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School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

CERTIFICATE OF EXAMINATION

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entitled:

**At the Scene, On the Screen, and Beyond:
Experiences and Representations of Coney Island in Early Twentieth Century
Photography and Film**

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requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Date _____

Chair of the Thesis Examination Board

ABSTRACT

This thesis will examine representations of Coney Island in photography and short films from the turn of the twentieth century and in narrative films from the 1920s. I will consider how Coney Island was represented and examine the polysemic functions of the representations. The photographs and films that I have selected as case studies in this investigation are those I believe best illustrate the capacity of these media to show and recreate Coney Island experiences. Representing Coney Island served economic, national, individual, social, cultural, and artistic ends. Situating this selection of representations in the contexts that they were produced in and considering their formal components will demonstrate the importance and role that Coney Island representations played in its history and evolution, encompassing the impact that Coney Island and Coney Island representations in the mass media had on American culture and entertainment.

KEYWORDS: Coney Island, Photography, Stereograph, Early American Cinema, 1920s Film, Entertainment, Leisure, Cinema of Attractions, American History

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INTRODUCTION

Just nine miles east of New York City's Manhattan Island, on the southern tip of Brooklyn, you will find the five mile stretch of peninsula called Coney Island. Originally the location lured visitors who sought seaside rejuvenation and the healthful benefits of the salt air. The first hotel opened in 1829. In the decades that followed Coney became an increasingly popular beach/resort destination, leading to the construction of more hotels and other entertainment establishments and venues. By the 1880s Surf Avenue contained music halls, theatres, freak shows, food stalls, mechanical rides, the Beacon Tower/elevator, and the Elephant Hotel. Inexpensive ferry services as well as investments and advances in road and rail guaranteed the popularity of Coney Island and Brighton beach.¹ In *The Playful Crowd: Places of Pleasure in the Twentieth Century*, Gary Cross and John Walton suggest that "No matter how pristine or exclusive a pleasure spot may be, almost inevitably once a site begins to draw a crowd, it pulls in commerce and entertainers that challenge the genteel values of early visitors."² While the east end of the beach was frequented by respectable upper and middle-class visitors, the west end became a site for con-artists, drinking, gambling, and prostitution.³ In 1895 Paul Boyton opened Sea Lion Park. In order to filter out undesirable patrons, such as those that congregated on the west end, he enclosed a number of rides and attractions and charged a fee for entrance.⁴ George Tilyou opened Steeplechase Park in 1897, improving on and increasing the number and nature of attractions in Boyton's original amusement park. The

¹ There are three beaches on Coney Island including Brighton Beach, Manhattan Beach, and Gravesend.

² Gary Cross and John Walton, *The Playful Crowd: Pleasure Places in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005): 12.

³ Cross and Walton, 12.

⁴ Boyton failed to provide new attractions and draw repeat visitors. In 1902 he leased the space to Frederick Thompson and Skip Dundy. It was replaced by Luna Park.

close proximity to New York and the affordability of the trip, made shorter and cheaper with the eventual trolley and subway connections to Coney Island, contributed to the millions of attendees as well as the class and ethnic diversity of its visitors.⁵

Similar to the way entertainments and businesses were handled in the streets of New York, Coney Island entrepreneurs were interested in the self-promotion of their businesses.⁶ Disregarding the middle and upper-class conventions of respectable and morally uplifting leisure⁷, they looked for what would appeal to the greatest number, and in turn generate the most profit. Tilyou explained that, "[w]hat attracts the crowd is the wearied mind's demand for relief in unconsidered muscular action... We Americans want either to be thrilled or amused and we are ready to pay well for either sensation."⁸ The millions who indulged in the new place of play led to the opening of Frederic Thompson and Skip Dundy's Luna Park in 1903 and William H. Reynolds' Dreamland the following year. In *The Themed Space: Locating Culture, Nation, and Self* Scott Lukas indicates that the "primary purpose of themed spaces is not to fulfill human needs, but to play on human desires. Desires of course are conditioned by human needs that can be fulfilled by entertainment spaces, including sexuality, happiness, sociality, and autonomy."⁹

The three amusement parks that comprised Coney Island consisted of similar entertainments that were themed to cater to different desires. Tilyou was inspired by the youthful majority of Coney Island revelers and their interest in the new heterosocial

⁵ Cross and Walton, 14.

⁶ Cross and Walton, 25.

⁷ I will describe the appropriate forms of leisure as exemplified in Central Park.

⁸ Judith A. Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991): 42.

⁹ Scott Lukas, ed., *The Themed Space: Locating Culture, Nation, and Self* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007): 2.

interactions occurring on the beaches.¹⁰ He constructed rides and experiences that enabled strangers or young men and women to come into physical contact in ways that would never occur or be allowed in the city streets. Luna Park capitalized on the fascination with technology and electricity, using over 250,000 electric lights to illuminate the exotic structures and rides. Luna was described as an alternative to the titillating interactions and spectacles of Steeplechase, "a place for mothers, daughter, and sisters."¹¹ Dreamland, the least successful of the parks, tried to evoke more traditional forms of entertainment and leisure, employing grandiose, pristine white architectural structures and using biblical and other didactic themes for rides and attractions. In *The Invention of the Park: From the Garden of Eden to Disney's Magic Kingdom* Karen Jones posits that park construction is influenced by cultural norms and values, its design shifting in accordance with fluctuating human wants and desires.¹² The diversity of the Coney Island amusement park narratives demonstrates attempts to appeal to desires that differed according to class, gender, or individual beliefs.

Despite the difference in the overall themes of the three parks, the appeal for the masses lay in the capacity of the amusement park to provide a space where temporal reality would dissipate. For a minimal fee, patrons were immersed and participated in a fantasy world. Lynn Sally observes that

such a fantasy world was created through unimaginable displays of technological innovation, architecture, amusement rides, and exhibits that constructed another world. The fantasy world of the amusement park allowed spectators to momentarily suspend expected social roles: grown-ups could act like children:

¹⁰ Heterosocial is defined as "of, relating to, or involving social relationships between persons of the opposite sex.

¹¹ Lynn Sally, "Luna Park's Fantasy World and Dreamland's White City: Fire Spectacles at Coney Island as Elemental Performativity," in *The Themed Space: Locating Culture, Nation, and Self*. Edited by Lukas Scott. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007): 43.

¹² Karen R. Jones and John Wills, *The Invention of the Park: From the Garden of Eden to Disney's Magic Kingdom* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005): 8.

courting couples could act as if they were married: working class women could play the role of the genteel lady; genteel ladies could put themselves in compromising positions by riding on camels and mechanical rides that may cause their skirts to lift suggestively over their ankles.¹³

In addition to social roles, another reality Coney Island patrons sought to escape was the city. By 1900 New York's population was over 4,250,000.¹⁴ Thousands of workers and immigrants who had moved to the city with dreams of prosperity and accomplishment found themselves overworked and poverty stricken. Their time was commandeered by fifteen hour work days spent labouring or tending machines. Many lived in tenements that lacked privacy and failed to meet essential safety and sanitation standards. In addition, the spatial impositions of the skyscrapers, rectangular walled in spaces, and congested city streets bore down on urban inhabitants.¹⁵ Frederick Law Olmstead's Central Park design was implemented to provide a natural reprieve, a green space for leisure, health, and moral uplift. He believed the park would facilitate social improvement through the practice of acceptable forms of leisure, such as classical concerts, bird watching, walking, or reading, while providing relief from the architecture and crowds of the city.¹⁶ The middle class saw themselves as cultural entrepreneurs and this was one of many efforts to instill a sense of decorum in the rowdy lower classes.¹⁷ Vital to the moral preservation of the park were the strict rules prohibiting acts of disorder, walking on the grass, use of improper language, and selling goods. Following the construction of the park, surrounding property prices went up. It was impractical,

¹³ Sally, 40.

¹⁴ Jones and Wills, 43.

¹⁵ Jones and Wills, 6.

¹⁶ Jones and Wills, 6.

¹⁷ Jones and Wills, 44.

expensive, and undesirable for the lower classes to spend the little leisure time they had at a place that was as socially segregated and constricting as the city.

Unlike Central Park, Coney Island did not impose mandates of social improvement; however, activities and spaces that adhered to genteel pursuits and promoted intellectual or moral behaviour were available in the parks and at the beach resorts. Coney Island beaches were free and offered new 'respectable' forms of heterosocial interaction and increasingly more revealing bodily displays and liberated play. Although a Coney Island trip was intended as an escape from the city, Russel Nye posits that "a day at an amusement park was not a flight from urban life but a journey to an intensified version of it."¹⁸ At Coney Island the machines and technology of the city turned topsy turvy. They were subsumed for the purposes of thrilling the masses and showcasing spectacles of the modern individual and technology. The recreation at Coney Island amusement parks recalled ancient roman saturnalia festival traditions, world fairs, and expositions. Influences can also be seen in pleasure gardens and forms of street entertainment such as penny arcades, fortune-telling, and freak shows. The amusement parks ensured their novelty with annual additions and changes to the rides, architecture, and spectacles. Transforming tastes and desires of the masses were met with the ever-transforming spaces and activities that made up Coney Island.

Coney Island impacted the way time, space, and vision were experienced. Historical reconstructions, reenactments and the relocation of actual exotic tribes to Coney Island confused geographical and temporal conceptions. In a single structure at Dreamland one could find evidence of numerous historical styles of architecture. At night

¹⁸ Quoted in *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills*, 52.

in Luna Park the buildings and spaces were enlivened and mobilized by electric lights. Rides such as the Flip-Flap roller coaster turned a daily train ride experience into a thrilling form of entertainment and spectacle of near death as the cars were sent barreling down the tracks headed into one another before flipping over on themselves. The Human Roulette Wheel was one of many rides that jolted men and women or complete strangers into one another. These forms of physical interaction would never have occurred in the city. The Ferris Wheel and Steeplechase Air Tower brought viewers to new heights, while rides such as spinning swings mobilized vision, enhanced the speed of sight, and facilitated new angles of mobilized seeing. Under the cover of darkness in the Tunnel of Love or as a part of the anonymous crowd on the beach, men and women embraced, kissed, and as the legend goes, fell in love at Coney Island.

People-watching was one of the attractions that provided humorous and voyeuristic pleasures for amusement park attendees. Freak shows, spaces for spectators lining the rides, announcers, and signs encouraged and directed the crowds to look. Crowds gathered and sometimes paid to witness patrons exit rides where wind holes blew women's skirts up and exposed their undergarments. Unsuspecting couples were caught 'necking' inside tunnel rides when they opened up unexpectedly, exposing the riders to a waiting audience. Trick benches and sidewalks subsumed patrons as a part of the constant and multi-layered spectacle that constituted the park. Coney Island amused all of the senses at once, delighting the taste buds and the nostrils with savory fairground treats such as the famous Coney Island hotdog, amusing the ears with the intermingling fairground melodies and tambourines of exotic dancers, thrilling the body with the sensation of physical contact with the opposite sex, and pleasing the eyes with the

continuous and competing spectacles I have outlined above. It is the visual pleasure that Coney Island afforded that photographers and filmmakers had the capacity to harness, reproduce, and in the case of cinema, replicate. These visual representations proliferated the spaces, behaviour, and experience of the park. Images of Coney Island leisure, liberation, and (social and technological) novelty interpolated the urban and rural everyday spheres.

This thesis will examine representations of Coney Island in photography and short films from the turn of the twentieth century and in narrative films from the 1920s. I will consider how Coney Island was represented and examine the polysemic functions of these representations. The photographs and films that comprise my investigation were in mass circulation at the time of their publication/release, distributed widely and thus accessible to much of the American public. These representations of Coney Island construct multi-layered messages about the park, American society and modernity, and function as advertisements, reportage, and forms of visual entertainment.

Coney Island, its history, and emergence, have been looked at in the context of urban development, American history, and cultural studies.¹⁹ Entertainment histories consider the role and development of Coney Island as a recreational landscape, amusement park, or themed space.²⁰ For example, in *Coney Island: The People's*

¹⁹ Jim Lilliefors, *America's Boardwalks: From Coney Island to California* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006); Woody Register, *The Kid of Coney Island: Fred Thompson and the Rise of American Amusements* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Judith A. Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991); Eliza Darling, "Nature's Carnival: The Ecology of Pleasure at Coney Island." In *In the Nature of Cities: Urban Political Ecology and the Politics of Urban Metabolism*. Edited by Nik Heynen, Maria Kaika, and Erik Swyngedouw (New York, Routledge, 2006).

²⁰ Michael Immerso, *Coney Island: The People's Playground* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002); John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill& Lang, 1978); Scott Lukas, ed. *The Themed Space: Locating Culture, Nation, and Self* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007); David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements*

Playground, Michael Immerso describes Coney Island history as a "a rich narrative of the way Americans and particularly immigrants and urban Americans, came to invent their own forms of leisure and to regard leisure as part of their national birthright."²¹ Gary Cross and John K. Walton focus on related issues in *The Playful Crowd: Pleasure Places in the Twentieth Century*. This study considers how and why Americans gathered at Coney Island, indicating that the playful crowd was reflective of its time and place.²² These and other studies of Coney Island include photographs, but they are employed as supplementary evidence to the arguments made in the text with little or no attention paid to the formal qualities and/or function(s) of the images. Scholarship on Coney Island representations has been devoted to paintings of the park such as those by Joseph Stella and Reginald Marsh.²³

Studies in early cinema and silent film have examined various Coney Island films, situating them within the development of film or American film history.²⁴ Coney Island film has also received attention in studies of film genres, particularly as a location for

(Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); Karen Jones and John Wills, *The Invention of the Park: From the Garden of Eden to Disney's Magic Kingdom* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005).

²¹ Immerso, 9.

²² Jones and Wills, 6.

²³ Barbara Haskell, *Joseph Stella* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994); Robert Hughes, *American Visions: The Epic history of Art in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997); Lloyd Godrich, Reginald Marsh (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1972); Wanda M. Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999).

²⁴ Lauren Rabinovitz, *For the Love of Pleasure: Women, Movies, and Culture in turn-of-the-century Chicago* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988); Andre Gaudreault, ed. *American Cinema 1890-1909: Themes and Variations* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009); Lucy Fischer, "'The Shock of the New' Electrification, Illumination, Urbanization, and the Cinema." in *Cinema and Modernity*, edited by Murray Pomerance. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

comedy and slapstick films.²⁵ Films of Coney Island are usually mentioned in Coney Island histories and early cinema studies since films were shown as one of the attractions at the fairground.²⁶ These discussions tend to centre on descriptions of the theatre set-ups, which were modeled on train stables and contained moving seats, or the reactions of the crowds, many of whom had never seen a 'moving picture' before.

In contrast to the aforementioned scholarship, representations of Coney Island in this study will not be used to supplement an elaboration of Coney Island development, or illuminate some aspect of film history. The selection of Coney Island representations will be the focus of my investigation. A comprehensive study of these representations in photography and film from the turn of the twentieth century and film from the late 1920s demonstrates why and how Coney Island was a significant subject for representation. In addition, this study calls attention to the importance and role that Coney Island representations played in its history and evolution, encompassing the impact that Coney Island and Coney Island representations in the mass media had on American culture and entertainment.

Coney Island was a place of liberation and change. The social change and new technologies seen at Coney Island, as well as voyeuristic and mechanized ways of seeing available at the park permeate and constitute the representations of it. Coney Island representations focus on what is innovative at the site, both socially and technologically.

²⁵ Lauren Rabinovitz, "The Coney Island Comedies: Bodies and Slapstick at the Amusement Park and the Movies," in Keil, Charlie and Sheley Stamp, eds. *American Cinema's Transitional Era: Audiences, Institutions, Practices* (London: University of California Press, 2004).

²⁶ Lauren Rabinovitz, "The Coney Island Comedies: Bodies and Slapstick at the Amusement Park and the Movies," in Keil, Charlie and Sheley Stamp, eds. *American Cinema's Transitional Era: Audiences, Institutions, Practices* (London: University of California Press, 2004); Judith A. Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991); Gary Cross and John Walton, *The Playful Crowd: Pleasure Places in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

In addition, particularly in film, when Coney Island is taken up as subject matter, the mode of representation is distinct. Cinema capitalizes on its ability to reconceive the experience of time, space, and vision. It captures and reproduces the motions, dynamism, and mobilized vision of the park. This is evident in the turn-of-the-century films that I discuss, but becomes most obvious in the 1920s representations of Coney Island. In these instances the Coney Island segments are juxtaposed with the narrative structures of the majority of the film. My examples demonstrate the ways in which Coney Island, as subject matter, has liberated filmmakers from narrative constraints. As a result, they are able to focus on showing the spaces and ways of seeing that comprise the park, as well as the capacity of the camera to reproduce and enhance the experience. Inherent in all subject matter and modes of representation is the fundamental Coney Island mandate to entertain.

The photographs and films that I have selected as case studies in this investigation are those I believe best illustrate the capacity of these media to show and recreate Coney Island experiences. Representing Coney Island served economic, national, individual, social, cultural, and artistic ends. Situating this selection of representations in the contexts that they were produced in and considering their formal components will demonstrate how the photographs and films functioned, and the messages they communicated about Coney Island, while entertaining the vision of the viewer(s).

I begin my investigation by looking at representations of Coney Island in a selection of photographs that were in mass circulation at the turn of the century. Allan Sekula demonstrates that in the mid-nineteenth century photographs had been employed

for the purposes of social regulation.²⁷ Photographs were used by genteel reformers, who saw themselves as cultural guardians of the lower classes, to repress the classes beneath them, and as affordable aesthetic pleasures and forms of cultural enlightenment.²⁸ When Coney Island emerged, commercial photographers were among the first to document and circulate the social changes witnessed at Coney Island. Photographs of Coney Island were published in response to the middle and lower-class interests in new forms of amusement and entertainment. Coney Island representations disrupted the former moral economy of the images in circulation. New morals and systems of social behaviour were made visible, popularized, and advertised in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century photographs of Coney Island. In fact, little official advertising was done for Coney Island. Publicity was garnered through the distribution and sale of postcards and souvenirs (which included stereographs and photo albums).²⁹ For the purposes of my study, photographs are the best media to consider for their role in negotiating the social shifts that occurred at Coney Island. The photographs under consideration in this first chapter include picture postcards, stereographs, newspaper and magazine photographs by commercial photographers, and a souvenir photo album.

Photographs such as postcards and stereographs were collectable and widely distributed. The permanence of the photographic image as well as its reproducibility are significant in the context of my study. Photographs of changing social interactions at Coney Island were mass produced, circulated, and collected. As a result these images were viewed by many and could be looked at for extended periods of time, reinforcing

²⁷ Sekula, Allan. "The Body and The Archive." *October* 39 (Winter 1986): 8.

²⁸ Sekula, 8.

²⁹ Jones and Wills, 26.

the changes they re-presented and impressing them visually on those who saw them. Certain Coney Island behaviour could also be omitted from photographs. I will examine how photographs were used to form different conceptions of the park and socially acceptable forms of leisure. Through my analyses of specific photographs, I will examine how the images function to document, inform, and entertain. Victor Burgin relates that "photographs are texts that engage in discourses beyond themselves."³⁰ In the case of Coney Island, photographs participated in a number of discourses. Through my analyses of specific photographs, I will question how photographs construct and negotiate social, national, and individual identities; contribute to the democratization of entertainment and behaviour; as well as promote and manufacture the carnival spirit of the site. In addition to advertising and showing the social shifts occurring at Coney Island, photographs imitated Coney Island voyeuristic activities. The act of looking, however, was uninhibited and prolonged because of the separation the photograph affords between the viewer and the subject matter.

