

REDISCOVERIES

Gender, Spectacle, and Machinery: *Prix de beauté* (1930)

Lawrence Rainey
University of York

Typewriters, telephones, Dictaphones, adding machines, duplicators, loose-leaf ledgers, card indexes, vertical filing systems—all interlinked and concentrated in that new kind of building, after 1890 increasingly called the “skyscraper.” These devices shaped what business historians now recognize was “a veritable revolution in communication technology” that took place between roughly 1890 and 1910, one that created an interlocking grid of communications and storage-and-retrieval technologies.¹ The centre of that grid, its epitome, was an equally novel figure: the female clerical worker, more commonly described as typist, secretary, or stenographer, a figure who not only stood at the centre of a communications revolution transpiring in the real world, but also became a major protagonist within a rapidly changing media ecology that reformulated that world as spectacle; she became both the addressee and the protagonist of plays, postcards, comic strips and cartoons, novels serialized in tabloid newspapers, conduct books, popular songs, poetry, and above all, film. Taken together, these now forgotten works constitute a vanished continent of modern consciousness, one that has only recently begun to be rediscovered and explored.² While mapping an entire continent is plainly beyond the scope of a brief essay, one representative specimen from 1930 can cast light on the interwoven issues at stake: gender, modern spectacle, trust, and the cinematic machinery marshalled to address them.

Prix de beauté (*Miss Europe*), or *Beauty Prize*, can be tersely described as a French film that was released in 1930. But doing so slights the polyglot, transnational character of its production. Its basic storyline was devised by Georg Wilhelm Pabst (1885-1967), an Austrian director then resident in Berlin and perhaps best known in the Anglo-American world for his film version of Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera* (*Dreigroschenoper*), which

appeared one year after *Prix de beauté*.³ Overburdened with commitments, Pabst bequeathed his plot outline to the French director René Clair (1898-1981), who developed it into a more or less complete scenario. But shortly before production began, when it was decided to make the film into a sound production, Clair withdrew his participation and was replaced by Italian director Augusto Genina (1892-1957). From its inception, moreover, the film had been seen as a vehicle for the American actress Louise Brooks, while its parenthetical subtitle (*Miss Europe*) nodded to the notoriety attached to the Miss America beauty contest since it had been so named in 1922.

A word about Brooks, her status, and the film's reception history is necessary before turning to the film itself. After making several films for the American studio Paramount between 1925 and 1928, such as *Love 'em and Leave 'em* (1926) and *A Girl in Every Port* (1928), Brooks left for Europe to take up an offer advanced by Pabst. Over the next year, under his direction, she starred in *Pandora's Box* (*Die Büchse der Pandora*) and *The Diary of a Lost Girl* (*Das Tagebuch einer Verlorenen*), both silent films. It was in the late summer of 1927, however, that Al Jolson had starred in what later legend turned into the first talkie or film with sound, the Warner Brothers' film *The Jazz Singer*, achieving a box-office success that made the popular appeal of sound an undeniable fact. The process of converting to sound was protracted and complex, but it is the case that Brooks was working in a medium rapidly dying. When she returned to the US in late 1929, shortly after filming *Prix de Beauté*, it so happened that *Pandora's Box* finally achieved its American release. It flopped badly, chiefly because audiences now wanted to see talkies, not silents. *Prix de beauté*, with its post-production synchronized sound, was an uneasy combination, but by the time it was released in France in 1930 it was already a bit dated. It was not shown in the United States until 1958. Brooks is a notorious oddity. "By no objective standard could Brooks be considered one of the major stars of the silent era." Her current status is the result of a critical revival that transpired in the 1980s, culminating in the 600-page biography of her that was published in 1989.⁴

