possible consequences on reception that interest me here. Whether or not we follow Thalberg in the belief that watching a Hollywood film, albeit with sound, “is like watching life”—recently, Lea Jacobs (2008) has impressively argued that a drive towards more simplicity and less sentimentality could be detected in Hollywood films throughout the 1920s—I would like to propose that Thalberg’s fantasy of realism should also be understood as a form of marketing discourse, and thus equally as a horizon for reception, so that invading the *intimacy of the home* could, perhaps, be analyzed as a long-term historical trend in the reception of Hollywood films, including in the ballyhoo of the 1920s.

My object here is not to repeat the excellent research already done about the history of “home movies”—the history of the projection of movies at home—as part of the history of non-public, alternative sites for movie consumption. Working back from our contemporary mode of film reception as an increasingly domestic reception, this research has come to focus notably on “home cinema” as a particularly pregnant site for film cultures. Indeed, as Ben Singer has argued, “efforts at home cinema […] prefigure many of the ways in which visual media would ultimately be consumed in our society” (37), with Alexandra Schneider, more recently, reminding us that “the history of home viewing began not with television but with the film reels of the 1920s and 30s” (353). The findings of such research challenge us to posit the ontology of cinema as more than a public spectacle, that is, as a *private, intimate*
phenomenon more often associated with the reception of television. For Peter Kramer (2003), indeed, a “televisual imagination” (16) could be shown to animate film history from, in fact, its very “beginnings,” (13) most famously via the telephonoscope, which, according to Thomas Elsaesser, provides evidence that “the late nineteenth century did not expect the cinema [but] […] rather devices of simultaneity and instantaneity” (47). What Donald Crafton has called cinema’s “electric affinities” (26-27 and passim) further prove, for Haidee Wasson, the inscription of cinema within emerging notions of modernity and the automation of home appliances in the 1920s (“Electric Homes”). Cinema should, she argues, be “insert[ed] into an earlier history of the entertainment industry’s domestic agenda” (4), in the hope of understanding “the conditions in which we watched, discussed, thought about, and wrote about moving images” (2). The history of home viewing of Hollywood films, thus, should be an integral part in a historically-grounded search for this elusive culture of media images in our daily life, this “common sense about the place of moving images in everyday life […] generated not just in movie theaters but also just about everywhere else” (Wasson, “Reel of the Month” 220).

While vital in helping us study film reception as the dynamic, plural phenomenon that it has always been, such research, however, has failed so far to link public and non-public (or alternative) consumption of movies satisfactorily, continuing to confront both film cultures rather than look for their potential synergies. Haidee Wasson, for instance, while suggesting that the answer to “what cinema means” may have been generated in a multiplicity of spaces, including the space of the home, remains within a traditional dichotomy of public vs. private, theatre vs. the home, as private spaces of film consumption are understood to offer the chance to “wrest mass media from its threatening populist and commercial power” (221; see Hansen, “Early Cinema” for a similar distinction). I would like to suggest that there is no such dichotomy, that the “populist” success of cinema also depended on its capacity to project itself onto a domestic horizon in order to engage with audiences. If one looks at the other media technologies that started emerging or expanding in the 1920s (namely, the wireless and the print media) and cinema’s relation with these media, one is struck, in fact, less by their opposition than by a commonality of purpose. Beyond the technologies of public film exhibition, film worlds also circulated in print and on the radio in the 1920s. Those media allowed film worlds to reach an extra-theatrical, domestic horizon of film reception that in fact expanded the commercial reach of cinema by proposing to engage with potential viewers everywhere and merge multiple reception spaces together: the theatre, of course, but also the street, and indeed the home. In its reliance on multiple media to circulate its imaginary,
cinema emerges as a paradoxical phenomenon, at the same time public and intimate, industrial and domestic, glamorous and familiar.