The novel visual experience, whether through the technological landscape of Coney Island or the mediated vision of the camera, responds to the human desires to show and to observe. The new technologies, spectacles, and forms of entertainment that comprised Coney Island influenced modes of looking. Whereas photography represented and engaged with these aspects of the park, cinema strove to recreate the experience. Early cinema aimed to reproduce the multi-layered spectacle of Coney Island as well as capture the visitor's experience of mobilized vision. In chapter two I investigate how the notion of *attraction* may be employed to establish a convergence between cinema and

³⁰ Victor Burgin, "Looking at Photographs," in *The Photography Reader*, edited by Liz Wells, (London: Routledge, 2003), 131.

Coney Island. Indeed both are celebrated as potent symbols of modern life, culture, and experience, and credited for their capacity to recreate modern experiences and movement, their construction of technology and electricity, and their role in entertaining the masses. In order to investigate the role of *attractions* in early cinema and Coney Island, and the relationship between the two types of entertainment, I consider three Edison films that take place at or represent the park. In an examination of *Coney Island at Night* (1905), *Electrocuting an Elephant* (1903), and *Rube and Mandy at Coney Island* (1903) I endeavor to shed light on the coalescence of science, technology, entertainment and spectatorship in film and at the amusement park. At the site and on the screen patrons and viewers are subjected to a multi-layered spectacle of competing attractions. I demonstrate how film and the fairground, although they are different forms of media, use similar methods to implement shocks and tricks intended to fascinate and attract the masses. Both forms of entertainment, products of modernity and urbanization, capitalize on the conditions and technologies that facilitated their emergence, transforming and re-presenting the vision and experience of the familiar.

In order to affirm the analogy between cinema and attraction, as exemplified in the films under discussion, I employ Tom Gunning's characterization of cinema as attraction. Gunning argues that the cinema theatre itself is comparable to the fairground attraction more so than it is to the traditions of legitimate theatre. He substantiates this claim indicting early cinema's "reference to the curiosity arousing devices of the fairground [...] its fascination with novelty and its foregrounding act of display."³¹ Gunning defines the 'attractive themes' in early cinema as "a fascination with visual

³¹ Tom Gunning, "Now You See it, Now You Don't: The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions," in *The Silent Cinema Reader*. Edited by Lee Grieveson and Peter Kramer (London: Routledge, 2004): 42.

experience that folds back on the very pleasure of looking."³² Additionally, he explains that the 'cinema of attractions' directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity through an exciting spectacle.³³ The attraction to be displayed may also be of a cinematic nature such as the close up, which was an attraction in its own right in early cinema, or cinematic manipulation such as slow or reverse motion. This technological means of representation constituted the initial fascination with cinema. And, as I argue, this fascination with the cinema corresponds to the emergence and fascination with Coney Island.

Coney Island was a popular subject for representation in photographs and film from the turn-of-the-century because of the new possibilities for subject matter and the ways the camera could represent those subjects. In chapter three I turn to a slightly later period, the 1920s, to examine how representations and connotations of Coney Island established at the turn of the century persist in later American mainstream films. In this chapter I examine the significance and representation of Coney Island in *It* (1927) and *The Crowd* (1928), both of which deal explicitly with issues of American modernity. The late 1920s are an important period in film history, marking the end of the silent film era. In silent films visual communication and expression remain dominant elements. This period is the latest instance of Coney Island representation in film that is most relevant to my study. In the late 1920s Coney Island was still at the height of its popularity. It remained entrenched in American culture as a site of social and sexual liberations. The

³² Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator" in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, edited by Linda Williams. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994):15.

³³ Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde," in *Early Cinema: Space Frame Narrative*, ed. Elsaesser, Thomas and Adam Barker (London: BFI Publishing, 1990): 59.

³³ Gunning, 57.

1920s was a period where the issues emerging at the turn-of-the-century had intensified. Sexual pervasiveness and a break from genteel traditions had permeated most aspects of culture and were visible in entertainment opportunities of Coney Island. These representations of Coney Island are situated in the context of a narrative film, which establishes a contrast between the rest of the film and representations of Coney Island.

The rides and experiences in the park continued to recreate the way people experienced time, space, and place. Consequently visual representations of the park in 1920s cinema capitalized on the opportunities for replicating and enhancing the forms and possibilities for modern, virtual, and mobilized spectatorship that occurred there. Through my analyses of Coney Island, as it is represented in *It* and *The Crowd*, I will maintain Tom Gunning's assertion that the desire to *show*, in cinema, continues to have a place in the films of the twenties, particularly in films that are considered dominantly narrative films. Gunning argues that "the cinema of attractions does not disappear with the dominance of narrative, but rather goes underground both into certain avant-garde practices and as a component of narrative films."³⁴ Exhibitionist cinema is maximized in these representations of Coney Island, encompassing the attractions of the fairground and the camera. These Coney Island sequences explore modern spaces, structures, and conditions. The efforts to entertain, appease the desires of mass audiences, and display the technologically and aesthetically expressive possibilities of the camera, result in a reference to and perpetuation of the reputations and representations of Coney Island that emerged in photography and film at the turn of the century.

³⁴ Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde," in *Early Cinema: Space Frame Narrative*, ed. Elsaesser, Thomas and Adam Barker (London: BFI Publishing, 1990) 57.

Chapter 1

WHAT GOES ON AT CONEY ISLAND:
PHOTOGRAPHY'S ROLE IN NEGOTIATING SOCIAL PRACTICE AND PUBLIC
AMUSEMENT

The emergence and popularity of Coney Island coincided with a critical period in American history. At the turn of the century, America's new mass culture was still in the process of formation and was not fully incorporated or accepted into the life of society as a whole.¹ In *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century*, John Kasson defines Coney Island as the purest symbol and expression of the new mass culture and as a site in which the prevailing social and public order was challenged.² Since Coney Island was not considered a subject worthy of representation in the fine arts, commercial photographers were the first to document and disseminate the technological and social innovations they witnessed there. Photography had been one of the most powerful means to communicate ideological messages and to make public statements about class sensibility, solidarity, and morality. I intend to examine how late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century photographs of Coney Island participated in these discourses and, more specifically, how they contributed to discourses about social conflict and change in the context of public amusements. To do so, I will analyze a selection of picture postcards, stereographs, newspaper and magazine photographs by commercial photographers, as well as a souvenir picture book, all of which were in mass circulation around the turn of the century.

Through my analyses of these photographs, I will explore the social shifts occurring at Coney Island, focusing on the mixed presence of gender, class, and race as

¹ John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill & Lang, 1978), 8.

² Kasson, 12.

well as the evolution of heterosocial behaviour. I will question how specific photographs construct and negotiate social, national, and individual identities. The capacity of these photographs to promote and manufacture the carnival spirit of the site will also be examined. I will consider how the contexts of the photographs (as a postcard or in a magazine) and/or accompanying text, choice of subject matter, and/or formal characteristics may affect the meanings and roles of the images. Subjectivity and spectatorship are integral to my discussion. As such, I will consider Victor Burgin's argument that "photographs are texts which engage in discourse beyond themselves."³ The intertextuality of the photograph is paramount to my consideration of different, intersecting meanings and readings as the same subject matter is often used to communicate diametrically opposed convictions about Coney Island, what it represents, and social conduct at the park. The photograph warrants the visibility (or invisibility) of social changes; however, the activities in the photographs and at Coney Island remain severed from the everyday public, social sphere.⁴ Photographs of Coney Island that embodied precisely what social reformers found to be problematic in the new mass culture were the images that entertained the public and incited their desires to participate in and accept this new social order. While the genteel social reformist's prominence and authority decreased, the popularity of Coney Island persisted. Rather than a rejection of this new and popular place of amusement and the forms of leisure practiced there, an alternative photographic representation of Coney Island was constructed. Coney Island was photographed, and through careful selection of content and form, pictured in a

³ Victor Burgin, "Looking at Photographs," in *The Photography Reader*, edited by Liz Wells, (London: Routledge, 2003), 131.

⁴ Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 24.

manner that situated it comfortably within the established social boundaries of acceptable, moral behaviour. I will demonstrate how the actual practices and desires of different genders and classes, as well as the entertainment and economic motivations derived from these, influenced the construction, mass circulation, and interpretation of these photographs. These representations play an integral role in the negotiation and transformations of the social environment at the time and the ways we interpret and understand it today.

The prominence of a genteel Victorian culture in turn-of-the-century America had been, in part, secured by the formation of institutions such as museums, libraries and theatres.⁵ Photographs on postcards, in books, magazines, periodicals, and newspapers were used to envision, diffuse, and impose their ideologies. Allan Sekula makes a case for how photography linked the sphere of culture and that of social regulation.⁶ He quotes portrait photographer Marcus Aurelius Root who, writing in 1864, indicated the connection between pleasure and discipline, arguing for a moral economy of the image. Root stressed the salutary effects of photographs on working class family life and as a form of cultural enlightenment.⁷ He describes how the wide distribution of portraits of the great would "subject everyday experience to a regular parade of moral exemplars."⁸ Photographs were also used to demonstrate the effectiveness of social reform. For example *Once a Little Vagrant, Now a Little Workman* was a series of photographs published to show the success and transformation of the boys who entered Thomas John Barnardo's school for vagrants.

⁵ Kasson, 26.

⁶ Marcus Aurelius Root, *The Camera and the Pencil*, 1864, reprint, Pawliett, Vermont, Helios, 1971, pp. 420-421. Quoted in Sekula, 8.

⁷ Sekula, 8.

⁸ Sekula, 9.

Social environments and photography had been used as a means of social control, intended to shape and uplift mass culture. Walter Benjamin explains that mechanical reproduction shattered cultural traditions, generated new cultural forms, and created a multiplicity of environments where cultural products could be experienced.⁹ Traditional, elite culture could not rival the abundance of copies made possible through mechanical reproduction. In the midst of a shifting social order the managers of mass media recognized a new market in the urban middle class who were eager to respond to amusement and embrace activities previously existing on the margins of American life.¹⁰ Kathy Peiss posits that "Leisure activities may affirm the cultural patterns embedded in other institutions, but may also offer an arena for the articulation of different values and behaviour."¹¹ Under the scope of Coney Island, new moral and social systems were made visible, advertised, and popularized. The Coney Island amusement park entrepreneurs did not advertise directly for their parks. Publicity for the parks was established indirectly through the postcards that were given away or the souvenirs (such as stereographs and photo albums of Coney Island subject matter) that were for sale. The same channels employed by the former cultural elite to maintain and assert power were infused with images of Coney Island, the very locus of social tension and experimentation. Beginning in 1898, the one-cent stamp enabled affordable greetings to be sent even a short distance, such as from Coney Island to the city.

Picture or "real photo" postcards of Coney Island are the first type of photograph that I will examine. John Kasson emphasizes the concurrent development of Coney Island and the abolition of post office restrictions on mailing picture postcards. The very nature

⁹ Walter Benjamin. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical reproduction*, quoted in Sklar, 88.

¹⁰ Kasson, 37.

¹¹ Peiss, 4.

of the postcard and the issues surrounding its emergence were analogous in many ways to Coney Island concerns and properties. Both the postcard and Coney Island provoked anxieties about the transformation of space and social spheres. Coney Island undermined and collapsed male and female as well as public and private spheres that were respected in city life. The Coney Island rides, spectatorship, and leisure environment facilitated the frequent interaction of strangers and mixed-sex relationships that were not permitted in the city. The picture postcard, as a form of communication, minimized regional and national distance, connecting people across the city and the country.¹² The threat was inherent in the publicity of the new form of mail and communication. Since the message was written on the card and sent unconcealed, there was no separation between the private message and the public sphere.¹³ Furthermore, the publicity of the images and message was heightened by the fact that people collected and displayed these cards in their homes for others to see. As such, it also functioned as a form of visual entertainment, much like Coney Island itself. These postcards had a strong appeal for those of little or no education, for all that was required was a brief message and, in cases where the message was already printed on the card, only the signature of the sender. Another problem seen with these cards was the disintegration of an older epistolary style in favour of a new abbreviated form of communication.¹⁴ New and abbreviated forms of communication flourished at Coney Island. People used slang and spoke out, using unrefined forms of language in reaction to rides and spectacles.

¹² Robert MacDougall, "The Wire Devils: Pulp Thrillers, the Telephone, and Action at a Distance in the Wiring of a Nation," *American Quarterly* 58.3 (2006), 721.

¹³ MacDougall, 721.

¹⁴ Kasson, 42.

A central concern of what follows is the way in which the photographs on the postcards functioned to communicate messages about the individuals who sent them and, in the process, propagated ideas about the nation and the dominant social practices of the time. Individual, national, and social identities are visibly constructed and negotiated in these images, revealing and contributing to the broader social crises and changes of the period. Contradictory as well as controversial conceptions of Coney Island and personal identity are constructed, publicized, and transmitted via picture postcards. An analysis of a number of types of these postcards will elucidate the details of the context as well as demonstrate the multifaceted roles of the photographs.

Rosamond Brown Vaule points out that advertisers were among the first to capitalize on the medium of the postcard.¹⁵ It began with text ads and developed into picture postcards, which contributed to the success and mass distribution of these ads.¹⁶ In the postcard of *Stauch's at Coney Island* (Fig. 1.1), its function as an advertisement is made explicit through the text on the reverse of the card: "Stauch's Coney Island. Open All Year. View showing bathers at Stauch's beach and baths. Accommodations for 2000 bathers." The message implied in the text is that this place is always accessible, "open all year" and available to anyone and everyone. It suggests that the viewer could be one of the two thousand visitors accommodated by the beach. The picture of the crowded beach promotes the presence of the crowd which evokes the popularity of the sight as well as the anonymity of the masses. The notion of becoming anonymous in this large crowd would have appealed to many who embraced anonymous crowds as an opportunity to

¹⁵ Rosamond Brown Vaule, *As We Were: American Photographic Postcards, 1905-193* (Boston: David R. Godine, 2004), 17.

¹⁶ Vaule, 17.

escape social restraints and boundaries.¹⁷ Kasson relates "Coney Island had a code of conduct which is all her own" and one of the reasons for this was the presence of the crowd coupled with the holiday spirit.¹⁸ Crowds at Coney Island, particularly at the beaches, also meant unconventional gender, class, and racial mixing. The democratic accessibility and mixed-presence at the beach became associated for some, mainly immigrants, with the American dream of freedom and democracy.¹⁹ The other obvious allures of the beach were the relaxation of social constraints on behaviour, posture, and dress. All of these components are reinforced visually in the panoramic view which captures the playful activities of the crowd dressed in swimwear. In addition to the capacity to advertise, the postcard also functions as a record of place, memory, and national pride. The sender or buyer of the postcard is likely commemorating or communicating his or her presence and experience at this place.²⁰ Thus, the owner or sender of the card is situating him or herself amidst this crowd and associating him or herself with the connotations Coney Island beaches embody. Simultaneously this postcard functions to advertise a location at Coney Island, propagate national ideologies, remember a visit, in addition to situating and identifying the sender as a certain type of Coney Island participant.

Another beach scene postcard (Fig. 1.2) depicts heterosocial freedom more explicitly. The *Greetings from Coney Island* postcard features a photograph of a man and woman embracing on a beach. Departing from the panoramic view of the previous

¹⁷ David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements*, (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 9.

¹⁸ Kasson, 37.

¹⁹ Kasson, 61.

²⁰ Eleanor Goodman, *The U.S. Postcard, Tourism, and the Construction of Place and Past*, Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Studies Association 2008-10-09 <http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p113993_index.html>.

postcard, this photograph focuses on the specific interaction of one couple and a few surrounding clusters of people. The presence of the crowd is still acknowledged through the numerous, though blurred figures which fill the background of the postcard. Of interest here is the embrace of the anonymous couple who very publicly engage in a display of affection for one another. This image may have been less alarming and unconventional had the figures embracing been identified as husband and wife. Coney Island was known for the relaxation of societal conventions which contributed to its popularity as a destination for young men and women. Strict etiquette books that circulated in the middle classes even outlined when it was proper for a man to tip his hat to a lady in public; interaction with strangers was off limits.²¹ In most classes and races a certain decorum of courtship was maintained, where couples were always to be attended by a chaperone in the home.²² Ironically, the only privacy they had was in public. The crowds and the relaxed beach setting at Coney was the ultimate site for couples to interact. Without the text, the site in this photograph would not be identifiable as the Coney Island beach. The text is thus paramount to the interpretation of the image. Sending a "greeting" from Coney Island with a picture that verifies the notions of social and sexual liberations associated with it reinforces and promotes the nature of this location as such.

As in the previous example, this postcard is a record of place, an advertisement, and a souvenir. It also makes a statement about personal identity. Sending or collecting this image of Coney Island conveys a broad range of personal views, visions, and values about the leisure activities and use of recreational space at Coney Island by the

²¹ Kasson, 38.

²² Peiss, 52.

consumer.²³ Such postcards offered a way to celebrate one's outing as a step outside the everyday world, in this case a step outside of the social constraints of the city. The behaviour of the masses inspires and constitutes the picture postcards which become a means for individuals and the nation to communicate and circulate messages about personal and social identity and change.²⁴ At the same time, the photographs circulate visual records that document and advertise Coney Island activity. The Coney Island marketers and producers of this type of picture postcard have looked to and captured the practices and behaviour at Coney Island which attract and incite pleasure. The people and their practices are commodified, subjectified, and commercialized in the production of such postcards. The implications of the visible expression of major shifts in sexual mores resonate in far-reaching and immediate social change, making it visible, inciting a desire to participate in it and suggesting that the sender is or has participated in it.

Images of unfamiliar places and public behaviour, as depicted on picture postcards, may have made their way to rural cities and citizens.²⁵ Postcards functioned as a form of armchair tourism. These pictures facilitated a more distanced experience, familiarizing the viewer with the place and its activities before actually going there. This photograph is visually entertaining and pleasurable for the viewer, who is enabled to voyeuristically gaze, uninterrupted, upon the couple embracing. The advertisers and promoters of the park have capitalized on the desires of those who wanted to go to the park for this reason, promoting and perpetuating the spectacle of romantic expression.

²³ Greg Ringer, "Gender Posed: The People Behind the Postcards" in *Tourism and Gender: Embodiment, Sensuality and Experience*, edited by A. Pritchard et al., (Oxford: CABI Publishing, 2007), 223.

²⁴ Ringer, 225.

²⁵ Vaule, 38.

Another genre of American postcard popular at Coney Island was portraiture. The people who comprised real photo postcards were its senders, subjects, and savers.²⁶ A visit to the photo studio itself became a popular form of entertainment and recreation at Coney Island. Portraiture is understood as a form of self-image making, part of the act of self-definition, status, and validation.²⁷ Although, as I have demonstrated in my previous discussion of postcards, a portrait is not integral to a construction of personal identity or experience. The studio portrait postcards (Fig. 1.3, 1.4 & 1.5) appear to be posed. They are reconstructions of an already very constructed and fabricated location. The focus in these photographs is on the person or the people being photographed. In Figures 1.3 and 1.5 the text is used to specify the location of the couple who are pictured in a real Coney Island location. The figures in the portrait photographs are at the Coney Island amusement park, photographed inside a studio which reconstructs a place in Coney Island or on their way there —on the Coney Island Express, for example. The specificity of the location, as it could be any studio or train, is communicated through the text. The posed portraits (Fig. 1.4 & 1.5) depict well dressed, very composed, ordered couples in respectable positions and activities. They are not overly amused nor do they succumb to the chaos, pleasure, and temptation often associated with Coney Island. They present themselves and their visit to Coney Island within a morally and socially acceptable construct of leisure, something reinforced by the posed and ordered composition of the photograph. These examples of 'proper' depictions are situated outside of Coney Island on the train further dissociating the people depicted with the immorality of Coney Island itself.