The film's narrative is extraordinarily simple. The heroine, Lucienne Garnier (Louise Brooks), is a typist who works for a Parisian newspaper called *Le Globe* and is engaged to André (Georges Charlia), a typesetter who also works there. When *Le Globe* announces a national competition to locate a Miss France who will then represent the country in a wider competition to select Miss Europe, Lucienne enters some photographs of herself, only to discover, the very same evening, that André deeply disapproves of such doings. The next day Lucienne tries to withdraw her entry, but learns that she is already a finalist. A few hours later and she's been named the winner. Swiftly endowed with a lavish wardrobe, she is hustled off to Saint Sebastian in northern Spain, where the Miss Europe contest will ensue. Lucienne wins

the second contest as well and, while fêted by the contest organizers, soon finds herself being courted by the debonair Adolphe de Grabovsky (Jean Bradin). Meanwhile, back in Paris, André has learned about Lucienne's triumph as Miss France—ironically, through reading the newspaper they both work for—and hurries off to Saint Sebastian to reclaim her. He arrives the evening after her triumph and storms out after issuing an ultimatum: “Ce soir ou jamais.” Either she returns to Paris this evening, or they will never be together again. Lucienne acquiesces and follows him to the train station. Their reunion is ecstatic; its aftermath, dismal. A housewife who no longer works, Lucienne is oppressed by drudgery and routine. When André arrives home for lunch, the atmosphere is tense and unhappy. As if we didn't already get the point, the film repeatedly lingers over an image of obtrusive symbolism, a bird in a cage (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Lucienne (Louise Brooks) stares at the birdcage, a symbol of her life after marriage to André.

Only when André gives her fan mail addressed to “Miss Europe” does a smile break over her face. But André's jealousy gets the better of him: he rips the fan letters to shreds. After André leaves, Lucienne receives a second visit, this one from Adolphe de Grabovsky. He offers her a lucrative contract and a screen test; Lucien rejects his offer and tears it up. But later that same night, sleepless, she finds she can no longer resist. She gets out of bed, reassembles the torn contract, then leaves André once and for all. The outcome is nearly instantaneous: in the next scene we see a movie producer scanning through a roll of film that contains images of Lucienne, and he issues his verdict, “Remarquable.” Lucienne will become a star, and the hypnotic power of her performance will be revealed to the press at a screening scheduled to take

place within days. The screening constitutes the film's explosive denouement, a masterpiece of modernist filmmaking.

Before turning to it, however, we need to survey a second dimension of the film, one seemingly at odds with its brisk narrative momentum. It is characterized by a species of lateral, rather than forward motion, acquiring salience precisely because it contributes nothing to the horizontal axis of sequence and event and instead invites our attention to dwell on motifs overtly symbolic or thematic in character. It emerges in the film's third major sequence when, after work, André and Lucienne together with their friend Anton go to a carnival or amusement park to while away the evening. The sequence depicts a night-time world of commercial spectacle and leisure activity, one that is strange, disjointed, almost frightening: cacophonous noise is ubiquitous, and everywhere we see figures who border on the grotesque. A man wrenches a woman's head in order to give her a kiss (Figure 2) and Lucienne frowns: sexuality acquires repugnant undertones. The moment



Figure 2: A repugnant kiss seized by a man at the carnival.

also stands out because this is otherwise a masculine world, one in which André finds occasion to show off his physical prowess by winning a strength contest. Lucienne scarcely notices, her attention transfixed instead by the phantasmagoric figures who surround her. André senses her malaise, but merely tells her that she should try harder to have fun. He detects nothing disturbing in the environment. And the amusement park is associated with a specific form of visuality, still photography. When André notices a photographer's sign, he suggests that they commemorate the evening with a photo. The result (Figure 3) is stiff and awkward, even archaic, a throwback to the nineteenth century.



Figure 3: The photograph of André and Lucienne that is taken at the carnival: a throwback to nineteenth century photography.

If the carnival is the setting where André achieves his triumph with a test of strength, Saint Sebastien is the setting where Lucienne achieves hers by winning the beauty contest and becoming Miss Europe. The contrast between the two settings is stark, glaring, even schematic. The contest takes place during daytime, drenched in sunlight, the opposite of the carnival. The crowd that assembles to watch the beauty contest is composed not only of men, but many women who actively participate in assessing the contestants. It is also international and cosmopolitan, as brief close-ups hone in on an Indian maharajah, a French duke, or a Spanish woman. Unlike the tightly packed crowd that jostles Lucienne in the carnival, the audience here sits in orderly rows that form a semi-circle around the catwalk; its enthusiasm is expressed in muffled waves of polite applause, rather than loud jeers and raucous noise. The measured applause finds its counterpart in a soundtrack that presents a spritely melody, the antithesis of the carnival's disordered din. The setting is also associated not with still photography, but moving pictures; repeatedly the film pauses over various cameramen who are filming the event (Figure 4). Even the way in which Lucienne wins her victory contrasts with the way André wins his. Unlike most beauty contexts, this one is judged not by a panel of expert judges but by the audience itself, whose applause is measured and tabulated. André wins by raw force; Lucienne, by democratic consensus.