Numerous studies have thus shown how the arrival of radio as a medium of mass entertainment in the early 1920s was seen both as dangerous competition and as an opportunity for film distribution. Exhibitors tended to fear radio’s impact on movie attendance, with quite a few blaming the attendance slump of the 1922-1923 season on the competition from the “radio euphoria of 1922” (Butsch 175) and on radio concerts that loomed large in the accusation that radio kept entertainment-hungry people at home. A June 1922 Photoplay editorial thus recognizes that as “the radio rage is sweeping the nation […] this new competition has the picture barons worried a trifle,” but the editorial quickly points out that such “concern is hardly justified,” since “the theatre is ‘some place to go.’ We like to have our thrills and laughs with the crowd. The radio is relatively a solitary pastime” (Photoplay p.48).

Yet this seeming opposition between, on the one hand, film as a public event and, on the other, radio as private and solitary, is immediately questioned by the next sentence, which evokes “dreamers […] at work on the problem of sending pictures broadcast by radio. There is a thought for tomorrow!” In other words, the opposition between public and private is, here, more porous than we might expect. Radio Films, or the use of radio to transmit live sound accompaniment to several film theaters at the same time (whether music, a lecture, or even, in a 1925 Norma Shearer experiment, dialogue), an obvious cost-cutting device, has been studied elsewhere (notably by Donald Crafton), yet we should note that such uses of radio seem more a continuation of on-going reception practices of the 1920s than a revolutionary technological break. In a bid to put radio to any profitable potential use, MGM even experimented in 1927 with what it emphatically, if optimistically, called “telemovies.” First, for a showing of Ben-Hur (Fred Niblo and al., 1925) in November at the Pantages, in Salt Lake City, “an announcer broadcast description of the picture as he viewed it from a box at the theatre. During this performance he also announced all subtitles as they were flashed on the screen” (The Film Daily, 11 November 1927, p.11). Then, on December 20, 1927, for the opening of Love (Edmund Goulding and John Gilbert, 1927), a romantic vehicle for Greta Garbo and John Gilbert, at the Embassy theater in New York, famous radio announcer Ted Husing was on hand, delivering a running commentary on the film live from the theatre. Only the massive arrival of sound films in 1928-1929 seems to have made “the idea of a movie ‘announcer’—going back in concept to the narrators of nickelodeon days—[…] no longer […] necessary” (Hilmes 79), and to have put a damper on such experiments.
Yet beyond such curious and seemingly paradoxical experiments in turning silent films into radio plays, Hollywood’s uses of radio for film distribution were so frequent and of such varied nature during the 1920s as to impose a reconsideration of what the industry was, in fact, looking for when using the emerging technology of radio jointly with the more established one of silent film projection. Despite technical limitations (notably in sound projection), other, more successful, efforts by theater managers to exploit the “radio craze” in the 1920s ranged from the utilization of radio as part of the on-stage show entertainment (for instance, at the McVickers theater, Chicago, according to the Exhibitors’ Herald of January 23, 1924) to that of radio to broadcast concerts given by the theater orchestra, both extra concerts that were not part of the normal movie shows (on Sunday mornings for instance) and the musical part of the film program itself, a tradition started by showman Roxy Rothapfel on November 19, 1922 with the Capitol Theatre Grand Orchestra, with Roxy describing the sets and costumes, and introducing the songs of pre-film entertainment (Hall 71-75).

Radio was also used for more obvious and, in this case, studio-controlled publicity purposes for instance, to report on on-going Hollywood productions, either through a radio journalist (“Nat Rothstein will broadcast tonight over WPCH offering a graphic account of production of Uncle Tom's Cabin,” The Film Daily, December 1, 1927) or on the progress of productions related by directors themselves (“Arrangements have been completed by W.W. Van Dyke, who sailed recently with Robert Flaherty for the South Seas [for the production of White Shadows on the South Seas], for nightly radio communication between a Culver City station and Station DAM at Tahiti”, The Film Daily December 13, 1927). Lastly, following the 1925 recommendation of Harry Warner to have “[film] artists talk into the [radio] microphone and reach directly millions of people who have seen them on the screen, but never came in contact with them personally or heard their voices” (The Film Daily, April 3, 1925), United Artists in 1928 was still trying to exploit the fame of its stars by having Norma Talmadge, Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, D.W. Griffith, Lionel Barrymore and Dolores Del Rio come before the microphone live from the Fifth Avenue Playhouse in New York in a special broadcast of The Dodge Brothers Hour, for an expected audience of 50 million people (Crafton 44).