²⁶ Vaule, 9.

²⁷ Vaule, 54.

The underlying anxieties surrounding the passage from the city to Coney Island would not have been overlooked. The trains and ships that transported the masses to Coney also became associated with inappropriate social and moral conduct.²⁸ Some regarded these modes of transit as vehicles of temptation and immorality. Masked once more by anonymity, transportation became another site for men and women to flirt and interact as they might not in the confines of their home or city streets. The backdrop, which depicts the outside of the train, seems to avoid these connotations. The propriety of the subjects remains ambiguous in Figure 1.3. The connotations of the Coney Island Express and the man's arm around the woman's shoulder leave the photograph open to interpretation. In Figure 1.4 the man and woman remain at a great distance from one another, but their position on a balloon ride which will sail out of sight conveys a suggestion of possible mischief. A trip to Coney Island, however virtuous the picture or the journey cannot be separated from the prevalent social tension and changes practiced at and associated with the park.

Picture postcards, whether portraits, panoramic views of crowds and locations, or specific people and behaviours, could represent the kind of time you had at Coney, or the kind of image of yourself at Coney you wished to convey. Are you immersed in these massive crowds, frolicking and mixing with the opposite sex and different races at the beach? Or are you abiding by the strict rules of social conduct that you are bound by in the street of the city? Coney is pictured as a democratic, inclusive form of unbridled play and recreation for the masses as well as a civilized respectable place of leisure.²⁹

Different, sometime opposing, and multi-layered messages are made visible on and

²⁸ Peiss, 67.

²⁹ Although, on the postcards I have been able to access, this respectability is not represented in situ, but in a studio.

circulated through these picture postcards. These photographs enable the manipulation and malleability of Coney Island reputations and activities as well as the identities and social positions associated with them. Personal values and constructs of identity were negotiated through postcards, which also conveyed messages about social standing through the quality and content of the card.³⁰ Reception of the photographs is often mediated by the text or by the very inclusion of the name Coney Island. Coney Island could not be divorced from the prevalent sexual and socially liberal associations it had acquired. These associations were further established and diffused by the proliferation of such subjects in postcard collections and other photographs.

Stereographs, a form of visual entertainment, like picture postcards, were collected and mass produced, and often featured sights and scenes from Coney Island as their subject matter. Stereoscopic viewers were a hand-held device used to create an optical illusion of three-dimensionality from two two-dimensional images. The stereograph consisted of two of the same images, often photographs, represented from slightly different perspectives. Every aspect of Coney Island was captured and reproduced in stereographs: the architecture, the amusement parks, the crowds, the people, the performances, the exhibitions, the beach, the rides, as well as new technologies such as electric lights (Fig. 1.6 & 1.7). The stereographs that I have chosen to focus on are those that depict new emerging expressions of heterosocial relationships, and social tensions surrounding crowds and women.

Stereographs could function as souvenirs or memories of one's trip or experience at Coney Island as well as forms of 'armchair tourism'. There was little social

³⁰ Vaule, 62.

controversy surrounding the use and distribution of stereographs.³¹ Stereoscopic viewing was an activity that took place in the confines of the home, which families could participate in together, or couples could engage in under the supervision of a chaperone. I am interested in spectatorship and the prolonged and perpetuated act of viewing the stereograph. The subject matter selected for some of the stereographs enable a form of voyeuristic viewing similar to that which one might experience at Coney Island beaches, for example. Titles and text on stereographs mediate the interpretation of the image as well as their participation in social changes.

Stereographs functioned as celebrations of American technology and progress. They also functioned as advertisements, comic narratives, pornography, and as tools for the religious, moral, and educational edification of the population.³² A collective learning experience was manufactured in the mass creation and circulation of these photographs which simultaneously functioned as exhibitions of nineteenth-century social conventions and cultural aspirations.³³ An accessible and democratic form of education and entertainment, stereographs documented many facets of American cultural life.³⁴ It is important to consider the commercial nature of the stereograph which situates its subject matter as a response to or reflection of the shifting demands, interests, and practices of a mass audience (of consumers). An analysis of a selection of stereographs will demonstrate how the image could operate to communicate information and/or enable the

³¹ Edward W. Earle, *Points of View: The Stereograph in America: A Cultural History*, (Rochester, Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1979), 12.

³² Earle, 18.

³³ Earle, 106.

³⁴ Earle, 106.

viewer to perceive personal or even cultural associations. Stereographs often became sites of cultural commentary, making jokes about "darkies" and other ethnic groups.³⁵

Shadows on the Beach (Fig. 1.8) exemplifies the turn of the century fascination with other ethnic groups and documents the racial mixing that occurred on the shores of Coney Island. The frame and composition of the photograph segregate the African American subjects from the rest of the crowd on the beach. In the background of the photograph, many tiny figures are visible, indicating that they are separate, but not alone on the beach. This separation focuses the attention of the viewer on these specific figures while the title plays on the colour of their skin, emphasizing it as something to look at. The figures become objects of difference and evidence of the social diversity at the Coney Island beaches. Analogous to one of the attractions at Coney Island, the ethnographic displays, the stereograph functions as an ethnographic exhibit of the African Americans. The separation from the crowd through framing as well as the distance achieved in the medium of the photograph enables a distanced, less threatening observation of this racial group. They do not confront the viewer, thus enabling uninterrupted, unthreatened, and prolonged viewing. The negative connotation of the word 'shadows' in the title calls attention to their colour and their difference. The text constructs a message and reading of the image which situates the African Americans as a source of social tension and suggests they are not welcome.

Another group whose presence and behaviour at Coney Island provoked the visual interest and delight of the masses were the young women. Just as in the *Greetings from Coney Island* postcard (Fig. 1.2), the *Ah There, Coney Island* stereograph (Fig. 1.9) exploits Coney Island's reputation as a location for new heterosocial interactions,

³⁵ Earle, 24.

flirtation, and sensuality. The women look at the camera as they lift their bathing dresses, displaying their legs and frilly undergarments for the viewer. They have formed a line and evidently posed for the photograph, smiling as they willingly and knowingly create what would have been a titillating spectacle for male viewers. The pleasure and satisfaction involved in the observation of this image emanates both textually and visually. "Ah There" conflates Coney Island with the subject matter and expresses satisfaction with the view of the women. The text and image work together to solidify a construction of Coney Island as a site of frivolity, visual pleasure, and underdressed, overassertive female spectacles.

The image on the stereograph functions in multiple ways, offering simultaneous and/or differing messages depending on the gender and social position of the viewer. As an advertisement this photograph would have invoked a male desire to go to Coney Island to see displays such as this on the beach. It may also have enticed young women who wished to participate in such liberated forms of dress, posture, and behaviour. Alternately, the image could also convey precisely the spectacle and social behaviour that some people saw as problematic. The female spectacle accessible at Coney Island has been perpetuated and diffused to an even wider audience via the stereograph.

The act of conspicuous consumption inherent in stereograph viewing corresponds to the nature of Coney Island activity and amusement which facilitated and encouraged voyeurism as a form of entertainment and participation in the amusements. For example in the *Shooting the Chutes* (Fig. 1.10) stereograph one can see the heads of the crowds gathered to watch the people on the rides. Another example of openly solicited spectatorship occurs at the Love Tunnel ride which has a sign that reads "Do They Neck?"

Watch!" Participants are made aware of, and become a part of, the Coney Island spectacle in such instances. The viewer of a stereograph is aware of his or her role as an observer; however, the stereograph establishes a distance between the viewer and the actual subject. The photograph enables a prolonged viewing experience.

Coney Island amusement parks and the stereograph provide very structured experiences for participants and viewers.³⁶ While response and reaction vary depending on the viewer of the image or the participant at the park, both the photograph and the amusement park are highly constructed spaces which attempt to organize specific experiences and provoke desired reactions. For example at Coney Island amusement parks the rides and structures shape the way patrons experience time, space, and each other. Burgin affirms the structured space of the photograph in the following, describing the photograph as "a place of work, a structured and structuring space within which the reader deploys, and is deployed by what codes he or she is familiar with in order to make sense."³⁷

The way the experience and interpretation of the image are constructed has to do with subject matter, framing, composition and, often times, as in the stereograph *The Guileless Maid* (Fig. 1.11), the accompanying caption. This becomes clear in a comparison to a similar photograph of girls at the Coney Island beach *On the Beach-Coney Island* (Fig. 1.12) that circulated in the press. This photograph features a cluster of figures while the stereograph focuses on one girl. The actions and dress of the girls in the other photographs are similar to the *The Guileless Maid*, but the reading of the image is

³⁶ Burgin, 137.

³⁷ Burgin, 137.

structured and altered by the use of text.³⁸ In the stereograph the text problematizes the image indicating that the girl in the photograph has been violated by unwelcome gazes at the Coney Island beach, as well as the voyeuristic gaze of the stereograph viewer. Isolating her from the crowds focuses the attention on the issues specific to this girl and her actions. While the text problematizes the image and notions surrounding the voyeurism, the fact that it appears in stereograph form simultaneously encourages the viewer to keep on looking. Abigail Solomon-Godeau posits that the "voyeuristic components of the look...are immeasurably heightened by the stereopticon apparatus which masks out everything but the image."³⁹ She foregrounds the private act of viewing and the three-dimensional illusionism which fills the viewer's visual field as central contributors to the voyeuristic gaze inherent in the stereograph.⁴⁰ With the way that the photograph is composed, the viewer is positioned almost below the girl so that her legs and lifted dress become the focal point of the image. The viewer gazes up at her, almost up her dress. The maid is, in a sense, implicated by her naivety. In the newspaper photograph the text does not attempt to mediate the viewer's reading of the image in the same way. The excitement and pleasure of the newspaper photo is not intentionally threaded with a textual enhancement of the simultaneous threats and anxieties that may have existed for young girls at the beach. The erotics of looking are enhanced and prolonged by the nature of the stereograph. The meaning of the photograph is dependant on the subjectivity of the viewer as well as the subject matter.⁴¹

³⁸ Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message" and "Rhetoric of the Image", in *Image Music Text*, translated by Stephen Heath, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 25.

³⁹ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock: Essays on photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 228.

⁴⁰ Solomon-Godeau, 229.

⁴¹ Solomon-Godeau, 229.

In some cases the subject matter of the photographs has been manipulated in order to construct a representation of Coney Island as a respectable form of entertainment. The souvenir picture book *Coney Island: The People's Playground* (Fig. 1.13) published in 1906 is a photographic purification of Coney Island in pictures. This book demonstrates how photographs were used to try to situate Coney Island within an acceptable and class-specific conceptualization of leisure. The first page reads as follows:

The publisher's excuse for "inflicting upon a long suffering and patient public another picture book of Coney Island, is embodied in that fact that there is not, previous to to-day, a really worthy souvenir book of this great amusement resort, and that the public will appreciate a goodly collection of all the desirable attractions and places of note made from original negatives taken especially for this work, this year. It is the hope that Coney Island, the People's Playground will be appreciated by the better class of the Island's patrons, that we will commend it to their attention, assuring them that each succeeding year the little red covered book will be equally as good and down to the minute as it is this year."⁴²

It is clearly stated in the text that the book is intended for the 'better classes.' The fifteen cents cost also suggests middle-class consumption. The selection of photographs in the book make visible how and why Coney is an acceptable form of leisure for classes who wish to participate in traditional and genteel forms of recreation. For example, the first picture in the book, an image of the pyramid on the beach (Fig. 1.15), zooms in on a portion of the crowd. This is an intentionally ordered view of the crowd on the beach. All of the subjects are lined up and pose for the camera. The pyramid construction evokes a sense of organized play. Similar forms of organized play were practiced in urban playgrounds, where recreation was organized and supervised by middle-class institutions such as the Playground Association.⁴³ Any images of massive crowds or chaotic

⁴² See Figure 1.14.

⁴³ Gary Cross and John Walton, *The Playful Crowd: Pleasure Places in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 115.

behaviour one might find on or associate with the beaches have been cropped from the picture.

Pictures of crowded beaches and Coney Island boulevards do appear in the book (Fig. 1.17 & 1.18). In these photos the crowd becomes a minor detail, overpowered in the images by the grandiose architecture or scenery that surrounds it, or abstracted by a distant vantage point. The photographs that are of crowded beach scenes (Fig. 1.19 & 1.17) never focus in on specific behaviour or the types of people who make up the crowd. The crowded beach in this period, despite a number of negative connotations, could also function as a symbol of American equality and liberty, where all classes and races are welcome. The messages of the wonder and purity of Coney Island included in the textual history propose that these beaches are viewed in that context. Furthermore, these beach scenes (Fig. 1.19 & 1.20) are balanced, with the turn of a page, by, for example, an image of a reception hospital located on the Coney beach. The viewer is reminded of the morally uplifting and healing capacities of the beach. The beaches at Coney Island are pictured as national symbols and associated with health and rejuvenation, extending their worth and function beyond the content of amusements and leisure. This is not an innovation within this souvenir picture book. Examples of the Coney Island beaches pictured as proper sites of leisure or healing can be found in magazine and newspaper photographs such as Figure 1.21 and 1.22.

In short, the mythologizing history of Coney Island that accompanies the photographs acknowledges the impure, immoral, and exotic origins of the park prior to its reconstruction and then dispels them, poetically relating that the "Coney Island of today has been purified as fine gold by fire, and sphinx-like it has arisen from the ashes, a

larger, handsomer, better Coney, worthy of your love and mine—an amusement resort at once the pride and admiration of New York, the wonder of the world.”(Fig. 1.23) Coney Island is glorified photographically and textually, as a wonder, not only of the United States, but of the world. The panoramic form of the photographs contributes to the visual grandeur of the scenes in which the park and locations sprawl across large distances and fill the compositions with new and advanced forms of technology (Fig. 1.25).

Like the other photographs I have examined, the photo album functions as a souvenir, and a visual form of entertainment. It has the capacity to fulfill the desires of the armchair tourist. The photographs take the viewer on a visual journey through the different spaces and places of the park. Empty ballrooms and cafes are pictured (Fig. 1.26), allowing the viewer to imagine him or herself there and to visually wander through the spaces uninhibited by a subject's gaze. The empty ballrooms, beer gardens, and cafes also deliberately avoid and omit any questionable forms of dance or interaction that might have occurred within these spaces. The filmic nature of the album's composition contributes to its entertainment component. The viewer moves visually from space to space as in a montage sequence, as vantage points, angles, and focal points shift from one scene to the next. The camera's mediation is made known to the viewer through these shifts. Zooming in and out of scenes (Fig. 1.24 & 1.25) and providing panoramic views of new technology celebrates and makes explicit the technological capacity of the camera itself as well as the subject matter it represents.

In some instances a location that is pictured empty will be followed by a photograph of the same location populated with figures. For example, in the photograph of the Deutscher Garten (Fig. 1.26) the café is depicted empty and the next photo (Fig.

1.27) reproduces the same location with figures who are all posed, facing the camera, and well-dressed, an audience of a caste of society the viewer or owner of the book could identify with. The album provides an opportunity to explore the space and then to see the patrons and activities that occur within that space. All of the other photographs that include close-ups of people whose faces are visible have the figures organized in rows, facing and/or posing for the camera. All of the photographs in this souvenir book are highly composed, structured, and maintain very ordered compositions and subject matter which is in sync with the message of ordered, acceptable entertainment at Coney Island that the book aims to transmit.

Having examined Coney Island as it is pictured in postcards, newspapers, and stereographs, it is evident that this picture book departs from popular representations of the park. I have considered numerous examples of photographs where specific people and their activities are employed as referents or symbols of Coney Island and the forms of entertainment and amusement found there. While the crowds are included in the book, the dominant focus and subject matter are locations and architecture. The deliberate omission of visible, controversial social changes, or behaviour associated with or practiced at Coney Island, constitutes a genteel reformist resistance to the visual reproduction, perpetuation, and acceptance of those changes. This book successfully perpetuates an image of Coney Island that adheres to 'better class' regulations of public decorum and social practice. The text and photographs in the book manufacture an alternative way of perceiving Coney Island. Derived from the desires and practices of the genteel, the book provides the consumer with what he or she wants, or is allowed to consume, without violating social propriety.

For example, the photograph of the Helter Skelter in the book (Fig. 1.29) and the photograph of the Razzle Dazzle by the press (Fig. 1.30) depict two very different pictures of a similar ride and the spectatorship involved. The photograph included in the picture book is posed. The man at the side of the slide has turned to face the camera and there is a wall which appears to block his view of the woman descending the slide. In the press photograph, however, the camera captures the act of voyeurism as the man watches the women coming down the slide. Here, he is allowed a glimpse up her skirt at her undergarments in the process of the descent. In addition to carefully selected content, the high quality of the photos and the book communicate messages about the social status and identity of the owner. The book ensures that morality and propriety remain in tact in this representation of Coney Island. It is displayed as a destination worthy of and acceptable for genteel patronage.

Commercial photographs of Coney Island in the form of picture postcards, stereographs, newspaper and magazine pictures, and souvenir photo albums circulated as reportage, souvenirs, advertisements and forms of visual entertainment. The managers of mass culture looked to the desires and practices of different genders and classes, as well as entertainment and economic motivations derived from them in the construction and depiction of Coney Island and its amusements. An alternative to everyday social practice, constraints, and interaction, Coney Island was a site of social liberation, social experimentation, social tension, and social voyeurism. Public photographs challenge, question, dissect, replicate, and make visible or blatantly omit these changes. At the turn-of-the-century, and in the visual material addressed in this study, Coney Island and the photographic medium exist separate from everyday, established systems of social conduct

and structure. It is in these spaces, at Steeplechase or on the beach at Coney Island, or in a photograph of these places, that these separate spheres begin to intersect with the everyday and challenge convention. Photographs such as those used in stereographs constituted activities analogous to the forms of spectatorship experienced at the site. The infusion, popularity, and mass distribution of Coney Island photographs familiarized and perpetuated the social behaviour and new class interactions that occurred there. The separation of the photograph and Coney Island from reality and the city life enabled interpretations of the photographs and their content to simultaneously replicate and comment on controversial behaviour and modes of looking. The distance between the viewer and the photograph, between Coney Island and everyday practices and social systems, facilitated a simultaneous communication of the apprehension and appeal inherent in the new forms of leisure. Choices concerning content and formal characteristics, such as subject matter, framing and composition, as well as textual accompaniments contribute to a structured interpretation of the photographs and, in addition, reveal the malleability of Coney Island representation, as exemplified in the souvenir picture book. The meaning and message conveyed by Coney Island subjects in photography are guided by the structure of the photograph, although, the subjectivity of the viewer will determine how he or she interprets it. Different meanings and messages intersect and/or resonate depending on the viewer and the context. The purchase, collection, and/or exhibition of picture postcards, stereographs, or a souvenir picture album enabled consumer construction and negotiation of personal, social, and national identities. These photographs proliferated and continue to resonate diverse and multifaceted messages concerning social tension between the classes and inherent in the

amusement at Coney Island, negotiating the understanding and acceptance or rejections to social changes.