Figure 4: The cameraman taking moving pictures amid the crowd attending the beauty contest in Saint Sebastian.

The two settings, the carnival outside Paris and the contest in St. Sebastian, establish a series of sharp dichotomies:

Carnival

André wins
male
raw force
cacophony
still photography
night/opacity
darkness
the local
grotesque
confining crowds

St. Sebastian

Lucienne wins
female
democratic consensus
melody
moving pictures
daytime/transparency
light
the international
fairy-tale
freedom to move

And they do so by repeatedly focussing on machinery for the production of likenesses and illusions, and by aligning that machinery with different historical stages in the production of spectacle.

These dichotomies are so schematic that they seem to conflict with, or threaten to deplete, another set of more realistic motifs indispensable to the narrative's forward drive. One is André's jealousy, which is already announced in the film's opening sequence, when André and Lucienne take a Sunday excursion to a little lake just outside Paris. André becomes discernibly jealous when Lucienne, while doing her callisthenics amidst a crowd, attracts admiring looks and comments from male observers. In response, Lucienne calms him by singing a song:

Ne sois pas jaloux, tais-toi !
 Je n'ai qu'un amour, c'est toi !
 Il faut te raisonner,
 Tu dois me pardonner
 Quand un autre me dit que
 je suis belle;
 Les aveux les plus flatteurs
 N'ont jamais troublé mon
 cœur
 Je te reste fidèle

C'est plus fort que moi
 Je n'ai qu'un amour, c'est toi!

Don't be jealous--just relax!
 I've only got one love--it's you!
 One has to reason with you,
 You must forgive me
 When someone tells me I'm
 pretty;
 The most flattering avowals
 Have never really touched my
 heart.
 I remain faithful to you;

It's stronger than me,
 I've only got one love--it's you!

Her song assuages his jealousy and reassures him of her fidelity, and while it suffices for the moment, it does not erase the fact that André is a jealous man prone to bursts of anger. When he and Lucienne are lunching together and he notices Lucienne perusing a newspaper preview of the Miss Europe contest, he bristles with intemperate indignation: "If I was the government I would forbid all those kinds of things." He repeatedly engages in small acts of violence: in the opening sequence beside the lake, he throws their mutual friend Anton into the water, while in the restaurant sequence he both tweaks Anton's nose and snatches a piece of bread right out of his hand. In short, André's jealousy is indiscriminate and his temper explosive, traits plainly meant to account for his actions in the film's closing sequence, the screening in which Lucienne's talents will be revealed to a select audience of film producers and journalists.

Ironically, André learns about the screening when he is asked to typeset the newspaper announcement of it while at work. What follows is remarkable. Through a backstage door, André gains entry into the theatre and feels his way through its dim corridors. In another room, meanwhile, the screening begins. Drawn by the sound of Lucienne's recorded voice, André finds a side door to the screening room; he opens it by a crack and peers inside. The film cuts from a close-up of André's face (Figure 5), intensely seeking the figure of Lucienne, to a mid-shot in profile of the spectators; but then the camera zooms in at a vertiginous speed to focus exclusively on the faces of Lucienne and Adolphe, seated beside one another (Figure 6). The film cuts back to André's face, but now the camera pans downward, following the vertical axis of the door that is ajar until it reaches André's hand: he is holding a gun, and fires it. Lucienne's head is shown as it jerks forward, and her eyes swiftly close in death. But it is at this point that the film



Figure 5: André peers into the screening room and . . .



Figure 6: . . . sees Lucienne beside Adolphe de Grabovsky.

exploits the soundtrack to achieve a haunting effect. For the recorded voice from Lucienne's screening continues to sing in the wake of her death. And at one point the film juxtaposes her face in profile, still and dead as she lies on the floor, with the cinematic image of her that continues to sing (Figure 7). Her after-image lives on, and the ghostly light from it flickers over her dead face, while she continues to sing in the film's haunting conclusion.