While some of these examples certainly bear out Michele Hilmes’s conclusion that “the interest by the motion picture industry in experimenting with radio must be seen in the context of the industry’s internal tension between producers and exhibitors” (82)—the United Artists broadcast, for instance, provoked the fury of exhibitors as it took place during regular movie show-times, 9 to 10 pm—they also reveal a surprising faith that there is continuity
What is more surprising about this issue of *Photoplay* is how personal and intimate some of the issues raised by a third series of ads are. It is as if film worlds were offered a chance to project readers into fictions of intimacy that went beyond anything discussed in the movies themselves. Throughout the 1920s, underwear, male (BVD in 1916) or female (corsets by Gossard in 1927), were regularly advertised, along with books and “methods” discussing intimate issues like sex (sexology in *Photoplay*, July 1916, *Sexual Knowledge* (illustrated) in *Motion Picture Classic* of June 1920, and Elinor Glyn’s *The Philosophy of Love in Photoplay* of February 1924). Intimate problems are discussed by ads in frank terms: hair problems (dandruff, loss of hair), feet problems (bunions, corns), constipation, bad breath (with evocative ads showing how that problem can cost one’s social position) or “woman’s oldest hygienic problem” are all gleefully advertised alongside stories of Douglas Fairbank’s boundless energy or Garbo and Gilbert’s kiss (Fig. 2). Those ads, and their inclusion in the pages of a mainstream fan magazine like *Photoplay*, suggest, again, a continuum between film fictions and the intimate lives of fans, as if the goal of the magazines and, by extension, of the films themselves and of film worlds, was to allow entry into joyful modernity and its world of endless self-improvement, a mission that fan magazines, through very personal adverts, take however to very pragmatic, at times unglamorous, proportions. Thus, intimacy, ranging from domesticity to more embarrassing, bodily problems, emerges as a key element in the editorial policy of fan magazines, allowing potential transfers of fiction between film worlds and the fictions of advertisers. It is not just that you will be as well-dressed as Anna Q. Nilsson if you wear Olovnit garments and hosiery (*Photoplay*, September 1927), but that “you will star in the same picture” as Mabel Normand (*Photoplay*, July 1916)—as if the only thing standing between the reader/fan and the world of film-inflected romance was, ultimately, hair tonic or Cod Liver oil. Ads for intimate products, when appearing in fanazines, bring film worlds, indirectly or directly, down to the most intimate level for the fans, thereby offering a fictional continuum, a mixed-up, mashed-up, imaginary universe where consumption meets film dreams to realize the fans’ intimate projections of self-improvement.
What this material suggests is that, once one starts looking at the different media across which film imaginaries were deployed as early as the 1920s and through which they were encountered, however fleetingly, by audiences, two features become apparent. First, media technology does not determine the reception of cinema. As I have attempted to show, film imaginaries were deployed across competing, wildly different, at times paradoxical media (as in the case of the “silent radio film”) as early as the 1920s. The reception of cinema, thus, does not just concern the traditional sites of movie consumption (the film theatre) and their requisite technologies (the projector, the presence of live music, etc.), but has always been a cross-media phenomenon, with different media, indeed, participating to the construction of cinema’s imaginary all along, incorporating other media’s imaginaries and borrowing from them. Second, cinema actively pursued technological, hypermedia solutions to complement the movie-going experience and allow film reception to branch out in directions clearly opposed to the majority model of public movie-going experience, a model long accepted to represent the experience of cinema until, that is, the gradual replacement of the public screen with private modes of film consumption that are now ubiquitous. Indeed, by utilizing other emergent media technologies of print and radio to help circulate its imaginary, the film industry of the 1920s showed a latent desire to imagine film reception as a private, domestic and intimate moment—a dream arguably unfulfilled for most of Hollywood’s history in its actual reception conditions, though certainly activated by audiences that have never stopped taking Hollywood stars and worlds home with them. By the 1920s, cinema dreamed itself as a particular kind of magical “electric periscope” deployed, as in the 1929 version of Irving Thalberg’s dream, to invade audiences’ domestic intimate spheres, even if it had to rely on other media to do so.