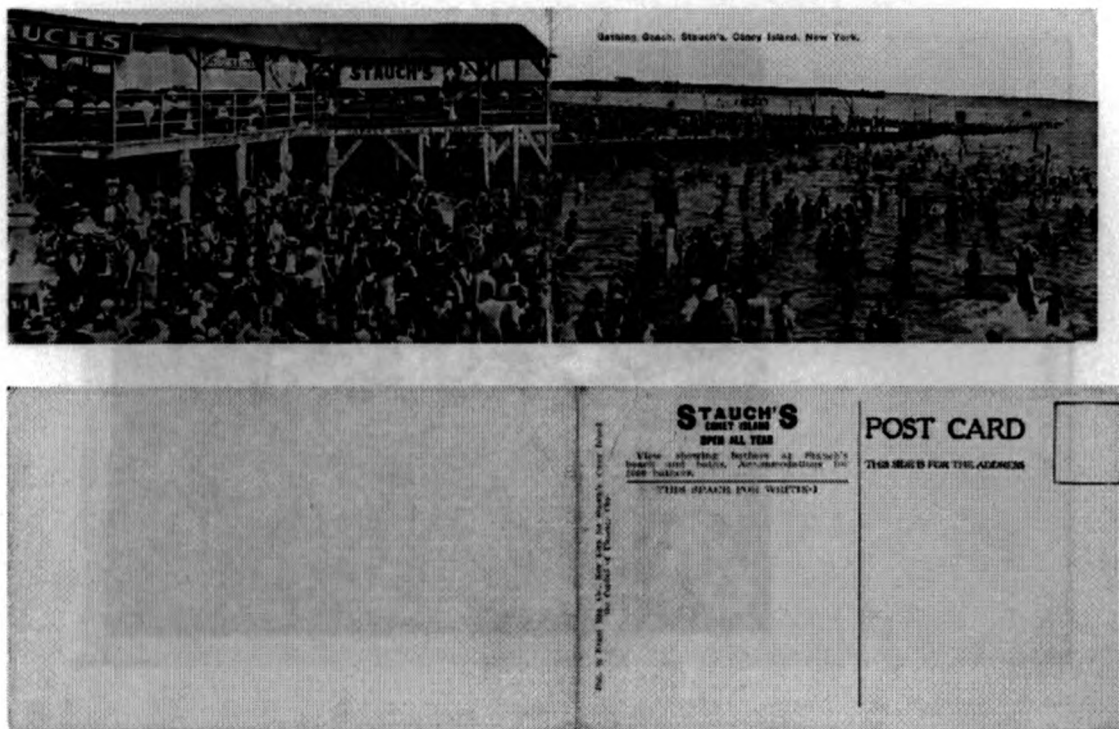


Figure 1.1

Untitled. Photo Studio Postcard. Coney Island History Project Collection, Brooklyn (about 1900).

Figure 1.1

Bathing Beach, Stauch's Coney Island, New York. Postcard. Coney Island History Project Postcard Collection, Brooklyn (about 1900).



Figure 1.2

Untitled. Photo Studio Postcard. Coney Island History Project Collection, Brooklyn (about 1900).

Figure 1.2

Greeting from Coney Island. Postcard. Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn (about 1905).



Figure 1.3 *Untitled. Photo Studio Postcard. Coney Island History Project Collection, Brooklyn (about 1900).*

Figure 1.3 *Untitled. Photo Studio Postcard. Coney Island History Project Collection, Brooklyn (about 1900).*



Figure 1.4 *Untitled. Photo Studio Postcard. Coney Island History Project Collection, Brooklyn (about 1900).*

Figure 1.5 *Coney Enchanted City in All its Brilliancey. Stereograph. Copyright Underwood and Underwood. Library of Congress (1922).*

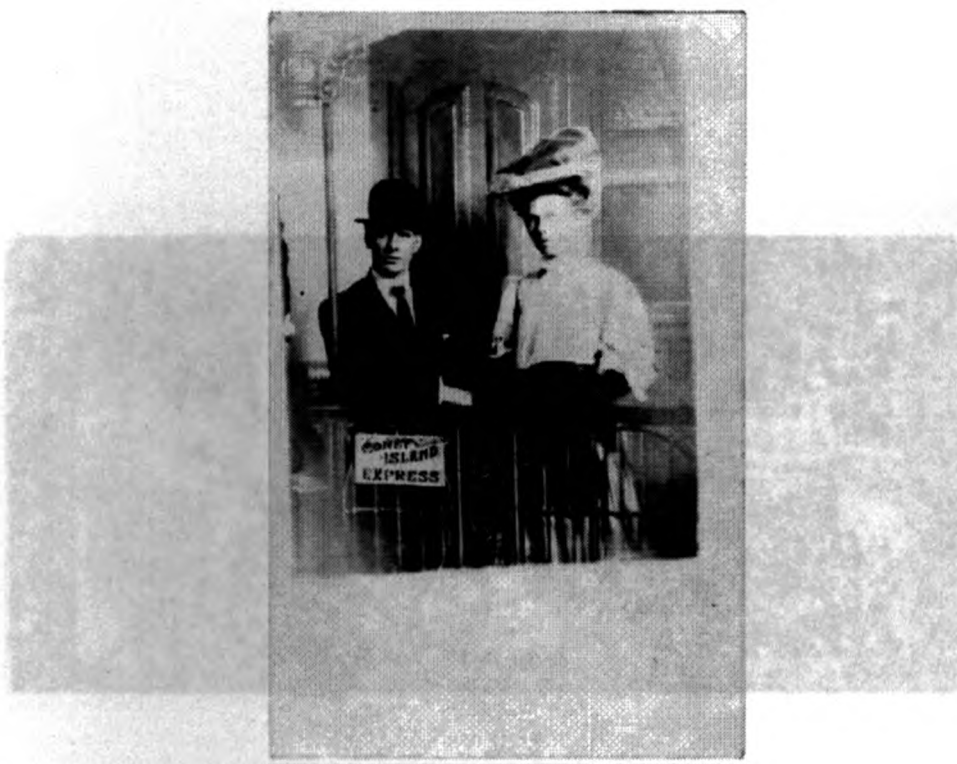


Figure 1.5 *Untitled*. Photo Studio Postcard. Coney Island History Project Collection, Brooklyn (about 1900). Underwood and Underwood. Library of Congress (1903)



Figure 1.6 *Coney Enchanted City in All its Brilliancy*. Stereograph. Copyright Underwood and Underwood. Library of Congress (1922). ⁸⁸ (1896).



Figure 1.7 *Brilliant Luna Park at Night: New York's Greatest Pleasure Resort.* Stereograph. Copyright Underwood and Underwood. Library of Congress (1903).



Figure 1.8 *Shadows on the Beach (Coney Island) Coloured Girls Bathing.* Stereograph. Copyright A.S. Campbell. Library of Congress (1896).

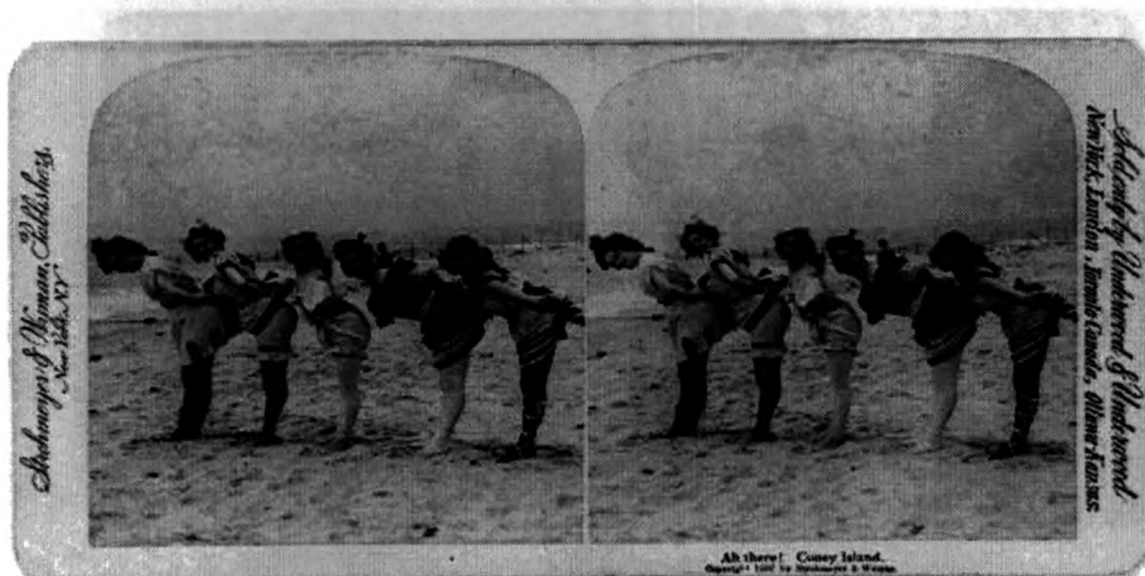


Figure 1.11 *The Gullfins Mold, Coney Island. Stereograph. Copyright Alfred S. Campbell. Library of Congress (1897).*

Figure 1.9 *Ah There! Coney Island. Stereograph. Copyright Underwood and Underwood. Library of Congress (1897).*

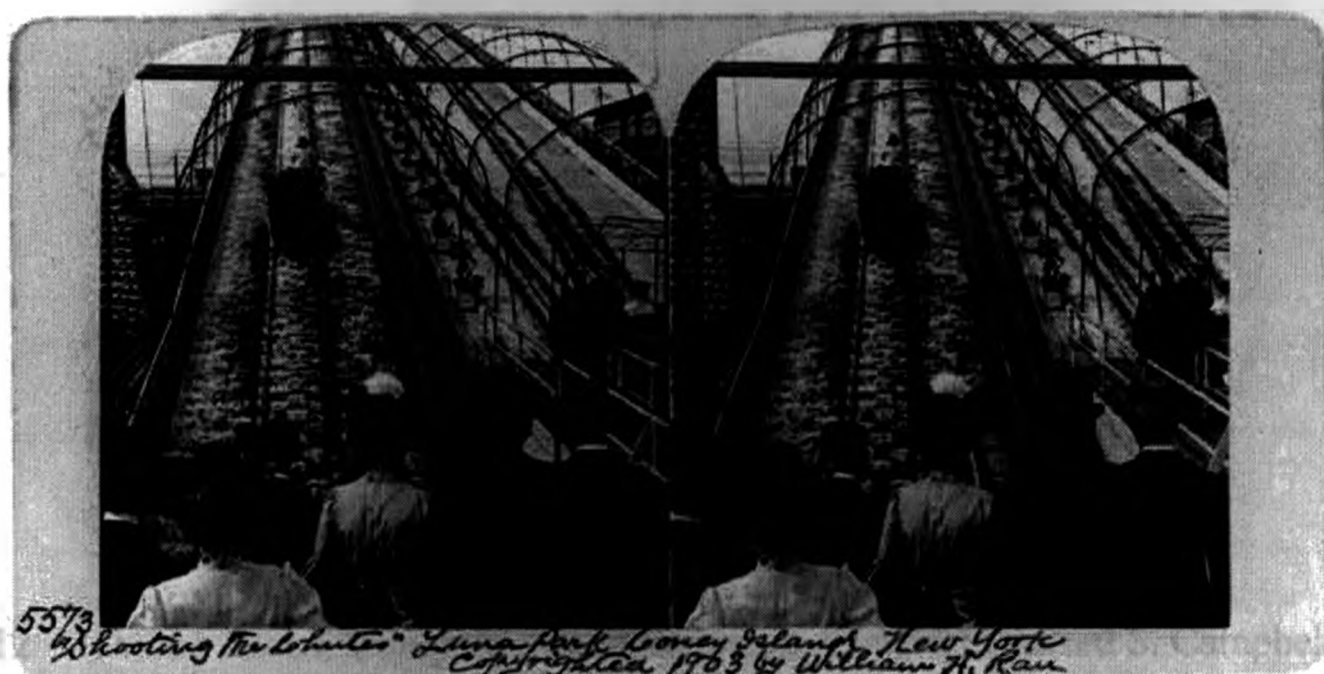


Figure 1.10 *Shooting the Chutes. Luna Park, Coney Island, New York. Copyrighted 1903 by William H. Rau. Library of Congress (1903).*

Figure 1.10 *Shooting the Chutes. Luna Park, Coney Island. Stereograph. Copyright William H. Rau. Library of Congress (1903).*



Figure 1.11 *The Guileless Maid, Coney Island. Stereograph. Copyright Alfred S. Campbell. Library of Congress (1897).*



Figure 1.12 *On the Beach, Coney Island. Stereograph. Copyright Alfred S. Campbell. Library of Congress (1897).*



Figure 1.13 Front Cover. *Coney Island: The People's Playground: A Souvenir Picture Book*. Souvenir Photo Album. Published by Waite & Staley. Coney Island History Project Collection, Brooklyn (1906).

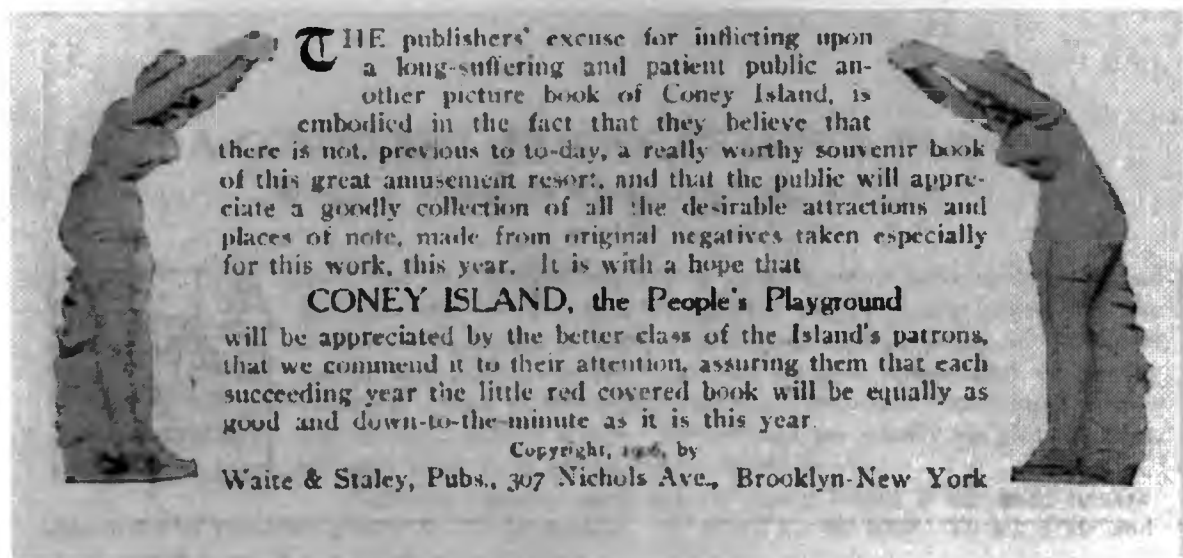


Figure 1.14 Preface. *Coney Island: The People's Playground: A Souvenir Picture Book*. Souvenir Photo Album. Published by Waite & Staley. Coney Island History Project Collection, Brooklyn (1906).



Figure 1.15 "Pyramid on the Beach." In *Coney Island: The People's Playground: A Souvenir Picture Book*. Souvenir Photo Album. Published by Waite & Staley. Coney Island History Project Collection, Brooklyn (1906).

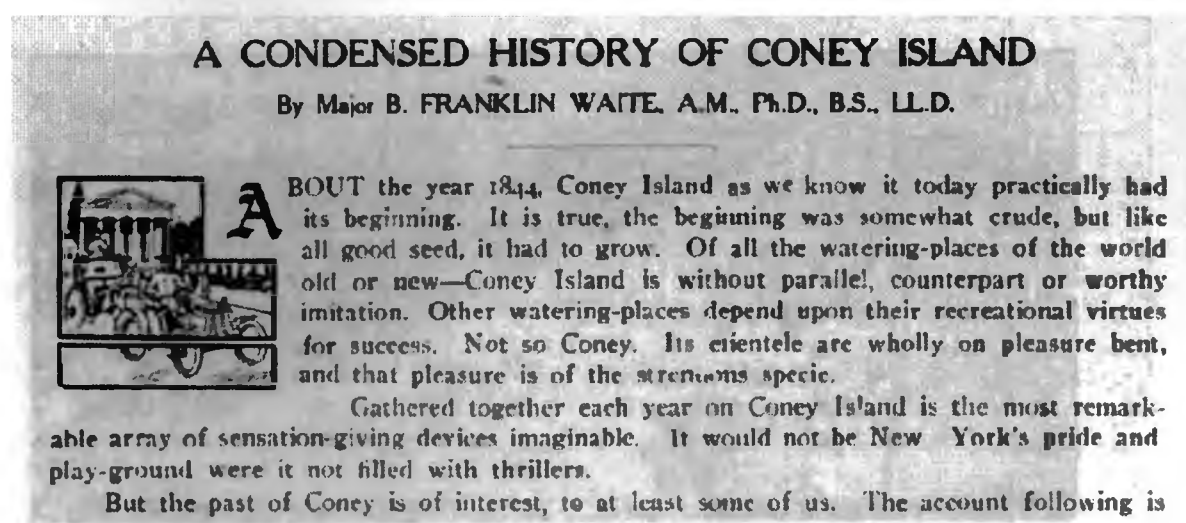


Figure 1.16 Page from "A Condensed History of Coney Island." In *Coney Island: The People's Playground: A Souvenir Picture Book*. Souvenir Photo Album. Published by Waite & Staley. Coney Island History Project Collection, Brooklyn (1906).



Figure 1.19

Figure 1.17

"A Hot Day on the Beach." In *Coney Island: The People's Playground: A Souvenir Picture Book*. Souvenir Photo Album. Published by Waite & Staley. Coney Island History Project Collection, Brooklyn (1906).



Figure 1.20

Figure 1.18

"Reception Hospital." In *Coney Island: The People's Playground: A Souvenir Picture Book*. Souvenir Photo Album. Published by Waite & Staley. Coney Island History Project Collection, Brooklyn (1906).



Figure 1.21
Figure 1.19

Health and Pleasure by the Sea, Coney Island. Copyright Kilburn
“A Hot Day on the Beach.” In *Coney Island: The People’s Playground: A Souvenir Picture Book*. Souvenir Photo Album. Published by Waite & Staley. Coney Island History Project Collection, Brooklyn (1906).



Figure 1.20

“Reception Hospital.” In *Coney Island: The People’s Playground: A Souvenir Picture Book*. Souvenir Photo Album. Published by Waite & Staley. Coney Island History Project Collection, Brooklyn (1906).

Figure 1.22

Stereograph. Copyright Keystone View Company. Library of Congress (1925).



Figure 1.21 *Health and Pleasure by the Sea, Coney Island.* Copyright Kilburn Brothers. Library of Congress (1885).

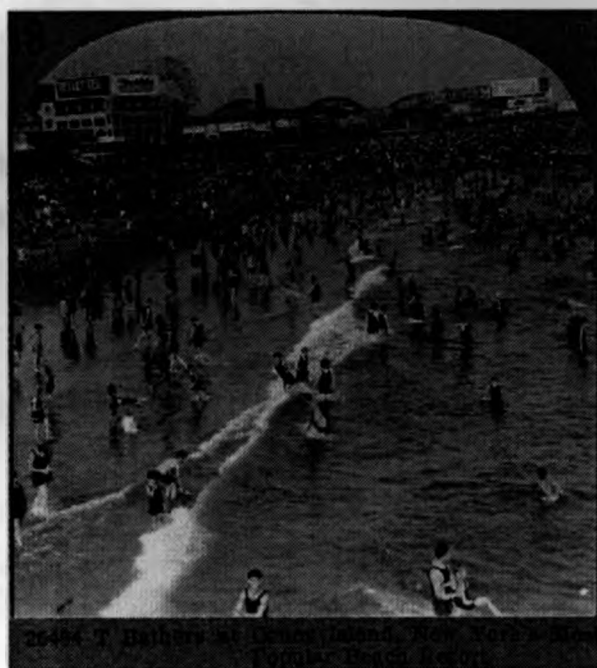



Figure 1.22 *Bathers at Coney Island, New York's Most Popular Beach Resort.* Stereograph. Copyright Keystone View Company. Library of Congress (1925).



was cremated. The Bowery fire of 1899 laid waste much territory, and obliterated many landmarks. This last fire is still fresh in our minds. One hundred thousand dollars damage was done, and much of the ocean front had to be rebuilt.