The ironies of this final sequence are multiplied by virtue of their being embedded within the film's adoption of a ring or circular structure; for the song that Lucienne sings in the final sequence is the same one that



Figure 7: Adolphe (left) looks at the corpse of Lucienne, while her cinematic image continues to perform onscreen.

she sang to André at the culmination of the opening sequence—yet with crucial differences. It is only now, when it reappears at the end of the film, that a viewer can recognize that it is a structural analogue to the film itself, insofar as it too deploys a ring structure, repeating the words from line two, at its beginning (“Je n’ai qu’un amour, c’est toi”), in the tenth or final line at its end. A ring structure within a ring structure, wheels within wheels, circles within circles. And again, it is only later when it reappears in the film’s final sequence that a viewer learns it is not an independent song or lyric in its own right, as it seemed earlier, but a refrain embedded within a longer song that consists of three stanzas and now unfolds against the dramatic backdrop of Lucienne’s murder by André.

The effect is lacerating. André shoots the real Lucienne at precisely the moment when the cinematic Lucienne has reached a transition between the second iteration of the refrain and the beginning of a new, third and final stanza. There is a brief pause: the gun roars, followed by a moment of silence, and then, while the real Lucienne is dying or already dead, the cinematic Lucienne begins to sing:

Mais un jour, peut-être,	But some day, perhaps,
Je peux disparaître	I may just disappear
Sans même t’avoir dit au revoir	Without even having said goodbye
	to you. ⁵

The dramatic moment puts extraordinary pressure on that otherwise commonplace phrase “au revoir” in the third line, translated here with the

commonplace “goodbye”; for “au revoir” retains a core of literal meaning, “to see again” or “to re-view,” that is reactivated by the cinematic context, when the viewer is quite literally re-seeing the real Lucienne as the cinematic Lucienne: or when the flickering image of the cinematic Lucienne, made when she was still living, casts its tremulous glow over the dead face of the real Lucienne, literally re-viewing the face in its own after-glow. A “tremulous glow,” or a very small and brief, extremely little light: a savage, even monstrous irony uncoils from such phrases, for the name *Lucienne* is a little or diminutive form of the name *Lucie*, a word that stems from--dare one say, can be re-seen in?--the Latin *lux*, meaning “light.” And that, after all, is the operative principle of cinema.

That glow, it is tempting to say, epitomizes an entire process so deftly condensed in a phrase first deployed by Muriel Spark in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, where it serves as the title of a fictional book, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. For by 1930, the figure of the female secretary or typist was no longer a novelty, as it had been back in 1898, or even as recently as 1920 in France, but a commonplace, a reliable feature of the everyday world. Yet invoking a transfiguration of the commonplace in this context courts the risk of aestheticizing murder and death; and although the film does imply that Lucienne’s cinematic afterlife will cast a glow over how we read her life, and her death, it also insists on the gap between the two, just as firmly as it insists on the culpability of André. And even that insistence on his culpability is not without ambiguity; for we may reasonably wonder which André is it that actually commits her murder? Is it André the flawed and choleric individual whose jealousy is excited much too easily, or André the figure who epitomizes an entire form of popular culture and spectacle plainly threatened with extinction by cinema, the newer form of spectacle embodied by Lucienne? Perhaps we shouldn’t choose, or perhaps we cannot choose. Or perhaps we should revisit some of the theological assumptions—deeply appealing though they may be—concealed in that phrase “the transfiguration of the commonplace,” with its ontological hierarchy, and instead adopt a more measured, more mundane terminology.

We can do that by revisiting another phrase that we used earlier when discussing the embedded ring structures that appear both in the refrain and the larger film: rings with rings, wheels within wheels, circles within circles. It is impossible to say “wheels within wheels” without recalling the camera shot that opens the film, a lengthy shot that slowly pans leftward across the entangled wheels of many bicycles apparently used to transport people to the lake outside Paris where the opening sequence takes place (Figure 8). While contributing nothing to advance the narrative, the shot is echoed in many others that recur throughout the film: in close-ups and middle-shots of gramophones, car wheels, the circular mouth of an electric megaphone, the gearing of linotype machines—to name only a few (Figures

9, 10, 11). In *Prix de beauté*, the camera repeatedly lingers over machinery for transportation (bicycles, cars, trains) and communication (printing presses, megaphones, gramophones). It foregrounds devices that execute