In a post on his research blog *Confessions of an Aca/Fan* entitled “District 9 (Part One): Can a Bench Be a Transmedia Extension?” (2009), Henry Jenkins, tracking transmedia convergence into our present media-saturated lives, argues for the possibility that bench advertising in Los Angeles for the release of *District 9* (Neill Blomkamp, 2009) should, in effect, be considered as an extension of filmic story-telling by other means, noting that the message on the bench situated audiences “emotionally and intellectually inside the fiction” (notably in reference to America’s history of segregated public spaces). In 1924 Mr. Rosenthal, theater manager of the Strand in Waterbury, Connecticut, wrote to *The Exhibitors’ Herald* to offer his latest stunt as an example of good, sound exhibition policy: for the release of *The Humming Bird* (Sidney Olcott, 1924), a star vehicle for Gloria Swanson in which she plays a Paris street urchin who ends up decorated for her bravery during World War 1,
Rosenthal arranged a tie-in with a local shop selling Hummingbird products, in this case, stockings. It is not the practice of the tie-in that the Herald wished to point out to its readers as a novelty, nor the fact that the Strand manager had rather unimaginatively used the title of the film as an excuse for a campaign with a product of the same name (but with no link to the story in the film). What caught the attention of this trade publication was, rather, the degree of possible fusion of the worlds of the cinema and of domestic consumerism: for a short time, the theater lobby, decorated with the products of the shop, was turned into an actual window display full of stockings. Rosenthal would not have called it thus at the time, but his effort, in the light of the available documentation linking film worlds with intimate worlds of audiences and fans, seems to me to participate in this remediation of the reception space of Hollywood films in the 1920s, helping to situate audiences “inside the fiction,” inside a space where fiction and reality may meet at intimate, private, and secret junctures. As Phil Wickham has argued (2010), the future of reception studies lies, in part, in the study of such ephemeral marginalia of film culture as experiments in silent film radio broadcasts, fictional accounts of contemporary Hollywood life or ads for intimate body problems running alongside reports on stars, film production and Hollywood life, in an effort to understand what cinema meant and how its imaginary may have circulated. If a bench can today tell a story, what stories, to audiences in the 1920s, could a pair of stockings have told?
Radio, though a very bulky and visible medium, abolishes all distance in an illustration of the “double logic” of remediation, of “immediacy” (presence) achieved through opaque media—and the ad is displayed in a film fanzine: “you’re there” (source: Media History Digital Library).
Tom Mix’s “vacation complex”, emerging young stars, and the fight against constipation, all displayed in a continuum between film worlds and intimate personal problems. *Photoplay*, September 1927, p. 117 (source: Media History Digital Library)
Works Cited


Klenotic, Jeffrey F. “‘Four Hours of Hootin’ and Hollerin’: Moviegoing and Every Life Outside the Movie Palace.” Going to The Movies: the Social Experience of Hollywood


Notes

1 Unfortunate, but not unprecedented. This use of a radio commentator echoes the widespread use of live presenters during film exhibition in early cinema—and well into the 1920s for ethnic audiences. In 1908, for instance, “twelve of the twenty-one rounds in the Gans-Nelson fight were shown at Hammerstein’s in New York, with the accompanying commentary of a live, professional referee,” as Gwendolyn Waltz notes in her Ph.D. dissertation (4). See also Show Biz by Green and Laurie (55).

2 A tie-in campaign with hosiery products, on the other hand, may make more sense as a remediation of the image of the star of the film, Gloria Swanson, long identified with modern feminine fashions thanks to the Cecil B. DeMille features Don’t Change Your Husband (1999), Male and Female (1919) and The Affairs of Anatol (1921).