OUT OF THE FLAME

Thus Coney Island of today has been purified as fine gold by fire, and Sphinx-like it has arisen from the ashes, a larger, handsomer, better Coney, worthy your love and mine—an amusement resort at once the pride and admiration of New York, the wonder of the world.



Figure 1.23 Page from *Coney Island: The People's Playground: A Souvenir Picture Book*. Souvenir Photo Album. Published by Waite & Staley. Coney Island History Project Collection, Brooklyn (1906).

Figure 1.25 "Loop the Loop—The Loop" in *Coney Island: The People's Playground: A Souvenir Picture Book*. Souvenir Photo Album. Published by Waite & Staley. Coney Island History Project Collection, Brooklyn (1906).



Figure 1.24 "Surf Ave." In *Coney Island: The People's Playground: A Souvenir Picture Book*. Souvenir Photo Album. Published by Waite & Staley. Coney Island History Project Collection, Brooklyn (1906). Photo Album. Published by Waite & Staley. Coney Island History Project Collection, Brooklyn (1906).

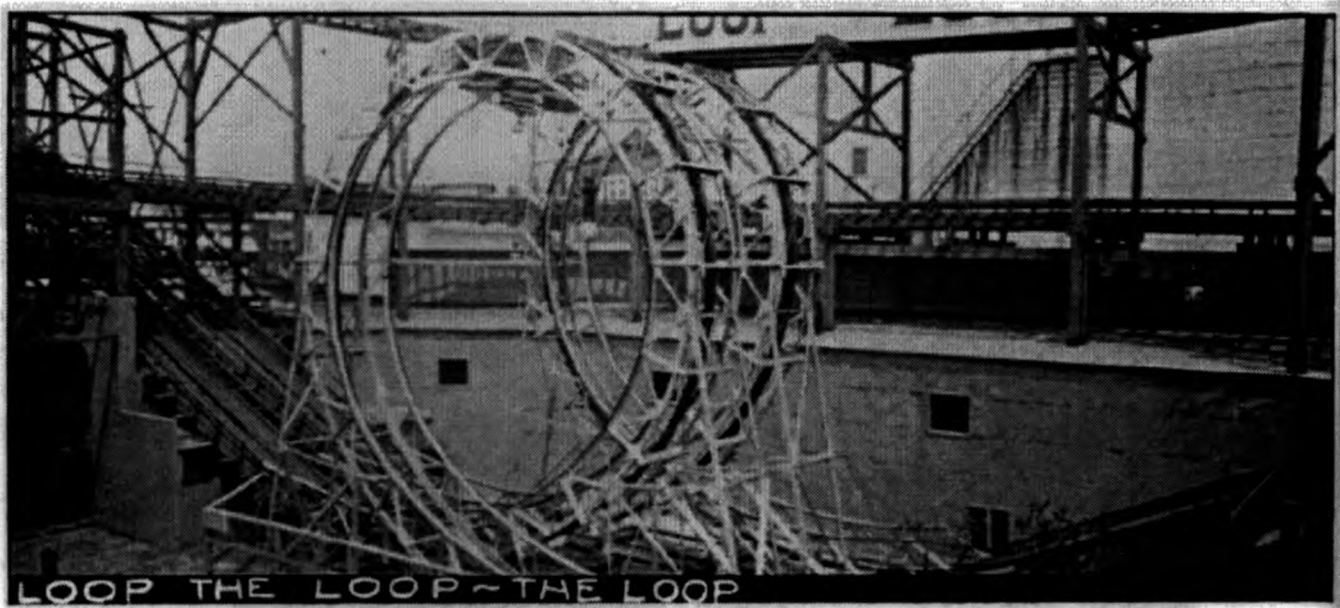


Figure 1.25 "Loop the Loop ~ The Loop" In *Coney Island: The People's Playground: A Souvenir Picture Book*. Souvenir Photo Album. Published by Waite & Staley. Coney Island History Project Collection, Brooklyn (1906).
Figure 1.27 *People's Playground: A Souvenir Picture Book*. Souvenir Photo Album. Published by Waite & Staley. Coney Island History Project Collection, Brooklyn (1906).



Figure 1.26 "Section of Feltman's 'Deutscher Garten' I" In *Coney Island: The People's Playground: A Souvenir Picture Book*. Souvenir Photo Album. Published by Waite & Staley. Coney Island History Project Collection, Brooklyn (1906).



Figure 1.27 "Section of Feltman's 'Deutscher Garten' II" In *Coney Island: The People's Playground: A Souvenir Picture Book*. Souvenir Photo Album. Published by Waite & Staley. Coney Island History Project Collection, Brooklyn (1906).

Chapter 2

ANALOGOUS ATTRACTIONS:



Figure 1.28 *Razzle Dazzle*. Copyright A.S. Campbell Art Co. Library of Congress. (1896).



Figure 1.29 "Luna Park Helter Skelter." In *Coney Island: The People's Playground: A Souvenir Picture Book*. Souvenir Photo Album. Published by Waite & Staley. Coney Island History Project Collection, Brooklyn (1906).

Chapter 2

ANALOGOUS ATTRACTIONS: THE ALLURE OF SHOCK, TECHNOLOGY, AND TRANSFORMATION IN EARLY CINEMA AND AT CONEY ISLAND

In the previous chapter I examined how photographs of Coney Island in mass circulation at the turn of the century established and circulated its reputation as a location of social experimentation and transformation. In this chapter I will consider representations of Coney Island in early cinema, looking at the technologies, spectacles, and forms of entertainment that make up the park. While the rides, technology and electric lights that constitute the park were reproduced in photography, it is cinema that had the capacity to capture motion and multi-layered spectacle as well as recreate the mobilized vision experienced at the park. The last chapter considered how representations of Coney Island in photography negotiated, circulated, and made visible social changes. It looked at how photographs of Coney Island could be used to construct messages about ones self or the nation and at how photographs, such as stereographs, could facilitate a voyeuristic viewing experience similar to how spectatorship was enacted at Coney Island. The photographs also functioned as forms of visual entertainment and advertisements which reflected and appealed to consumer desires for entertainment. I also indicated how photographs enable a malleable construction of the park, which may be interpreted or read, depending on the context and the viewer, in different and opposing ways. In looking at representations of Coney Island in early cinema, I shift my focus to the new technologies, entertainments, and experiences of vision at Coney Island and consider cinema's capacity to represent it. Although, as with photography, cinema establishes distance and separation between the viewer and the actual experience of Coney Island,

the technology of the cinema replicates, recreates, and shows the new technologies and new ways of seeing that comprise the Coney Island experience. In a number of ways, as I will demonstrate with specific examples in this chapter, cinema and Coney Island share properties, constitutions, and capacities that situate them as analogous attractions.

John Kasson asserts that the new amusement parks that emerged in this period, such as Coney Island, were the purest and most striking expression of a new American cultural order. They reflected changes in economic and social conditions and symbolized the morals and desires of the new mass culture.¹ Cinema has also been identified as an emblem of modernity. In the introduction to *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* Leo Charney and Vanessa Schwartz position cinema and modernity as points of reflection and convergence, arguing that of the emblems of modernity none has epitomized and transcended it more successfully than cinema.² Cinema and the amusement park (and specifically Coney Island) have been described as the utmost symbols of modern life, culture, and experience for their capacity to recreate modern experiences and movement, their make up of technology and electricity, and their role in entertaining the masses. The study of cinema and Coney Island through the electric technologies used to operate the camera and the fairground, the subject matter displayed, and the methods used to exhibit the content reveal a similar capacity to fascinate, allure, and entice spectators.

I will investigate how the notion of attraction may be employed to establish a convergence between cinema and the amusement park and, specifically, Coney Island.

¹ John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century*, (New York: Hill & Lang, 1978), 9.

² Leo Charney and Vanessa Schwartz, eds., *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, (London: University of California Press, 1995), 5.

In the process of defining attraction, it becomes evident that the term encompasses a variety of meanings and relationships. An attraction may be understood as an attractive quality that fascinates, allures, or entices. It is that which provides pleasure or an entertainment offered to the public. In physics attraction delineates the electric or magnetic force that draws things together. These definitions encompass a number of characteristics shared by the properties of cinema and the amusement park. Tom Gunning maintains that there was a relationship between films and the emergence of great amusement parks such as Coney Island. He asserts that "the cinema of attractions directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle - that is of interest in itself. The attraction to be displayed may also be of a cinematic nature..."³ It is noteworthy that the term attraction encompasses a scientific definition as science and technology are an integral component of the attraction inherent in cinema and Coney Island.

I have outlined the emergence of the Coney Island amusement parks and the surrounding social conditions in my introduction. I will contextualize the films under discussion in this chapter beginning with a brief explanation of the invention and characteristics of early cinema. In order to investigate the role of attractions in early cinema and Coney Island, and the relationship between the two types of entertainment, I will consider three Edison films that take place at or represent the park. In an examination of *Coney Island at Night* (1905), *Electrocuting an Elephant* (1903), and *Rube and Mandy at Coney Island* (1903) I endeavor to shed light on the coalescence of science, technology, entertainment, and spectatorship in film and at the amusement park. At the

³ Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde," in *Early Cinema: Space Frame Narrative*, edited by Elsaesser, Thomas and Adam Barker, (London: BFI Publishing, 1990), 58.

site and on the screen, patrons and viewers were subjected to a multi-layered spectacle of competing attractions. I will demonstrate how film and the fairground, although they are different forms of media, use similar methods to implement shocks and tricks intended to fascinate and attract the masses. Both forms of entertainment were products of modernity and urbanization that capitalized on the conditions and technologies that facilitated their emergence. They transformed and re-presented the vision and experience of the familiar.

Cinema was not invented overnight. As Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault indicate in the introduction to *American Cinema 1890-1909* it was a group effort, created through the accumulation of many inventions, all of which were necessary in order to achieve the eventual projection of animated photographic images on a screen.⁴ In the later half of the nineteenth century, following the American civil war, the modernization of the United States progressed with the industrialization and urbanization of many areas across the country. Cinema was a product of these changes and the accompanying advances in technology. It was also affected by and influenced social changes such as conceptions of race, gender roles, and leisure. Gunning and Gaudreault postulate that "all of these transformations intertwine with the history of film, dependant as it is on technical developments in photography, chemistry and precision engineering and on the growth, especially in urban areas of a working class audience, one particularly receptive to a visual mode of representation."⁵

⁴ Andre Gaudreault, ed. *American Cinema 1890-1909: Themes and Variations* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 9. The inventions credited in the text are Joseph Plateau's Phenakistiscope, Muybridge and Marey's chronophotographic experiences, Émile Reynaud's Théâtre Optique, and Edison and Dickson's principle of celluloid film.

⁵ Gaudreault, 9.

A product of modernization, cinema was also the most modern form of representation, "a new technological wonder with the ability to produce extended sequences of perceived motion."⁶ The early period of cinema is characterized as the Novelty era. This characterization encompasses the initial role of film as a scientific curiosity and new technological device. As such, the first films "were designed to exploit and demonstrate the cinematic apparatus, through the realistic presentation of familiar forms of images and entertainment."⁷ These short films were usually comprised of brief items of visual interest. In other words a presentation of "attractions" that filmmakers thought would be most interesting or appealing to their audiences. The main attraction of film in the Novelty era was motion and filmmakers often used film form to emphasize this.⁸ It makes sense, given the popularity of Coney Island around the turn-of-the-century, and the motion visible at the amusement parks, that it would become a subject for representation in these films.

The first film I will consider is Edwin S. Porter's *Coney Island at Night* (1905), a three minute film of Luna Park and Dreamland at night. Porter began his career in cinema in 1896 as a projectionist, and it was his background training as an electrician that qualified him for the job. He gave exhibitions with the Edison Vitascope, which was powered by electricity. In addition to powering the apparatus, electricity became a prominent subject for representation in early cinema. Electricity and electric light at the amusement park functioned in a similar manner. They were fundamental components of the rides and architecture, simultaneously displayed and employed as part of the attraction and spectacle. Filming the park at night captured the millions of electric lights

⁶ Gaudreault, 11.

⁷ Gaudreault, 13.

⁸ Gaudreault, 19.

which illuminated the machinery, rides, and architecture. Electricity was the life force of the camera and the amusement park.

A number of reviews of early moving pictures emphasize the use of electricity and light. An article about an Edison Kinetograph presentation in Auckland, New Zealand in November 1897 relates that "the pictures were shown by means of electric light, which was a great improvement and presented the views with wonderful distinctness."⁹ The *New Zealand Herald* of 1897 describes a cinematographe demonstration as follows: "after an electric knob was touched where all was darkness there appeared illumination. The scenes projected were depicted with an almost lifelike verisimilitude."¹⁰ These descriptions demonstrate how light and electricity contributed to the capacity of cinema to represent living pictures, advancing the realism of depictions from the way they were represented with the pre-electric magic lantern.¹¹ The exhibition of science and new technologies at World Fairs was a popular attraction. This was also the first time most Americans had access to and experienced advances in technology.¹² According to David Nye, electrification was social progress.¹³ He asserts:

Spectacular lighting was dramatic, nonutilitarian, abstract, and universalizing... Electrical displays also embodied the latest in science, lending the exposition its prestige by association. After 1881 all fairs emphasized dramatic lighting and many made illuminated towers their symbols... electricity became more than the theme for a major exhibit building; it provided a visible correlative for the ideology of progress.¹⁴

⁹ Lucy Fischer, "'The Shock of the New' Electrification, Illumination, Urbanization, and the Cinema," in *Cinema and Modernity*, edited by Murray Pomerance. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 23.

¹⁰ Fischer, 24.

¹¹ Fischer, 24.

¹² Fischer, 21.

¹³ Fischer, 20.

¹⁴ Fischer, 20.

Electricity, inherent in the birth of cinema and the amusement park, was a symbol of American modernity and progress.

Electric light, electricity, the fairground, and cinema facilitated new ways of seeing. Electric light in cities resulted in a new way of experiencing familiar spaces. Time was distended, night and day were no longer clearly demarcated. The confusion of temporalities was also a part of the cinematic experience, often as a result of the cutting and editing process. A clearly sequential and linear progression and experience of time had been disrupted in the modern city and to a greater extent at the amusement park. Porter's *Coney Island at Night* alters vision in a number of ways. Time is reordered and revolutionized. The electric light, which has enabled activity and amusement to continue into the darkness of the night, is the subject matter of the film. The film itself lacks an indication of time passing. Although the viewer moves through different spaces, and an awareness of night is evident, progress through time and passing time are abstract and unimportant. Perhaps the most obvious way that vision is revolutionized in this film is the way it is mediated by the camera. This further contributes to the distortion of time, as the scene may be infinitely reproduced and viewed in the future. As the operator, and as a result of the possibilities of cinema, Porter created a new way of experiencing Coney Island.

The film begins with the camera in motion, displaying a panorama of Dreamland and Luna Park. One of the most significant capacities of early cinema, often capitalized on by early filmmakers, was its ability to capture motion.¹⁵ Porter has also exploited the cinema's capability to mobilize vision. In his panorama of the amusement parks he varies

¹⁵ Lee Grieveson and Peter Kramer, eds., *The Silent Cinema Reader*, (London: Routledge, 2004), 2.

the speed at which the camera moves and alters the direction of the camera, first moving from right to left, then changing location and moving at a slower speed from left to right, changing locations and view points. These shifts heighten the viewer's awareness of the fact that he or she is in the process of viewing. The abrupt cuts to new locations in the park contribute to this awareness and also disorient the viewer. The first panorama sequence, which ends on the left in Luna Park, suddenly cuts to a tower in the middle of Dreamland, from a closer perspective. The panorama of Dreamland is followed by another shift to the main tower in Luna Park. At this point the speed is reduced once again and the camera alters its motions to a horizontal pan down and then back up the tower. The ability of the camera to mobilize, control, and reorder vision was one of the tricks and attractions of this film. The shock of varied motion, disorientation, and relocation entertained the viewer with the technical possibilities of the medium. Coney Island itself, as evident in the film, was made of up electric structures in motion. Technology is used to trick and amuse the patrons of the park, moving their bodies in every direction at multiple, increased and reversed speeds, on the rollercoaster, for example. Thus, Porter's film of Coney Island, mimics the type of mobile vision experienced in the park on the rides, simultaneously capturing that motion.

The camera and the amusement park could reconfigure the height and perspective of vision. While not as drastic as the skyscrapers of the city space, the towers and Ferris wheel enabled viewers to experience the site and space from new heights. In Porter's film he presents the viewer with another novel visual experience of the park. The first panorama sequence is filmed high above the park from a great distance. Most people were familiar with Coney Island and its architecture from their own experiences within

the park. This aerial perspective, and the decision to film at night abstract the site and architecture. The distance and the darkness of night disguise the crowds commonly associated with Coney Island. The space is transformed into a series of white specks. There is no depth in this space and vision. Everything is rendered flat and two-dimensional. The buildings and rides are transformed into a series of shapes and patterns. The curves of the architecture keep the eye in motion, failing to provide a visual resting place. The capacity of the cinema to display the vivacity of the electric lights as they flash and pulsate achieves a vision unobtainable by photographic representations. The neon signs incorporate text into the forms of the landscape. The vision is a collage of different mediums. The view becomes more of an aesthetic experience and an expression of patterns and light. The interest in abstraction, pattern, light, and technology continues in a different way as Porter relocates the camera to a close-up of the Dreamland architecture.

Another cinematic trick exemplified here is the way film can bring the viewer into close proximity with new technology. The close-up also fragments vision and forms contributing to a new form of abstract vision. The patterns and lights that were just exhibited in the first panorama are reinvented and re-experienced by this shift, thus demonstrating how the camera is able to offer new and various ways of seeing the same subject. The last section of the film, which focuses on the central tower in Luna Park, seems to function as the climax. Interestingly, the only point in the film where the camera is stopped (it is even in motion as the film begins and ends) is after the cut to the tower. After a brief pan left from darkness to the isolated view of the tower top, the camera stops for a second. This stillness is significant in contrast to the speed and motion used

throughout the rest of the film. The increased zoom and decreased range of vision and speed of the horizontal pan monumentalize the tower as a symbol of the amusement park. It is as if this tower is a culmination of the beauty, modernity, technology, and location exhibited in the previous panoramas. The tower, like the panorama scenes, is very flat and abstract. Once again the focus on the patterns of the light, and the lights themselves, intensify the modern and aesthetic experience. The tower itself is one of the spectacles at Coney Island and the employment of the close-up in the film is an attraction of cinema.

While the motion, fragmentation, and disorientation of the park are taken up in the film, the omission of the chaotic crowds at ground level creates a more serene representation of the park. It is idealized and ethereal in this representation, seemingly ungrounded and dimensionless. The film has been described as

[s]omething unlike any New York actuality ever made. The magical intent of Coney Island is here perfectly fulfilled: to create an immanent, ethereal world of light and sensation...Coney Island's nighttime landscape complements the plaster architecture of day: not rectangular signboards propped above modest, boxy, commercial buildings, but a delicate tracery of bulbs, draped like glittering necklaces over the romantic structures of a shimmering fairyland. Through the same blunt, unmediated technique that had recorded the ordinary life of the city, Porter had created a dreamy urban vision in which matter had been utterly dissolved into energy and movement. He had pushed filmic New York toward a sense of magical possibility, as different as imaginable from the mundane, grounded-in-reality approach with which the actualities began.¹⁶

This description suggests that the identity and atmosphere that Coney Island strove to evoke was only realized once it had been filtered through and represented by the camera. This film documents and propagates the new technologies at Coney Island as well as the analogous capabilities of the camera. This embodies the conflation of cinema and

¹⁶ Charles Musser, "The Early Cinema of Edwin Porter," *Cinema Journal* 19:1 (Autumn, 1979), 23.

amusement park technologies in their capacities to trick and to entertain as well as to modernize, mobilize, and revolutionize vision.

