

# Critical Response

## II

### Response to Miriam Ross

Thomas Elsaesser

I much appreciate Miriam Ross's thoughtful letter and her generous comments on my essay (Thomas Elsaesser, "The 'Return' of 3-D: On Some of the Logics and Genealogies of the Image in the Twenty-First Century," *Critical Inquiry* 39 [Winter 2013]: 217–46). It is always gratifying to have careful and passionate readers, and I welcome the exchange. She is indeed correct in surmising that the renewed public interest in 3-D, thanks to Hollywood's promotional efforts to relaunch 3-D as a viable digital medium, intersects with a number of long-standing film-historical and media-archaeological projects on my part, of which this essay is but one outcome. These projects include attempts to rethink the history of the cinema, now that its photographic base has become a contingent historical fact, rather than the cinema's constitutive and defining feature. This gives more prominence to the many diverse prehistories of the cinema as well as to the genealogies of light spectacles and image projections that fill or envelop space: phantasmagorias, fog pictures, ghost performances.<sup>1</sup>

I have also written about the need to enlarge the canon of film history: first, to include art and installation works, notably from the 1920s and 1970s, that deploy the moving image as a spatial dispositif;<sup>2</sup> and, second, to

1. See Thomas Elsaesser, "The New Film History as Media Archaeology," *CiNéMAS* 14 (Spring 2004): 75–117.

2. See Elsaesser, "Entre savoir et croire: Le Dispositif cinématographique après le cinéma," in *Cine-Dispositifs: Spectacles, Cinéma, Télévision, Littérature*, ed. François Albera and Maria Tortajada (Lausanne, 2011), pp. 39–74.

take account of the vast archive of nonentertainment films, that is, scientific, medical, military, and domestic uses of film and the cinematic apparatus.<sup>3</sup> These somewhat eclectic and undisciplined interests found their way into the 3-D essay in what I had hoped would be a reasonably coherent fashion, but I can well understand that they might make a more single-minded historian of 3-D both nervous and apprehensive, if not outright suspicious. And it seems that Ross has indeed discovered a number of factual errors, ambiguities, and potential inaccuracies.

Before I respond to these in more detail, I simply want to make explicit what is implied in the preceding paragraph: I clearly did not set out to write a history of 3-D. As I state at the outset of my essay: “My general thesis . . . is that 3-D is only one element resetting our idea of what an image is and, in the process, is changing our sense of spatial and temporal orientation and our embodied relation to data-rich simulated environments” (p. 221). I also took care to side neither with the scoffers, who consider 3-D “a waste of a perfectly good dimension” (Roger Ebert) nor the aficionados, collectors, and archivists of 3-D, who have proven their loyalty to a derided medium over many a decade and across by now countless dedicated websites (p. 218). But I was also not proposing a counterhistory; instead I offered what I called “four counterintuitive claims,” of which perhaps the most relevant in the present context is my polemical assertion that “from a historical perspective, . . . 3-D actually preceded 2-D in mechanical imaging and, in the form of stereoscopic slides, conquered fields as familiarly diverse-but-interdependent as the entertainment industry and the military, prior to the advent of the cinema, which appropriated part of stereo aesthetics and simultaneously suppressed knowledge of its popularity” (p. 221).

I hope that Ross will agree that the errors she detects in my piece do not affect the substance of any of these larger aims, arguments, or claims. In fact, her correction in one case would seem to strengthen my overall argument. She quotes me saying “Alfred Hitchcock’s *Dial M for Murder* (1954), shot and advertised in 3-D but only ever released in 2-D” and goes on to point out that “the *3-Dfilmarchive* offers excellent analysis of the production and reception of *Dial M for Murder*, including the reproduction of pages from the 1950s trade journals to support its claims that there were some initial screenings of *Dial M*

3. See Elsaesser, “Archives and Archaeologies: The Place of Non-Fiction Films in Contemporary Media,” in *Films That Work: Industrial Film and the Productivity of Media*, ed. Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau (Amsterdam, 2009), pp. 19–34.