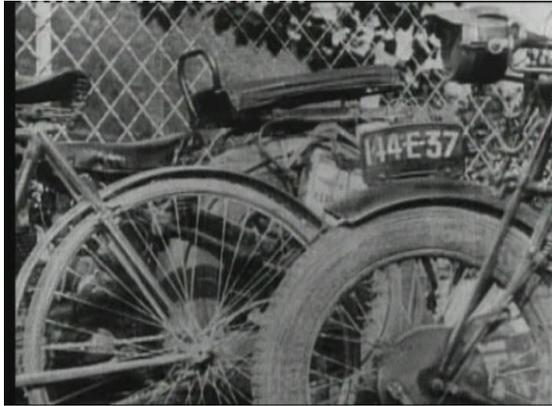


Figure 8: The opening shot of *Prix de beauté*: the camera pans left across numerous bicycle wheels.

operations of modernity that sociologists have designated as “disembedding mechanisms,” those sets of processes by which individuals and things are uprooted from the local, from place, and are reintegrated into the abstract operations of co-ordinated space and time that constitute modern systems (e.g., transportation and communications systems).⁶



Figure 9: Wheels within wheels in *Prix de beauté*.



Figure 10: The electric megaphone: another circular shape.

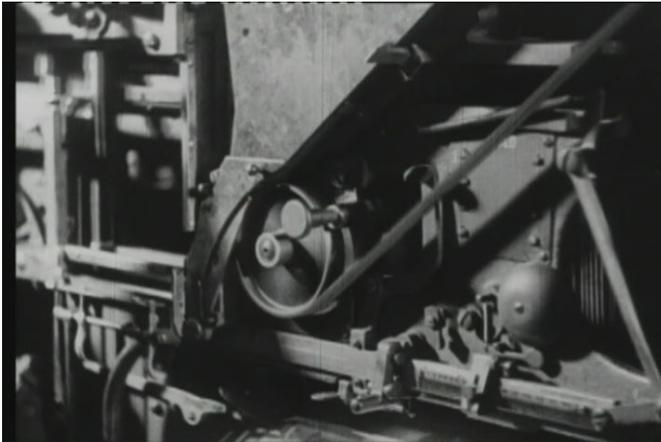


Figure 11: More wheels: a pulley at work in a linotype machine.

Cinema is a classic example of just such a system, for it uproots performers and performance from the local conditions of its production—this theatre, or this stage, or even this city or country—and resituates them within the systemic operations of the cinematic apparatus which, in theory, can be relocated anywhere and replicated any time. But such systems, as sociologists from Simmel to Giddens have noted, also place a heavy demand on trust, a demand so massive that “trust” may finally be an inadequate term to describe it.⁷ In everyday usage trust describes a state of confidence that arises from empirical knowledge and weak induction. We buy meat from a certain butcher on more than one occasion, find it good, and trust

that our next purchase will be satisfactory. But the kind of trust required for the abstract operations of modern systems goes much deeper: it is not trust that is vested in particular persons or even derived from empirical knowledge. Though all of use the modern aviation system, we do so with little or no knowledge of its operators and even less of the principles of aerodynamics and technological expertise on which it rests. This kind of trust might be better described as a quasi-religious form of faith, a concept that invokes related notions of credence, faithfulness, and even fidelity. And these are the notions that are also invoked in the refrain that Lucienne sings at the beginning and end of *Prix de beauté*. In the first instance she reassures André, “Je te reste fidèle,” in effect saying, “You can trust me.” In the second, her reassurance becomes more abstract, addressed to nobody in particular, or to anybody who engages with the systemic operations of modern cinema, now condensed in her own cinematic image: “you can have faith in me, trust me.”

Prix de beauté is many things: a fairy tale and a horror story, a fable of aspiration and jealousy, a study in freedom and domesticity, a probing inquiry into women’s changing roles and their reformulation as cultural and cinematic mythology. But it is foremost a modernist inquiry into the machinery for the production of likenesses and illusions.

Notes

All movie stills are from the Kino International Corporation’s 2006 d.v.d. of *Prix de beauté* (1930).

1. See Yates 37. For overviews of this revolution see Rotella, Whalen, and Yates “Communication Technology and the Growth of Internal Communication” 21–64.