The element of shock in entertainment, whether in cinema or amusement park rides and spectacles, was employed repeatedly.¹⁷ The shock could encompass an encounter with new vision, technology, spatial relations, or subject matter. I have already mentioned some of the cinematic shocks employed by Porter in *Coney Island at Night*. At Coney Island the shocks that could be encountered were endless. Throughout the park exhibits, rides, and architecture were designed to surprise or trip up the patron who was continually thrown off balance, frightened, or unexpectedly embarrassed and exposed to large, jeering crowds of spectators.¹⁸ In addition to emotive shock, Coney Island spectacles capitalized on the implementation of electric shock.

One of the most significant spectacles of life and death exhibited in the park and captured on film was the electrocution of Topsy the elephant in Edison's *Electrocuting an Elephant* (1903).¹⁹ Topsy had been mistreated by her trainers, and in retaliation to the abuse, had caused the death of three men. As punishment, she was put to death. In typical Coney Island fashion, and as way to demonstrate the power of Edison's electric current, her death by electrocution was arranged as a public spectacle. The same electric force that vitalized the amusement park and its attractions and animated the images on the screen, had the capacity to end life. In this context, whether it was giving life or taking life away, the electric shock was used to entertain.

¹⁷ Fischer, 19.

¹⁸ Kasson, 50.

¹⁹ The spectacle of life and death was a popular form of entertainment in nineteenth-century culture and at the park. For example, at Coney Island, one could experience a reenactment of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius and the death of the victims.

Technologies such as film, photography, and x-rays, as well as scientific and ethnographic studies, were also all forms of entertainment exhibited for eager mass audiences.²⁰ That is not to say that these forms of science, technology, and entertainment were accepted without apprehension. Many people feared the advances and effects of science and technology, and at Coney Island these fears and apprehensions were subsumed as apart of the attraction and spectacle. The death drive associated with new technology, electricity and cinema, for example, may be elucidated in a consideration of the circumstances surrounding *Electrocuting an Elephant*. A *New York World* reporter described how "[t]he current was turned on ...and quick as a flash the colossal form of the elephant stiffened forward, then quivered in the throes of the mighty bolt, sinking finally to the ground without a groan."²¹ The switching on of the electric current implicates the operator in the apparatus and the death. The same reporter describes how the electrician "narrowly escaped death in turning the switch that threw the entire voltage into the wire that was to carry death to Topsy. As he threw the last switch he got the full force of the current through his arm and down the right side of his calf to his leg."²² Lisa Cartwright remarks that the reporter is fascinated by the way the life of the operator is threatened in the process of electrocution.²³ He operates the technology that will end the life of the elephant, but he cannot secure his own safety throughout this process. The subject and the technician are connected by the power flowing through the apparatus.²⁴

²⁰ Lisa Cartwright, " 'Experiments of Destruction': Cinematic inscriptions of Physiology," *Representations* 40 (Autumn 1992), 132.

²¹ Cartwright, 140.

²² Cartwright, 140.

²³ Cartwright, 140.

²⁴ Cartwright, 141.

The notion of unbridled technology, a looming threat to mortality from the very apparati that facilitated entertainment and modern life heightened the appeal, shock, and attraction of many forms of entertainment at Coney Island. The Flip Flap Railway, for example, took daily machinery and inverted its form and function, sending people at high speeds towards one another, and then flipping at the last minute to avoid a crash. The danger, suspense, and shock heightened the entertainment value of such amusements. The fact that Topsy's execution almost ended the life of her executor intensified the thrill of the experience. Edison recognized that he could profit from this event and that people would pay not only to witness the actual event, but the reenactment of it on film. Life and death become commodities that were exploited and marketed for commercial gain.

Tom Gunning characterizes cinema as attraction "by its reference to the curiosity arousing devices of the fairground...its fascination with novelty and its foregrounding act of display."²⁵ Cinema did not seek to simply record previously existing acts or events, even a single shot film without any camera tricks, such as *Electrocuting an Elephant*, involved a cinematic gesture of presenting for view. This technological means of representation constituted the initial fascination with cinema. Gunning defines the 'attractive themes' in early cinema as "a fascination with visual experience that folds back on the very pleasure of looking."²⁶ He delineates the topoi of the aesthetic of attractions, one of which is a modern obsession with violent and aggressive sensations as well as an interest in death and decay.²⁷ The interest in death in this electrocution process supercedes the documentary value. As an attraction there is less concern with how it will

²⁵ Tom Gunning, "Now You See it, Now You Don't: The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions," in *The Silent Cinema Reader*, edited by Lee Grieveson and Peter Kramer (London: Routledge, 2004), 42.

²⁶ Gunning (1990), 15.

²⁷ Gunning (1990), 15.

develop than when it will occur.²⁸ This is particularly interesting to consider because of the nature of electrocution which is a sudden burst of electricity resulting in death. The electric current and instrumentation of death is not visible to the viewer. This internal electrocution transforms a living subject in a "flash" into a lifeless specimen. In the film, Topsy is led forward and stands hooked up to the apparatus, seconds later she falls over dead, shrouded by a curtain of smoke. The process of her death is not visible; rather, it is the sudden shift from life to death that constitutes the spectacle.

Cartwright posits that the film also documents the technological implementation of a life and death process.²⁹ The distinction is blurred between the observation of a phenomenon and the very life of the phenomenon. Cinema is able to show, index, and graph the life and death process. Cartwright points out that the film

reflexively documents the complex place technologies of representation had come to occupy in the regulation and control of those processes. In distancing himself from the spectacle of traumatic images of life and death – by rejecting real-time projection, by reducing picture to index – the laboratory technician accesses a point of entry into the life he studies, regulating its duration from within an apparatus that links technician, instrument, and body in an extended physiological system.³⁰

Science, entertainment, and technology intermingled at the fairground and in cinematic representation. Life is threatened on the rides at Coney Island and taken in this electrocution spectacle. Life and death are recreated and reenacted in cinema, once again temporality is distorted as the deceased Topsy is resurrected on the screen. Mary Ann Doane indicates that

[e]lectricity signifies not only a technological form of death, but also a compression of time and process. For electricity seems to effectively annihilate delay, the distance between cause and effect, and to evoke the idea of the

²⁸ Gunning (2004), 46.

²⁹ Cartwright, 149.

³⁰ Cartwright, 149.

instantaneous... This fascination with the sense of immediacy and of the pure present is associated not only with electric technology but with the cinema itself as a technology of images that seem automatically to connote a certain presence.³¹

Doane's assertion is instrumental in conflating the capacity of electricity, in this Coney Island attraction and as a component of cinema, to condense time and facilitate the instantaneous. Whether on a ride, in a film, or in the electrocution of the elephant, technology is the force that mediates life and death as well as the progression and experience of time. The pursuit of entertainment and visual attraction are the inspiration for such occurrences. The operator flips a switch that sends a ride or a picture into motion, or in the case of Topsy into a permanent state of stasis.

In order to examine a variety of other attractions and rides at Coney Island, and how these machines and forms of entertainment are analogous to cinematic attractions, I will look at Edison's *Rube and Mandy at Coney Island* (1903). These attractions include documentation of the park and rides, a panorama, the comedic performances of Rube and Mandy, and the mobile camera. The makeup of the film is analogous to variety theatre performances and the wide-ranging forms of entertainment available at Coney Island.³² Similar to a variety theatre program, the film consists of a number of disparate forms of visual novelties that are not linked by a narrative. The scenes in this film are connected by the shared context of Coney Island and the experience of two characters, Rube and Mandy. There is no logical progression through time and space in the film and it lacks a climactic event. Corresponding to Gunnings' conception of the "cinema of attractions", the film is devoid of narrative logic, consisting of an unpredictable succession of events

³¹ Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (London: Harvard University Press, 2002), 151.

³² Lauren Ravovitz, *For the Love of Pleasure: Women, Movies, and Culture in turn-of-the-century Chicago*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988): 158.

and instances. "Like the devotees of thrill rides at Coney Island, the spectator of early cinema could experience the thrill of intense and suddenly changing sensations."³³ The nature and structure of the film is parallel to the nature of the rides and experience at Coney Island. In the film the viewer is suddenly and unexpectedly relocated, as the camera cuts to a new location and often a new vantage point. This sudden transformation is an entertaining trick. The attempt to startle the patron was one of the agendas of the amusement park. As Kasson explains,

[w]ithin five minutes after your entrance to Luna Park you will try to tread on the trickwalk, the planks of which, propelled from machinery beneath, slide in all directions under your feet. You will...sit in trick chairs which, when your weight releases a hidden spring, tilt over and toss you away or in benches that by a similar device collapse and double you up like a jack knife.³⁴

Patrons of Coney Island and viewers of early cinema were subjected to an experience where the next instant was unpredictable and always astonishing.

Motion is another theme that pervades many of the scenes and was characteristic of the amusement park. For example, vision was mobilized on rides such as the rollercoaster. Senses of self, time, and space were altered and reorganized on amusement park rides and in cinema.³⁵ In film, vision is fleeting and fragmented, limited to the viewpoint framed by the camera. In *Rube and Mandy at Coney Island* the fragmentation of vision is accentuated as the characters frequently enter into or exit the frame. Fragmented, mobile vision is also accentuated in the panorama scene. The mobile vision does not allow the eye enough time to digest what is going on in the scene before the camera cuts to the next frame. The camera is capable of capturing motion and creating

³³ Gunning (2004), 49.

³⁴ Kasson, 61.

³⁵ Gunning (2004), 48.

vision in motion, thus accentuating the constant flux and dynamism the patrons of the park would experience.

If we look to the subject matter of the film it is evident that the camera documents and investigates various types of movement. The film opens with a horse driven wagon and then cuts to a sequence of the steeplechase, followed by the entrance of Rube and Mandy on a pair of cattle. In these three scenes a dichotomy is established between natural, human speed and mechanical motion. The camera slowly follows the first cart and captures the slow and awkward motion of the cows; this is heightened by the contrast with the mechanized horses which speed in and out of the cameras frame. Throughout the entire film the contrast between natural and mechanical movement persists. The characters are depicted on trains, boats, a camel, and on foot. On the rides their bodies are subjected to new placements and movements that break from the everyday experience. The shifting perspectives and location of the camera in the film from ground level to elevated vantage points, for example, also creates a similar reversal of the ordinary.

Cultural analyst Tony Bennett alleges that

[f]or the most part the amusement park addresses indeed assaults the body – suspending the physical laws that normally restrict its movement breaking the social codes that normally regulate its conduct, inverting the usual relations between the body and machinery and generally inscribing the body in relations different from those in which it is caught and held in everyday life.³⁶

Film has the capacity to *show* these assaults on the body and capture the contrast between the various types of motion. The visual contrast lends itself to a comparison between the two.

When the panoramic view of Dreamland in *Rube and Mandy at Coney Island* pauses, the varied dynamics of the park become visually accessible. The viewer is

³⁶ Rabinovitz, 156.

presented with a scene of competing attractions, like the nature of the visual experience at the amusement park. A fragment of the eclectic architecture of the tower fills the left side of the frame. Trees and bushes rustled by the wind move in the foreground, while people pass in and out of the frame in all directions. In the background cars continually race down the tracks of the Shoot the Chutes and land, splashing in the water below. Above the water is a bridge populated by a crowd that is abstracted by the distance of the camera into a wavering line. Thus the viewer is engaged with a variety of competing spectacles within the frame. The eye is distracted by the motion in all directions interspersed throughout the frame. The notion of competing attractions is also parodied in the film as showmen gesture and attempt to herd Rube and Mandy into their venues. In one scene a physical struggle ensues as Rube struggles to escape the showman.

Lauren Rabinovitz indicates how cinema condensed the park's discourse and simultaneously converted private individuals into consumers and commodity.³⁷ The insistence on visual spectacle and commodity consumption as the order of pleasure in modern life is clearly imbedded in the cinematic and amusement park experience.³⁸ In the film the position of the camera and the experience of the rides reveal how the patrons became a part of the show. Frequently in the segments of the film where the rides and attractions are being filmed, the heads of other spectators watching the people on the rides are visible in the periphery of the frame. This occurs when the characters are descending and emerging from a number of slides or as they raft across a path of water. Audience participation and spectatorship are also encouraged. The camera becomes one of the spectators as it records these events. At various points in the film the actors address

³⁷ Rabinovitz, 138.

³⁸ Rabinovitz, 138.

the camera, acknowledging the spectator and making him or her aware of the camera. In the opening scene the man on the cart looks to the camera twice in order to assure that it is following the movements of his vehicle. Other instances where the camera is addressed by the actors occur when it is located with other spectators along the edges of rides. The participants look directly into the lens and wave, acknowledging the fact that they are being filmed and accentuating the viewer's awareness that he or she is watching.³⁹

The continuous shocks and types of motion employed in these early Edison films and at Coney Island constantly distract and entertain the viewer or patron. The new, the sudden, and the unexplainable fascinate the viewer repeatedly and often simultaneously in these two contexts. The novel visual experience, whether through the technological landscape of Coney Island or the mediated vision of the camera, capitalized on the human desire to show and to observe. As active participants, acknowledged by the camera or subsumed as part of the spectacle, the masses indulged in these pleasurable, entertaining parodies of daily life, technologies, and vision. Cinema and Coney Island are associated by the nature of their apparati. Electricity and electric light facilitated the motion and vision of both experiences. Coney Island's rides, illuminated structures, and spectacles were powered by the same electric currents that enabled the projection of the moving image. The capacity to create and display motion and electric technology attracted and astonished the masses. The same forces that enabled the entertainment became a part of the spectacle, that were of interest in themselves.

³⁹ Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator," in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, Edited by Linda Williams. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 129.

As exemplified in the Edison films I considered, space and vision in cinema and at Coney Island were vitalized, in constant motion and flux, and reorganized so that time and space are reordered. This is achieved by the rides and trick architecture of the amusement park and the shifting vantage points, speeds, directions, and locations of the camera. This new way of seeing and experiencing time and space tricked the viewer, disorienting and confusing perception, resulting in a pleasurable effect. The regulated, monotonous, and restraining properties of the everyday were transformed into an amusing experience. Film and the fairground employed and exhibited multi-layered spectacles of competing attractions. The technology and setting, whether on site at Coney Island or represented on the screen, the event(s) that occur/are shown, and the ways they were demonstrated (in motion, abstracted by night or distance, via technology, in front of a crowd, or employing the spectators themselves as spectacle) constituted the various layers of the spectacle. As the subjects on the screen and the cinema gestured at you or the camera moved you through a series of locations, you were made aware of your involvement as a viewer. At Coney Island the patrons consumed and were consumed by the variety of entertainments, watching and being watched as they experienced and participated in the tricks and shocks of the park. At Coney Island and in these examples of early cinema, the attractions left no choice, but to be entertained.

Chapter 3

THE DESIRE TO SHOW:
THE "CINEMA OF ATTRACTIONS" AT CONEY ISLAND IN 1920S NARRATIVE
FILM

My previous analyses of visual representations of Coney Island in turn of the century photography and film have established Coney Island as a locus of social tension and as an emblem of American modernity and technological advancement. The representations of Coney Island in photography and film construct multi-layered messages about the park, American society and modernity, and function as advertisements, reportage, and forms of visual entertainment. Photographs on picture postcards, stereographs, souvenir photo albums and in the media contributed to the negotiation of social changes inherent in amusement park activities and interactions. In addition, the photographs affiliated personal and national identities with those changes. Cinema and Coney Island, both products of modernity and urbanization, capitalize on the conditions and technologies that facilitated their emergence, providing entertainment as well as transforming and re-presenting the vision and experience of the familiar. Films and photographs of Coney Island from the turn of the century perpetuate the voyeuristic activities experienced at the site. Coney Island offers an alternative to everyday experiences, whether parodying the technology and motions of the metropolis or revolutionizing social interaction. Visual representations from the turn of the century expose Coney Island's reputation as a site of social tension, experimentation and voyeurism, encouraging the viewer to participate in a form of spectatorship analogous to the acts of looking and nature of seeing experienced at the park, even if it is a vicarious visual involvement with the image, which remains distanced from the experience itself.

As Guy Debord indicates in *Society of Spectacle*, "In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immersive accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation."¹ Throughout this investigation I have endeavored to shed light on the multifarious roles of the visual representations of Coney Island spectacles. In this chapter I turn to a slightly later period, the 1920s, to examine how representations and connotations of Coney Island established at the turn of the century persist, function, and are represented in later American films.

As noted in chapter one, photographs of Coney Island played an essential role in shaping mass culture and participating in the negotiation of social boundaries at the turn of the twentieth century. The struggles that shaped this period continue to be of issue in the period following WWI. American society turned their attention to their own nation shifting focus from the international issues that had been of concern prior to and during the war. Restrictions implemented for the inter-war period had been lifted, wages had increased, and working conditions continued to improve. People had the time, freedom, and income to indulge in entertainment. Silent cinema scholars such as Lea Jacobs and Robert Sklar have effectively argued that "changes in cinema are congruent with and parasitic upon other cultural trends"² and that "movies, like photographs occupied a central role in cultural conflicts post WWI on both sides of the struggle."³ These cultural struggles included the sexual pervasiveness of the 1920s and the desire to leave behind

¹ Quoted in Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 18.

² Lea Jacobs, *The Decline of Sentiment: American Film in the 1920's* (London: University of California Press, 2008), 2.

³ Robert Sklar, *Movie Made America: A Social History of the American Movies* (New York: Random House, 1994), 90.

cultural traditions that had been established by the genteel. As the lower classes and immigrants began to earn better wages, they became the dominant order that entertainment entrepreneurs sought to appeal to. These audiences coupled with the post-war American sentiment resulted in a desire for more commercially and emotionally satisfying entertainment formulas. Cinema's involvement in the process of cultural transformation is evident in the subject matter and changing content of the films.

The late 1920s is a significant period in film and Coney Island history. Silent film climaxes in terms of pictorial perfection in this period before being replaced with the invention of the "talkies". In addition the subway extension to Coney Island secures its continued popularity as well as facilitating greater accessibility for members of the lower classes. Soon after with the emergence of the television and the affordability of cars, attendance at Coney Island begins to decline. Coney Island remains a site of cultural negotiation, and the representation of the park in the films I will discuss affirms and makes visible its persistent position as such.

In this chapter I will examine the significance and representation of Coney Island in *It* (1927) and *The Crowd* (1928), both films that deal explicitly with issues of American modernity. These cinematic representations of Coney Island demonstrate and recreate the modernity and movement that the Europeans defined as American. As a location, Coney Island magnifies the modern experiences and vision inherent in the modern American city. As I have established in my previous chapters, Coney Island embodies a simultaneous appeal and apprehension concerning the controversial social and technological experiences had there. Coney Island amusements and activities were constantly transforming, as new rides and spectacles were added each season; however, it

was no longer the *novelty* of the technology and the social behaviour that most interested the makers and viewers of film. America's propensity to look inwards after the First World War was accompanied by a growing sense of pride for American culture and technology. Coney Island continued to exist as and represent a place of sexual and social liberation. It was accessible to all classes, races, and genders, thus embodying the democratic spirit of the nation. New technologies and structures, inspired by those used to create American cities contrasted the traditional and historic elements of many European cities. The movement and technology that comprised the amusement parks appealed to modernists interested in the way time, space, and place could be explored and reinvented. Consequently, visual representations of Coney Island in 1920s cinema capitalized on the opportunities for replicating and enhancing the forms and possibilities for the modern, virtual, and mobilized spectatorship that occurred there.