THOMAS ELSAESSER is a film historian and professor of film and television studies at the University of Amsterdam.

for *Murder in 3-D*" (pp. 875–76). The site is indeed a mine of useful information, and I wish the entry had been up when I wrote my essay.<sup>4</sup> It summarizes the case around *Dial M for Murder* as follows:

On Monday April 26 [1954], DIAL M was previewed in 3-D and widescreen 1.85:1 in 29 key exchange cities (Charlotte, Pittsburgh and Seattle ran it flat) as part of Warner Bros. new product seminar. According to a May 1 article in *Boxoffice*, the film was seen on that day by an estimated 7,500 exhibitors. Theaters around the country booked the film in 3-D for its Memorial Day opening. *Trade reviews hit the following day and the first one to appear dramatically illustrated the projection issues that had effectively destroyed the public's interest in 3-D.* Variety's review by Brog stated: "Picture was filmed in 3-D and WarnerColor. The tints are good, adding to production values, but the depth treatment is a distraction that contributes nothing to the meller mood." Later in the review, he admitted that the preview was faulty. . . . The World Premiere took place in Grace Kelly's hometown of Philadelphia on Tuesday, May 18 at the 2,200 seat Randolph Theater. They had installed a new 72 × 30 foot Panoramascop screen in June of 1953. In addition to the giant silver screen, it was one of the few theaters in the Northeast with four projectors in the booth so they were able to run a 3-D film without the usual intermission. *After one preview performance on Tuesday and four showings on the 19th, the manager frantically contacted the studio and said that people were staying away in droves. He asked for permission to drop the 3-D and show it flat.*<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps I was technically wrong in saying "only ever released in 2-D," but if even in the female star's hometown, the cinema, while making a special effort and owning the best projection equipment, abandoned the 3-D version after only four screenings, one can hardly speak of the film having had a 3-D release. A review of the recently restored 3-D version, brought out on Blu-Ray/DVD, is even blunter: "If someone tells you they can remember seeing Alfred Hitchcock's 1954 classic "Dial M for Murder" in 3-D when it was first released, chances are you're talking to a liar."<sup>6</sup> And Hitchcock, fascinated though he was by the technical challenges, ruefully

4. Renewed interest (and archival digging) for *Dial M for Murder* was prompted by the Blu-Ray 3-D/DVD edition; see *Dial M for Murder* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1954; Warner Home Video, 2012), Blu-ray disc.

5. Bob Furmanek and Greg Klintz, "An In-depth Look at . . . 'Dial M for Murder,'" *3-Dfilmarchive*, [www.3-Dfilmarchive.com/dial-m-blu-ray-review](http://www.3-Dfilmarchive.com/dial-m-blu-ray-review); my italics.

6. Mike Scott, "'Dial M for Murder' Arrives on 3-D Blu-ray as Something of a Mixed Bag for Hitchcock Fans," *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, 9 Oct. 2012, [www.nola.com/movies/index.ssf/2012/10/dial\\_m\\_for\\_murder\\_gets\\_a\\_3-d\\_h.html](http://www.nola.com/movies/index.ssf/2012/10/dial_m_for_murder_gets_a_3-d_h.html)

remarked about 3-D: “It’s a nine-day wonder, and I came in on the ninth day.”<sup>7</sup>

Having said this, I think that Ross’s list of errors may be minor, but they are not trivial. I quite agree with her assertion that a journal like *Critical Inquiry* owes both itself and its readers the highest and most exacting standards of scholarship. And the manuscript editor in charge of my essay did in fact send me a substantial list of queries, which helped me greatly in improving a text that I had previously presented mainly as an illustrated talk. His questions were also the reason the number of footnotes rose from less than a dozen to seventy-one. The more regrettable that two caught the eye of Ross and struck her as misleading: she is right that Ray Zone does briefly mention the use of 3-D aerial reconnaissance on p. 160. On the other hand, I did not confuse the stereopticon magic lantern with stereoscopic slides when I mentioned Charles Musser’s book. I merely allowed myself to refer to a body of work by a scholar and colleague, with whom I had many discussions on the subject of stereoscopy, without once more checking my source.

The more egregious error, from a historical point of view, is probably my suggestion that the Lumière Brothers showed 3-D films as early as 1902. It was a piece of information narrated to me in Lyon in 1995, at the Lumière centenary conference, during a tour of the Lumière factory-turned-museum. The exchange took place in light of a debate that had occurred earlier that day, when I presented my paper, in which—emboldened by Jonathan Crary, who points out the crucial importance of stereoscopy for mid- and late-nineteenth European visual culture, as well as by Tom Gunning, who makes a very persuasive case for the Lumières as the true magicians of early cinema<sup>8</sup>—I argued that one could detect in Louis Lumière’s staging, framing, and shot composition the traces of a (subsequently repressed) stereoscopic aesthetics. I was basing myself more on a hunch than on hard evidence, which, however, presented itself in Lyon, after my talk, when I saw some of the hundreds of stereoscopic slides that the Lumières had manufactured and profitably sold in the years prior to their “invention” of the *cinématographe*.<sup>9</sup> It was in this context that their 3-D *cinema*

7. “Dial M for Murder in 3-D!” *Film Forum* (New York City), [www.filmforum.org/movies/more/dial\\_m\\_for\\_murder](http://www.filmforum.org/movies/more/dial_m_for_murder)

8. See Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), and Tom Gunning, “An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator,” *Art and Text* 34 (Autumn 1989): 31–45.