2. Studies from the last decade are Shiach’s “Modernity, Labour, and the Typewriter,” Thurschwell’s “Supple Minds and Automatic Hands,” Price and Thurschwell’s *Literary Secretaries/Secretarial Culture*, and Rainey’s “Office Politics,” “Pretty Typewriters,” “From the Fallen Woman,” “Popular Literature, Silent Film,” and “Secretarial Fiction.”

3. In the German-speaking world Pabst is known for directing the 1925 film *The Joyless Street*, which stars Greta Garbo and Asta Niellson, and for two other Weimar-era films, *Pandora’s Box* and *The Diary of a Lost Girl*, both starring the American actress Louise Brooks.

4. See Koszarski 313 and Paris.

5. The words to the song were written by Jean Boyer and René Sylvano, the music by Wolfgang Zeller. The lyrics in their entirety, except for the refrain (see 131), read:

1. Quand, sur mon passage,
On me dévisage
Je lis des reproches dans tes yeux

1. When I’m out walking
And someone looks me over,
I detect reproaches in your eyes;

M'appelant coquette
 Tu me fais la tête
 Et, le soir, nous boudons tous
 les deux!

Calling me a coquette,
 You frown at me,
 And in the evening we both sulk.

2. Parfois dans la vie
 Un souffle d'envie
 Passe tout à coup dans
 mon cerveau
 Je rêve aux parures
 Aux riches fourrures
 Je suis femme, voilà mon défaut !

2. Sometimes, in life,
 A passing whim
 Suddenly passes through my
 mind;
 I dream of strings of pearls,
 Or of rich furs;
 I'm just a woman; that's my only
 crime!

3. Mais un jour, peut-être,
 Je peux disparaître
 Sans même t'avoir dit
 au revoir
 Le cœur d'une femme
 Cause bien des drames
 Oui, mais c'est toujours sans
 le vouloir.

3. But some day, perhaps,
 I may just disappear
 Without even having said
 goodbye to you;
 A woman's heart
 Prompts many dramas--
 True, but always without
 wanting to.

6. The notion of disembedding mechanisms is discussed by Giddens 21-29.

7. The nature of trust and faith is first raised in 1900, in a discussion about money, by Georg Simmel 179, and is elaborated in Giddens 29-36.

Works Cited

- Giddens, Anthony. *The Consequences of Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990.
- Koszarski, Richard. *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1994.
- Paris, Barry. *Louise Brooks: A Biography*. New York: Knopf, 1989.
- Price, Leah and Pamela Thurschwell, eds. *Literary Secretaries/Secretarial Culture*. Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2005.
- Rainey, Lawrence. "From the Fallen Woman to the Fallen Typist, 1908-1922." *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 52 (2009): 273-97.
- . "Office Politics: *Skyscraper* (1931) and *Skyscraper Souls* (1932)." *Critical Quarterly* 49 (2007): 70-87.
- . "Popular Literature, Silent Film, and the Perils of Genre: *Chickie* (1923-1925)." *Literature and Film Quarterly* 38 (2010):

- . "Pretty Typewriters, Melodramatic Modernity: Edna, Belle, and Estelle." *Modernism/Modernity* 16 (2009): 105-22.
- . "Secretarial Fiction: Gender and Genre in Four Novels, 1897-1898." *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 53 (2010): 308-30.
- Rotella, Elyce J. "The Transformation of the American Office: Changes in Employment and Technology." *Journal of Economic History* 41 (1981): 51-57.
- Shiach, Morag. "Modernity, Labour, and the Typewriter." *Modernist Sexualities*. Ed. Hugh Stevens and Caroline Howlett. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000. 114-29.
- Simmel, Georg. *The Philosophy of Money*. Ed. David Frisby. 3rd ed. London: Routledge, 2004.
- Thurschwell, Pamela. "Supple Minds and Automatic Hands: Secretarial Agency in Early-Twentieth-Century Literature." *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 37 (2002): 155-68.
- Whalen, Thomas. "Office Technology and Socio-Economic Change, 1870-1955." *IEEE (Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers) Technology and Society Magazine* 2:2 (1983): 12-18.
- Yates, JoAnne. *Control through Communication: The Rise of System in American Management*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989.