In *It* and *The Crowd*, Coney Island occupies a position of thematic and visual significance, establishing a stark visual and narrative contrast to the structure, order, logic, and continuity implemented throughout the rest of both films. The amusement park remains an emblem of American modernity and a location of social transformation in these representations. Through my analyses of Coney Island as it is represented in *It* and *The Crowd*, I will maintain Tom Gunning's assertion that the desire to *show* in cinema continues to have a place in the films of the twenties, particularly in films that are considered dominantly narrative films. Gunning argues that "the cinema of attractions does not disappear with the dominance of narrative, but rather goes underground both into certain avant-garde practices and as a component of narrative films."⁴ I will begin

⁴ Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-

my discussion by contextualizing the social, artistic, and filmic conditions that these movies were produced in. Summarizing the plots of *It* and *The Crowd*, I will explain how the Coney Island sequences are situated in the narratives. Subsequently I will describe the subject matter and camera techniques and transitions implemented in both films. Following a reiteration of Tom Gunning's characterization of the "cinema of attractions", I will indicate how it is manifested in these Coney Island sequences.

In order to understand the significance of the Coney Island scenes and the way Coney has been represented in these films, it is necessary to briefly consider the social and artistic contexts in which these films were made, as well as the nature of silent cinema in America during the late 1920s. By the 1920s most Americans had moved to the cities to work. Populist rhetoric was increasingly addressing the concerns of this growing urban, working class.⁵ One of the pertinent issues emerging in this post-industrial, mass society was the powerlessness of the individual.⁶ The growth of modern industries and corporations inhibited the ability of the individual to realize the American dream. This issue is explored in King Vidor's *The Crowd*. In the 1910s and 1920s older assumptions about the inevitability of progress and absolute moral values began to be challenged. A new understanding and acceptance of sexuality was introduced. In addition to the criticism of the genteel there was a break from the past in terms of literary history as well as a re-evaluation of the literary canon.⁷ An explosion of modernist experiments in poetry, novels, and short stories ensued. There was an opening up of communication systems to the lower middle classes and the rise of new and adventurous publications

Garde,"in *Early Cinema: Space Frame Narrative*, edited by Elsaesser, Thomas and Adam Barker (London: BFI Publishing, 1990), 57.

⁵ Jacobs, 3.

⁶ John Belton, *American Cinema/ American Culture*, (Toronto: McGrawhill, Inc., 1994), 125.

⁷ Jacobs, 5.

such as the little magazine. An emergence of naturalism, encompassing both a rejection of morality as a key component of literary works and a "devotion to truth, however disagreeable truth may appear," resulted in a disregard for a polite, refined style and a reaction against genteel stylistic conventions.⁸ Naturalism violated middle class correctness and tact with its explicit descriptions of sexual urges, interest in the body and emphasis on the primacy of the instincts, exploration of the modern city or industry, and other milieux that bore down upon natural protagonists.⁹ The changes in literary taste and culture in the 1910s and 1920s included an affirmation of naturalism and an appreciation of the rough and inventive aspects of American slang over more formal and rhetorical conventions.¹⁰ American exposure to European modern art in the 1913 Armory Show in New York City contributed to major changes in art production and taste. This period also comprised the formation of the first American bohemian communities and the gradual diffusion of modernist and protomodernist elements into advertising and interior industrial design.¹¹

American film in the twenties conveys an enticing vision of American character and the American way of life. This vision usually includes new social and metropolitan experiences one would encounter in an American city. New York was considered the paradigm of the modern city and Coney Island, as I will demonstrate in my discussion of these films, an amplified version of the modern experience. The portrait of America in film functioned in a number of ways, one of which was to communicate messages about the country both internally and abroad. Cinema, like all forms of entertainment

⁸ Jacobs, 2.

⁹ Jacobs, 7.

¹⁰ Jacobs, 9.

¹¹ Jacobs, 2.

encompassed a capitalist motive which strove to attract the greatest number of patrons to maximize profits. These films fulfilled the desires of the viewers, providing a vicarious experience of American modernity. Movie makers accomplished this by providing a form of entertainment that satiated the nature of the American middle-class' appetite for entertainment. Robert Sklar indicates that "[t]he longings of postwar audiences set them on a perpetual quest for more commercially and emotionally satisfying entertainment formulas."¹² The movie maker's devotion to capitalist values trumped any investment they had in genteel morals or traditional middle class culture. Sklar also argues that "films also satisfied a basic emotional expectation American audiences had traditionally brought to their popular arts – the wish to experience vicariously the sweet succumbing to temptation and the guilt and retribution of those who step beyond the boundaries of the social code."¹³ What better location to indulge than Coney Island, whose very name and visual representations seethe with examples of liberations from social constraints, class division, and the monotony of the everyday.

Popular American film in the 1920s tended towards slapstick rather than drama. Filmmakers ridiculed gentility and decorum and replaced high-flown rhetoric with the implementation of vernacular titles and progression of actions. The low and vulgar aspects of popular culture were valorized. In 1919 movies began to be acknowledged as a form of art, and in the following years there was a determination to prove that they were.¹⁴ This can be seen in Griffith's innovative cutting techniques, the use of flashbacks, and symbolic image associations.¹⁵ Later in the twenties Hollywood became obsessed

¹² Sklar, 95.

¹³ Sklar, 95.

¹⁴ William K. Everson, *American Silent Film* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1978), 4.

¹⁵ Everson, 4.

with the need to move the camera. The avant-garde valorized bare cinema for its capacity to explore and express modern life and praise it as a language of surface and speed. It was the exhibitionist quality of cinema that made it so attractive to the avant-garde. As Sergei Eisenstein relates, the attraction aggressively subjected the spectator to "sensual or psychological impact".¹⁶ It was this accent on direct stimulation that interested experimental filmmakers.

The Coney Island sequences under discussion encompass many of the issues that concerned society and filmmakers of the period. The form and subject matter of the sequences served the interests of commercial filmmakers, providing a spectacle that would draw and please audiences with titillating and visual pleasures. Coney Island was outside proper rules of decorum; its patrons reveled in the vernacular language, as used and disseminated on the picture postcards discussed in chapter one. The use of slang is evident in the dialogue that appears on the screen in *The Crowd*.¹⁷ The romance, bodily interactions, continuous and sometimes erotic nature of the spectacles satisfied audience desires for a vicarious experience.¹⁸ Coney Island was the ultimate site for distraction and entertainment, offering participatory pleasures and bodily excitements which translated into equally interesting and alluring visual representations. The Coney Island representations also intersect with an avant-garde interest in how cinema and the modern city express and recreate the relativity and multidimensionality of time and space. It enabled producers to maximize the movement and abilities of the camera to explore and express modernity through the subject matter of the location and by implementing a number of camera tricks.

¹⁶ Gunning, 60.

¹⁷ Specific examples of this are included in the description of the film.

¹⁸ Sklar, 48.

Now that I have outlined the context in which the films under discussion were produced, I will provide a short introduction for each one, describing its subject of the film as well as how and where Coney Island figures into the narrative. Clarence G. Badger's *It* (1927) contains a two minute scene at Coney Island. In the film, notorious flapper Clara Bow plays the part of a shop girl, Betty Lou Spence, who is in pursuit of her wealthy employer, and heir of the world's largest department store, Cyrus Waltham Jr. (Antonio Moreno). Betty embodies the "new" woman of the period with her outfits, short hair cut and position as a shop girl. The film takes up Elinor Glyn's concept of "It" which is defined by Glyn and in the film as "that quality possessed by some which draws all others with its magnetic force. With "IT" you win all men if you are a woman—all women if you are a man. "IT" can be a quality of the mind as well as a physical attraction." The point in the narrative when Betty and Mr. Waltham go to Coney Island is significant. Coney Island is selected as the location for their first date. The two belong to separate social classes and Coney Island is a location where class distinctions are irrelevant. The opportunity for physical interaction, freedom from social constraints and dating decorum, as well as the liberal atmosphere of the park result in numerous physical interactions between Betty and her date. At one point Betty wraps Mr. Waltham's arms around her waist, in another instance her skirt flies up revealing her undergarments; however, when Mr. Waltham attempts to kiss Betty as he drops her off at her residence, she is appalled and slaps his face. No longer at Coney Island, the proper rules of heterosocial interaction that dominate city streets apply. Betty, who welcomed similar forms of attention and interaction at the amusement park is obliged to fend it off in the city. Coney Island, since its establishment, has functioned as a site of new heterosocial

interaction and romance, and a place where men and women fall in love. The early picture postcard of the man and woman embracing on the beach pictures this. In *It*, Coney Island is a location of romance where Clara and Mr. Waltham's emotions and physical interactions are permissible and cultivated. It is in contrast to the structure of the rest of the film that the difference and effectiveness of the Coney Island sequence become clear. The extensive use of montage, unexplained location changes, and the varied and fast-paced transitions between scenes and vantage points do not occur at other points in the film.

In these films Coney Island continues to exist as a social sphere outside of city rules of social behaviour and decorum, an iconic location for dating and romance. It is significant that Coney figures as the location for the first date in both films enabling physical interactions between the characters. It is also important to indicate that Coney was the place where many couples shared their first date or first kiss; cinema and photography reflect this. I will develop detailed analyses of these specific sequences to demonstrate that the inclusion of these Coney Island sequences also enabled the filmmakers to explore the technical possibilities of the camera. Through these sequences they offered a set of non-narrative spectacles analogous to the composition of early cinema. I will begin my analysis with a description of the formal qualities of these scenes.

The Coney Island sequence in *It* begins with a sign that fills the screen and reads "HOT DOGS! that sizzle and satisfy! Best on the Beach!" This fades to a long shot of Betty and Mr. Waltham at the hotdog stand. Behind them is a crowd in constant motion. People are whirling in circles on a ride, mechanical horses are spinning and people are passing by. The long shot is interspersed with cuts to close-ups of Betty and then Mr.

Waltham eating hotdogs. The camera's proximity to the characters as they tear into the hotdogs, chewing, mouths open with the food almost falling out creates a vulgar spectacle for the viewer, one similar to, but not as grotesque as, Rube and Mandy's indulgence in the same fairground treat. It adds an element of comedy and interest as the expressions of delight and enjoyment cross the faces of the characters who devour the infamous Coney Island hot dogs. The cuts from the long shots to the close-ups also enhance the movement of the scene, although the fast pace of the fairground and the constant motion have already been established in the background. The camera cuts to a medium shot of the two of them and Betty points to the left, tugging on Mr. Waltham's arm.

The camera then cuts to a sign reading "Fun House" and encircled by flashing lights. Unlike the sequence in *The Crowd* the director has used signs in the initial instances to explain the transitions to different locations in the park. It is not as abrupt a transition for the viewer whose movements are mediated by these textual indicators. The "Fun House" sign dissolves to the Social Mixer ride which is also indicated by a sign. Although the camera is taking the viewer to a different location in the park the use of signs provides a legible framework, and a more logical progression through the spaces. A straight on long shot of the Social Mixer shows the crowd surrounding the ride and the people in the middle of the turning circle which constitutes the ride. People run onto the circle and sit clustered together in the middle. Then it begins to turn. As it turns, people are spiraled away from the centre and tossed in all directions, piling up along the sides of the ride unable to maintain their balance. The camera cuts to a zoomed in close up focusing only on the riders themselves. The close up, filmed slightly from above, shows just the people's heads and upper bodies twirling, and the closeness of the camera

accentuates the close proximity of their bodies to each other. All of the people spin out of the frame, except for Betty and Mr. Waltham.

Next, the camera cuts to a long shot of the Social Mixer, where Betty, Mr. Waltham, and some other participants remain. Betty spins off the ride and off screen, followed by Mr. Waltham. The camera cuts to a medium shot of them laying side by side, their bodies being forced into one another. The screen dissolves to the up and down motions of the next ride. The camera cuts to a closer shot of it, isolating Betty and Mr. Waltham who are being bumped into each other by the mechanical motions of the ride. The screen dissolves to a close up of the couple, filmed from behind, at the top of a slide. The words "Hold me tight Mr, Waltham" appear before the next scene. Mr. Waltham puts his arms around her and they descend the slide. The shot includes the crowds that line the slide watching from the sidelines.

An abrupt cut from the long shot of the descent down the slide to a close up of them inside a spinning tunnel maintains the fast pace at which the camera has been relocating the viewer throughout the sequence. The temporal and spatial transitions are abrupt and varied, although relatively fast-paced, accentuating and replicating the speeds and movements inherent in the Coney Island ride experiences. The close up of their bodies in the spinning tunnel creates extreme disorientation for the viewer since the other transitions have been so distinct. There is no indication that they have switched locations to a different ride. The signed progression through the spaces followed by the non-signed movement creates a more effective contrast. In the spinning tunnels their bodies are falling all over each other and the camera seems to be moving and shaking as well. The camera moves left and right, from her to him, showing both of them, and then her bottom.

Suddenly Betty falls in a direction that causes her skirt to go up and her undergarments flash centrally on the screen for the viewer, a sudden and titillating spectacle. The camera cuts to a medium shot of the couple which finally gives an indication of the type of ride they are on and why their bodies are moving as they are. In the medium shot they continue to fall and Betty grabs at her skirt trying to keep herself covered. She is unsuccessful and eventually her whole skirt lifts exposing her undergarments. Once again a crowd of spectators is visible in the background. Mr. Waltham eventually gets his footing and helps Betty to her feet. They stumble off the ride sliding down another moving ramp as they get off. The camera cuts back a bit further and a gust of wind (part of the ride) blows up her skirt, completely exposing her undergarments. The screen fades to a street and Mr. Waltham's car pulls up to drop her off. Mr. Waltham tries to kiss her and she bats him away, even though she had encouraged his physical affection for her throughout the day at Coney Island.

Coney Island occupies a similar position in the narrative of King Vidor's *The Crowd* (1928). This film also contains a sequence at Coney Island that lasts about three minutes. Just as in *It*, Coney Island becomes the location for the initial romance between the male and female characters who share their first date and first kiss at Coney Island. After a brief initial hesitation, Mary (Eleanor Boardman) lets John (James Murray) kiss her under the cover of the darkness in the tunnel ride. *The Crowd* is a drama that explores the life of an average American trying to make it big in New York City. The film begins by introducing us to John's grandiose dreams and chronicles his journey through an ordinary life as an anonymous individual among the masses. *The Crowd* recreates the sensory experience of the urban environment and expresses the modernity of New York

City in montage sequences of a skyscraper and city spaces, focusing on modern architecture, technologies, and transportation. Modern movements and technologies are best represented in the Coney Island sequence, not only because of the structures and dynamism of the location, but as a result of overwhelming movements of the camera.

The Coney Island sequence in *The Crowd* begins with the trip to the park. John Sims gets off work and joins his friend on a double date. The transportation on the way to Coney Island gives John the opportunity to get physically close to his date. He tries to hold hands and cuddle with this woman whom he has just met, and she continuously, but flirtatiously resists him. The scene of their ride there, which began in the daylight after work, fades to an extreme long shot of the Luna Park tower and surroundings at night. Time has been reconceptualized in this transition. This long shot aerial view establishes the location at Coney for the viewer and the decision to film at night creates an abstracted, dimensionless view of the park which is illuminated by electric lights. The modernity and movement of the park are evident and accentuated by the decision to film at night, showing off the electric light structures and the lights in motion on the spinning swings and Ferris wheel. This is followed by a sudden cut to a zoom in of the last view, so that the tower is no longer central, but on the left of the screen. In early cinema this form of magnification was considered an attraction in itself. The ability to show something anew highlights the ability of the camera to facilitate new ways of seeing things, either abstracted by the zoom or in greater detail than the human eye could perceive it. The movement of the swings and Ferris wheel in this zoomed in view extends the movements beyond the visible space of the screen relating the continuous motion of the park.

The camera cuts to a close up of the Luna Park signs in lights. The signs are in motion and the animated lights twinkle. It is a collage of text and image in motion. The camera cuts to a closeup of the Luna Park "Sky Chaser" sign from the previous view. The next cut is to an extreme long shot of the "Wonder Wheel" and "Tunnel of Love" signs. This is a strong contrast from the close up of the previous shot which filled the screen with lights in motion. In this shot the screen is dominated by blackness, the camera is distanced from the subject matter. The spinning Ferris wheel and continuity of the circular motions are enhanced by the cyclical melody of fairground music that is playing. The camera cuts to a long shot view from the other side of the Luna Park tower and the vertical circular motion has been replaced by a horizontal circular motion of the spinning swings, which adds depth and dimension to the screen, cutting across the light as shadows, establishing greater depth to the screen and contrasting movement in a different direction. The montage of Coney Island architecture at night moves quickly, changing vantage points and locations before the viewer has time to take in everything from the image.

The camera then cuts to a medium shot of John and Mary inside a ride-car that is swinging, perhaps inside what we saw spinning before. They hold on to a seat in front of them with looks of delight on their faces. They fill the right hand side of the screen. Equal space on the screen is given to the window which fills the left half. As John and Mary wave out the window, the outside scene is blurred from the motion and unidentifiable because of the spiraling angles that the ride is moving in. The first time John and Mary are shown in the park is on a ride. They are in motion and this motion is conveyed for the viewer through the open window that dominates half of the screen.

This scene dissolves to the inside of a spinning tunnel where John's companions are sitting, unable to stand. Behind the tunnel people move down slides. John enters the tunnel and loses his balance like the rest of them. The horizontal medium shot inside the tunnel fades to a related circular motion of the merry go round type ride, shot from directly above (bird's eye view) so that the circle spinning is central as in the previous shot. Instead of looking through the tunnel we look down on the people seated back to back, their legs forming a cross as they sit back to back, man, woman, man, woman. The camera cuts to a medium shot of the same, looking across at them now, arms interlocked, gleeful expressions as they spin around and around one by one shot off the spinning circle in all directions and almost into the camera. Fred's buttocks flies into the camera, hurled violently at the viewer.

This scene dissolves to a medium shot of the characters seated at the top of a slide. The camera tracks down the waving slide before the characters, simulating the up and down motion a participant would experience on the ride, leading the viewer through the motions. After this, the characters descend the slide, catch up with the camera, and enter the frame of the screen. The camera speeds along ahead of the characters again and they are lost from the screen before re-entering it. A quick cut to a long shot of the same scene provides a view of the crowds watching, lining the sides of the slides at the moment the characters are just entering the top of the screen at a higher point of the slide. Prior to this the camera was in motion as if it were waving up and down descending the slide itself, but in this shot it is static, filming the motion of the characters. The camera simulated the movement for the viewer and then filmed the same motion from a static

position, until the characters had descended the slide, only their heads remaining at the bottom of the screen, the empty slide and crowds still visible in the background.

This scene dissolves to a longshot of the characters riding mechanical horses on a merry go round. The camera is situated in front of them on the merry go round. The camera dissolves to yet another location and ride where the motion has shifted direction again. The horizontal spin of the merry go round in the former scene is contrasted by an up and down, back and forth rocking motion. The shot length remains the same as the music shifts, slowing down from the fairground circus melody to a military, march tune. The screen dissolves to a close up of a paddle moving back and forth, a man's booted foot hanging off a boat, a rock in the foreground and a background scene of glaciers in water and a small mountain. The camera cuts to a long shot of the same scene, revealing that it is a historical reconstruction.