9. See Elsaesser, “Louis Lumière: The Cinema’s First Virtualist?” in *Cinema Futures: Cain, Abel or Cable? The Screen Arts in the Digital Age*, ed. Elsaesser and Kay Hoffmann (Amsterdam, 1998), pp. 45–61.

experiments were mentioned, and since this piece of information fitted so well with my previously inferred stylistic analysis, it stayed in my mind—and indeed it came to mind when I wanted to take a swipe at Scorsese’s *Hugo*, with its (to my mind misleading) implication that it was George Méliès who would have made 3-D films, had he known how to. I now regret that I never sought to verify the reference to the Paris Exhibition with more reliable, that is, printed evidence.

As I understand it, however, the debate around *L’Arrivée du train* in 3-D is still not altogether settled because the Lumières did indeed patent a 3-D system around 1900. And Ross is right to complain that websites do carry unsubstantiated claims like mine to this day; one proclaims, “one of the first 3-D movies ever shown (if not the first) was *L’Arrivée du train* by the Lumière brothers in 1903.”<sup>10</sup> The same assertion is made on another website, where one is invited to download an (anaglyph) 3-D version of the *L’Arrivée du train*, “modified so that you can experience the 3-D by using 3-D stereoscopic glasses of the red/blue variety.”<sup>11</sup>

Yet even the ever-reliable Ray Zone—the source also of Ross’s correction—highlights the disputed and complex nature of this history. Here is a passage that sums up Zone’s account, taken from a review of his 2007 *Stereoscopic Cinema and the Origins of 3-D Film: 1838–1952*:

The famous Lumière Brothers’ *L’Arrivée d’un Train à La Ciotat*, an iconic film, which, shot originally with one of the first motion picture cameras, startled 1896 audiences with its 2-D image of a locomotive rushing toward them. What most film histories leave out is that the Lumière Brothers were trying to achieve a 3-D image even prior to this first-ever public exhibition of motion pictures. As early as 1900, they patented an “Octagonal Disc Stereo Device” meant to shoot for 3-D projection. Although Zone cites disputes about its production date, Louis Lumière eventually re-shot *L’Arrivée d’un Train* in 3-D and exhibited it at a 1935 meeting of the French Academy of Science. This and other 3-D tidbits are cited in some film history books, most of which have fallen out of favor (i.e., James Limbacher’s once mandatory *Four Aspects of the Film*, 1969). It is to Zone’s credit that he carefully compares such existing texts to each other and to his own

10. “The History of 3-D Viewing,” [www.3-Duniversity.net/page.aspx?page=11](http://www.3-Duniversity.net/page.aspx?page=11)

11. “Recognised as the first 3-D Movie to have been shown to audiences in the world! It was 1903 when the Lumière brothers (Auguste and Louis) took their film to be viewed at the World Fair in Paris, France” (“*L’Arrivée du train*,” in *Depthcharge 3D*, [www.depthcharge3D.com/3-Dmovies.shtml](http://www.depthcharge3D.com/3-Dmovies.shtml)).

findings, making clear the contradictory accounts that plague early cinema and pre-cinema accounts.<sup>12</sup>

Ross's account strikes much the same note of cautious revisionism, and it certainly would have been better had I added just one more footnote, pointing out the contested if not altogether refuted nature of this urban myth that projects 3-D back by some thirty-odd years. It remains for me to join her in wishing for more accurate scholarship in this area and to thank her for her close reading not only of my text but of the scholarship on a topic she evidently feels so passionate about.

12. Betsy A. McLane, "L'Arrivée du 3-D," review of *Stereoscopic Cinema and the Origins of 3-D Film 1838–1952* by Zone, "Cut/Print," *Editors Guild Magazine*, [www.editorsguild.com/v2/magazine/archives/0508/columns\\_cutprint2.htm](http://www.editorsguild.com/v2/magazine/archives/0508/columns_cutprint2.htm)