As the full scene is revealed, a canoe filled with passengers enters, passing across the screen from left to right. John's friend stands up and imitates the standing mannequin on the display. The position of the live figures mimics the position of the constructed ones and their placement in the canoe. "Sit down! You don't look historical...you look hysterical!" John pushes him back down to a seated position, and the military march inspired tune slows down into a jazzy seductive tune as his friend Fred tries to close in on his woman. She slaps his hand "Say am I ridin' with you or wrestling?" He embraces her. The camera cuts to a close up of John and Mary, the background is black; suggesting they have entered the dark part of the Love Tunnel ride. He gathers her into his arms and they begin to embrace and kiss. After they have been kissing for a while, she pushes him away. "Gee...I ougtn't to let you kiss me." But he convinces her and they begin to kiss

again. The camera cuts to the outside of the tunnel where a crowd waits behind a gate and a sign above the tunnel reads "Do they neck, WATCH." An announcer points to the tunnel which opens up revealing all of the embracing couples, who quickly separate and exit upon exposure. The camera cuts to a close up of the crowd pointing and jeering. This scene fades into the subway ride home where all couples are in each others arms tired out after their day at Coney.

I have discussed how photographs of Coney Island functioned, in one way, as a form of arm chair tourism and as forms of entertainment by looking at reproductions of the place, the park itself, and what goes on there. Film and the amusement park have been established as analogous forms of entertainment in a number of ways. Like the photograph, the camera becomes the new form of armchair tourism, mobilizing the spectator so that he or she is transported through the spaces and places of Coney Island. These sequences are structured as a number of disparate forms of visual novelties that are not linked by a narrative, other than the trip to Coney Island. It is a visual experience that, as Tom Gunning accounts, folds back on the very pleasure of looking.¹⁹ This act of pleasurable looking is reinforced for the viewer by the inclusion of a pleasure seeking and satiated audience lining the rides shown in *It* and *The Crowd*, most memorable, perhaps when the kissing couple are exposed. Coney Island remains, in filmic representation, a place to narratively, aesthetically, and visually maximize the re-creation of modern experiences and movement. The films show off the new technologies of the park and the camera. Coney exists as a site of pure entertainment and liberation, narratively for the characters and a visual form of liberation and experimentation for the camera and the viewers.

¹⁹ Gunning, 58.

Although both of these films are dominated by a narrative impulse, the Coney Island segments enable the directors to indulge in an interest in the ability of the camera to *show*, an interest that occupied the makers and watchers of early cinema at the turn of the century. In his consideration of early cinema, Tom Gunning maintains that the differences one finds between the Lumières and Georges Méliès should not be represented as an opposition between narrative and non-narrative filmmaking.²⁰ In accordance with Gunning's position, I argue that the Coney Island sequences in *It* and *The Crowd* exist as and as a result should be examined as, a fusion of narrative and non-narrative film. These Coney Island representations exemplify Gunning's theory that the "cinema of attractions" remains an aspect of narrative film.²¹ The Coney Island scenes in both *It* and *The Crowd* are pertinent examples of exhibitionist cinema and exemplify the notion of the "cinema of attractions" as cinema based on its ability to show something. Like Lumières' films these representations offer realistic motions such as the simulated motions of the rides and vision experienced at the amusement park; and similar to Méliès they include magical illusions such as the cinematic reconceptualization of space and time. Gunning describes both narrative and non-narrative cinema as "way[s] of presenting a series of views to an audience, fascinating because of their illusory power..."²²

Coney Island, like cinema, is a fusion of motion and magical illusion. Coney Island is comprised of rides, architecture, reconstructions, re-enactments, and exhibits

²⁰ Tom Gunning indicates that Laura Mulvey also supports this conviction in her discussion of classical cinema, ultimately concluding that "shown in a very different context the dialectic between spectacle and narrative has fueled much of the classical cinema...balancing between pure spectacle of gag and the development of narrative traditional spectacle film proved true to its name by highlighting moments of pure visual stimulation along with narrative." (Gunning, 57)

²¹ Gunning, 57.

²² Gunning, 57.

which, similar to a cinematic capacity, mobilize spectators, and involve viewers in displays of motion, magical illusion, and exoticism. It is interesting and significant that the directors return to the fairground, one of the origins of this form of mobilized and reconceptualized spectatorship, to take the opportunity to *show*. At Coney Island, the directors have capitalized on the visual opportunities and characteristics of the location, which is a historical derivative of new forms of spectatorship and the emergence of cinema, to amplify and unify the subject matter with the cinematic mode of presentation.

Although numerous analogies may be drawn, it is important to recognize the distinction between the cinematic experience of Coney Island and the actual Coney Island experience. Anne Friedberg's notion of the mobilized, virtual gaze, which "is not a direct perception but a received perception mediated through representation," indicates a distance and a difference between direct and mediated perceptions.²³ Although there is a physical separation inherent in the cinematic experience, there are also new ways of experiencing things visually as a result of technological mediation. The capabilities of the camera enable the viewer to see and experience the space in alternative ways. For example, the close-up and the aerial-view offer new proximities at which to experience the sites of the park. Friedberg introduced the "mobilized, virtual gaze" in order to describe "a gaze that travels in an imaginary flânerie through an imaginary elsewhere and an imaginary elsewhere."²⁴ This form of mobilized and virtual spectatorship originated at, among other places, the fairground. Coney Island offered a range of virtual mobilities like reconstructions of geographical locations such as an Eskimo village or Venice, Italy; historical events like the destruction of Pompeii; or fantasy excursions such as a trip to

²³ Friedberg, 15.

²⁴ Friedberg, 37.

the moon. The amusement park also performed, as John Kasson argues, as a parody of urban experience, turning the jumbled subjectivities of urban life into bodily enactments.²⁵ The rides, shows, movements, and ways of seeing experienced at Coney Island create a physical stimulation for the participant, whereas the viewer of cinema experiences a disembodied, purely visual stimulation, mediated by the technology of the cinema. The camera replicates and reproduces Coney Island vision and experience for the viewer, creating a visual connection to, and a mediated separation from, the physical experience.

Tom Gunning has described the various components of the "cinema of attractions." He argues that it is cinema that bases itself on its ability to show something.²⁶ This exhibitionist cinema is a cinema that displays its visibility.²⁷ Gunning expands on this description referencing Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein's implementation of the term "attraction" as aggressively subject[ing] the spectator to "sensual or psychological impact", according to Eisenstein, "theatre should consist of a montage of such attractions, creating a relation to the spectator entirely different from his absorption in illusory depictions."²⁸ Gunning states that "the trick film itself is a series of displays, of magical attractions, rather than a primitive sketch of narrative continuity – many trick films are in effect plotless, a series of transformations strung together with little connection... The story simply provides a frame upon which to string a demonstration of the magical possibilities of cinema."²⁹

Gunning points out that cinema theatre itself is more analogous to the fairground attraction than the traditions of legitimate theatre and, here, in a representation of the

²⁵ Kasson, 42.

²⁶ Gunning, 57.

²⁷ Gunning, 57.

²⁸ Gunning, 60.

²⁹ Gunning, 58.

fairground, this analogy is made evident and visible. In addition the article explains that the "cinema of attractions" directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity through an exciting spectacle.³⁰ The attraction to be displayed may also be of a cinematic nature such as the close up, which was an attraction in its own right in early cinema, or cinematic manipulation such as slow or reverse motion. According to Gunning "The cinema of attractions energy moves outwards towards an acknowledged spectator rather than inward towards the character-based situations."³¹ The persistence of the "cinema of attractions" in these representations of Coney Island is significant because Coney Island, as a location and in these representations, has remained the site at which to visually experiment. Coney Island and the "cinema of attractions" satiated the desires of the filmmakers and audiences supplying forms of entertainment that expressed American modernity, captured and accentuated technological and social innovations, all the while providing the ultimate mediated form of distraction and amusement. Representing Coney Island in the 1920s, filmmakers are concerned with the same subject matter and methods of visual presentation and reception that occupied the producers of photographs and films of Coney Island at the turn of the century.

I will consider Gunning's characteristics of the "cinema of attractions" as outlined above in a close analysis of these Coney Island sequences. I will demonstrate that the "cinema of attractions" co-exists with the overall narrative structures of these films and elucidate the nature of this persistent "cinema of attractions". This discussion clarifies the inclusion of these scenes in the films and the nature of their composition.

³⁰ Gunning, 59.

³¹ Gunning, 58.

In both films, the structure of the Coney Island sequence is composed, as Gunning describes the "cinema of attractions" often is, as a series of plotless transformations. Not all sense of a narrative is abandoned. It makes sense, in the context of the story, that the characters have gone on a date to Coney Island in *It* and *The Crowd*, but what happens from scene to scene and cut to cut has no narrative logic associated with it. As the camera follows the characters from place to place, the camera transforms time and space magically transporting the viewer along with the characters to new locations in the park without explaining how they arrived there or why. In *The Crowd*, Vidor establishes some visual continuity from one attraction to the next. For example he takes the viewer from the circular spinning motion of one ride to a similar circular motion of another ride. Another example of a transition that is related visually and in terms of motion is the fade from the teeter-totter motion ride to an animated iceberg, part of a historical reconstruction, that is moving in the same motion. Another technique employed by Vidor to establish a relationship between the various locations are the rhythmic carnival, militaristic, or jazzy, romantic melodies accompanying the scenes.

While some visual and audio continuity has been established, ultimately, for the viewer, there is no logical or meaningful connection established between the jump from one location to the next. It is the camera that rearranges time and space, transporting the viewer from one spectacle to another attraction at a constant and rapid pace. This illogical progression functions to recreate the disorderly, fast-paced, fragmented ways time, vision, space, and place are experienced at Coney Island. *It* offers the same plotless progression through the rides and attractions of Coney, focusing more on displaying the various rides and interactions available at the park than furthering the narrative of the

film. These scenes give a sense of the experience, vision, technology and interactions that make up the modern American location the characters experienced in their trip. The narrative element of the sequence, which focuses on the characters who are on dates, also becomes a part of the visual spectacle. The viewer wonders at and finds pleasure in the physical interactions of the characters who are jostled together on the rides, thrown off balance, sit together in an embrace and in *The Crowd* share kisses. The viewer is likely aware that these occurrences take place at Coney, and waits for the moment in the fast-paced montage when the affection will occur.

The Coney Island instance in the narrative gives Vidor and Badger the opportunity to exhibit the magical possibilities of cinema. I have already mentioned the use of the camera in these films to reorder time and space. An example of this occurs in *The Crowd* when John Sims and Mary are traveling on the bus to Coney Island right after work, and when the camera cuts to a view of Luna Park, it is pitch black, late at night. In this case, their journey to Coney Island is indicated, though shortened, whereas movement from place to place at Coney Island occurs suddenly and without description via cuts, dissolves, and fades. Other magical camera tricks that emerge in these sequences are the use of montage to comprise the segments, the implementation of dissolves, fades and cuts to reconstruct space and time, the mobile camera to replicate movement, as well as close-ups, and aerial shots, such as those of Luna Park at night. Another camera trick employed is the use of cuts to represent multiple views of the same subject or place simultaneously. For example, the human roulette wheel in *The Crowd* is seen from above in a bird's eye view as only the camera could show it, as well as from a horizontal position, situating the viewer as a member of the audience. The spaces, characters, and

events are seen from varying perspectives, whether the camera isolates them in a close-up or moves back to expose the context of the ride and surrounding audience.

In both *It* and *The Crowd*, the film solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity through an exciting spectacle. Many of the events that occur are analogous to slapstick or comedy performances of the variety theatre. Within each scene, there is an event of physical comedy, for example, when Fred stands in the boat mocking the historical display, or when the women battle off the advances of their male companions. On the rides, Betty and Mr. Waltham, as well as John and his companions are constantly being thrown off balance, losing their footing, being hurled into one another or piled up with other strangers who are visiting the park. In *It* the close-ups of Mr. Waltham devouring his hotdog and cuts to shots up Betty's dress function as humorous or titillating spectacles.

In some instances there is a build up to the occurrence of the main attraction in the scene. For instance, when Betty and Mr. Waltham are spinning on the Social Mixer, and the patrons around them are spiraled away from the centre piling up on the sidelines, anticipation mounts as the viewer waits to see what will happen to the main characters. In *The Crowd*, Mary's resistance to John's advances, her eventual submission as they kiss in the tunnel, and the shock and embarrassment of their exposure, not only to the viewers of the film but to the masses waiting outside the ride at Coney, constitute a similar build up. Showing the audience reaction to the exposed, kissing couples, and including the sign that the patrons see "Do they Neck? WATCH!" calls attention to the fact that the viewer is watching. He or she is made aware of his or her voyeuristic indulgence. A proper reaction to the event is suggested and structured by the inclusion and close-up of the

Coney Island crowd's reaction. The viewer participates and perpetuates the acts of looking inherent in the Coney Island experience.

The attraction in the "cinema of attractions" can be of a cinematic nature, and there are many instances of cinematic attractions as well as instances where the camera shows its visibility. Not only does the camera capture various technologies, interactions, and movements of the park, it enhances them and replicates them. It shows off its ability to bring the viewer into new proximities with technology and expands the viewing experiences found at Coney Island. In Vidor's montage sequences, he portrays the dynamism and vitality of Coney Island. Time, space, and vision are fragmented. When the camera is mobilized, as it moves down the slide ahead of the characters in *The Crowd* or is jolted in the spinning tunnel with the couple in *It*, the camera enables the viewer to experience vision as if he or she was on one of those rides. The camera has not only captured the motions of Coney Island, and established the continuity and variety of those motions, it has recreated the vision in motion that a patron of the park would experience on a specific ride. This is also one way that the camera displays its visibility. The viewer becomes aware of the mediated perceptions through the mobilized camera. The best example of this occurs in *The Crowd* as the camera replicates the movements of the characters as they wave up and down the bumps of the slide. The camera speeds ahead of the characters and waits for them to catch up to the frame. The camera has demonstrated the movements for the viewer before the characters in the film have experienced them. This scene is more about relating the spaces and vision of the park, as well as the possibilities of the camera to display that experience and vision, than it is about the experience of the characters in the film. The presence of technology in these

representations is evident in the capacity of the camera to display the lights of Luna Park close-up or in motion. Seeing through the window of the spinning ride, experiencing the waves of the slide or the jostling of the tunnel, seeing from aerial perspectives, or in the perpetual motion of montage indicate that vision has been mediated by technology.

Coney Island, an emblem of modern American society and technology, seems a natural location to include in films such as *It* and *The Crowd* which investigate the modern spaces and conditions inherent in modern American life. Including Coney Island in *It* and *The Crowd* was a means of representing and appealing to the middle and lower-classes. This pleasure ground constituted the ultimate in entertainment and the ultimate break from genteel conceptions of proper decorum and leisure. Coney enabled the directors to maximize their creation of comedic spectacles, use of the vernacular, and inclusion of romantic physical interactions, thus satisfying the desires of 1920s moviegoers. Coney Island, as it is portrayed in these representations, is a visual display and expression of a modern American identity, activity, and environment as well as the capacity of the camera to replicate and enhance the experiences of the location.

A return to the fairground, especially one as notorious as Coney Island, meant a number of things for King Vidor and Clarence G. Badger. Narratively, their characters were liberated from the constraints of the city, socially and physically. The attraction between the male and female characters could progress via physical interactions and flirtations played out at the park. For the viewer this facilitates a vicarious experience of the romance or heterosocial interaction. In addition, a return to the fairground, the roots of early cinema, and the foundation of such forms of spectatorship, liberated the filmmakers from their plot driven story lines and their obligation to a purely narrative

progression, providing an opportunity to explore the technical capabilities of the camera and vision, as it is revolutionized at Coney Island. A study of the Coney Island sequences in *It* and *The Crowd* according to Tom Gunning's notion of the "cinema of attractions" demonstrates the persistence of the early cinema's desire to show in 1920s film.

Coney Island was the ultimate site for distraction and entertainment, offering participatory pleasures and bodily excitements which translated into an equally exciting spectacle, whether witnessed at the scene, in a photograph, or on the screen.

CONCLUSION

There's a song about Coney Island, you know?

-Anon

When people today hear the words "Coney Island" they think of New York City, hotdog eating contests, or Lou Reed's 1976 album and song title *Coney Island Baby*. Some recall Weegee's 1940s photographs of the crowded beach and others will say "That's an amusement park isn't it? Is it still open?" It is important to question how Coney Island is remembered and what people know about it today. What was such a popular entertainment destination at the turn-of-the-century and into the 1920s, and figured as prominent and visually interesting subject matter has faded into history, forgotten by and unknown to many. Coney Island was the original amusement park, and remains an important part of American and entertainment history. Millions continue to frequent amusement parks today without questioning where these forms of fun came from. They attend the technological playgrounds, delighting in thrills often derived from those that amused patrons of Coney Island over a century ago.

Today, with an infinite variety of entertainments that advance and transform constantly, the amusement park does not possess the novelty it once did. The emergence of airplanes, television, and Disneyland contributed to Coney Island's demise. Even the constant transformations of the park, such as new rides and architecture each season, could not compete with new developments in entertainment technology. The shocks, thrills, and spectacles of Coney Island were no longer a novelty. The decline of the Coney Island amusement parks continued when Luna park caught fire on August 12, 1944. Ironically as the park disintegrated into ashes, it was before a crowd of 750,000. Luna park attracted and entertained even in its final hours. Post WWII construction costs and

waning attendance in the previous seasons prevented the owners from rebuilding. In 1964 Frank Tilyou died and with him, Steeplechase park, whose gates never re-opened. Despite the closure of the two most popular amusement parks a central cluster of attractions remained and the Coney Island beach continued to attract massive crowds. Today the beach and amusement park are dominated by a series of high-rise apartment buildings that have taken over the peninsula.

It seems only natural that what remains of the Coney Island from the early twentieth century has become an attraction in the current amusement park. The "99 cents cheap" Coney Island Museum proclaims itself the only museum in the world dedicated to interpreting and preserving the history of Coney Island, boasting a collection that "will give a sense of the importance of the place to the nation and the world". Their collection consists largely of Coney Island artifacts and photographs. Browsing the Coney Island website, it is evident that the same types of attractions that were used to draw the masses at the turn of the twentieth century persist in 2009. Burlesque at the Beach, the Coney Island Circus Side Show, Shoot the Freak, the World's Oldest and Best Roller Coaster, and the Coney Island Film Society are all attractions located "just a stone's throw from Manhattan". Recognizing the ambiguity of the existence of the Coney Island amusement park the site advertises Coney Island as "Really Fun. Really Open."

While the average individual may have forgotten or be unaware of Coney Island, Hollywood remembers. As recent as February 2009 Paul McGuigan's *Push* starring Chris Evans, Dakota Fanning, and Camilla Belle featured a scene at Coney Island. The American science fiction thriller is about a group of psychics who band together to fight a government agency that has conspired against them. Although the majority of the film is

set in Hong Kong, Coney Island is included as the location where the main characters fall in love. Interestingly a photograph of the couple taken on their date there reappears throughout the film as a reminder of their true feelings for one another. Since emotions, memory, and truth are challenged throughout the film, the photograph from Coney Island functions as proof of their time at the amusement park and the mutual love they felt during their experience there. In 2009 mainstream film Coney Island remains an iconic location for couples to fall in love. It is also significant that this conception of Coney Island as a place of romance had been established in early photographs such as *Greetings from Coney Island* (Fig. 1.2) and, as I have demonstrated, persisted in 1920s films such as *It* and *The Crowd*.

This study has only considered a small selection of Coney Island representations. A quick search of Coney Island on YouTube will yield a plethora of video results including footage or films from most decades of the twentieth century. The Library of Congress, the Coney Island Museum, the Brooklyn Museum, the Museum of the City of New York, and the Museum of Modern Art collections contain numerous photographs (stereographs, picture postcards, and newspaper photographs), narrative films, and documentary films of Coney Island, most of which remain archived. Although a limited selection of visual material has enabled the detailed analysis of the visual material and a focused study, much of Coney Island's past in pictures and in film has yet to be considered.

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