

REVIEW: *MOTION STUDIES* (or *RIVER OF SHADOWS*)

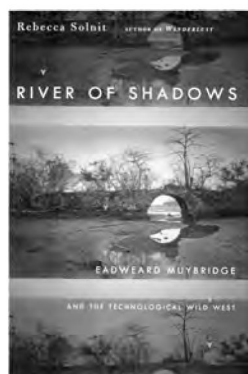
Stephen Herbert

Rebecca Solnit

Motion Studies: Time, Space and Eadweard Muybridge
London: Bloomsbury, 2003

US title: *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West*
New York: Viking, 2003

305pp, ill. Hardback £16.99 ISBN 0-747-56220-2 (UK);
\$25.95, ISBN 0-670-03176-3 (US)



THE COVER OF MY COPY of this book bears the title: *Motion Studies: Time, Space and Eadweard Muybridge*. The title page would beg to differ, suggesting it to be called *Motion Studies: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West*. The original American edition is called *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West*.

To have two different covers for the same book (à la Harry Potter) is not unknown. Three different titles for the same work seems less than helpful, and seems an odd decision by the British publisher. But then again, perhaps it's entirely appropriate in a work based around a man whose identity evolved rapidly, whose name changed at regular intervals, and whose career swung equally wildly in different directions.

Most readers of the *NMLJ* will be familiar with the basic details of Muybridge's life and work. Born Edward James Muggeridge in 1830, he left Kingston-upon-Thames as a young man to seek his fortune in America as a bookseller. In the 1860s, by then known as Muybridge, he bumped his head in a

stagecoach accident – an event that perhaps affected his subsequent behaviour – and became a photographer; first of landscapes and later, and most famously, of galloping horses. Muybridge (his final surname) is also notorious for killing his wife's lover.

Desiring to prove the veracity of his sequence photographs, he projected in motion painted images carefully traced from those photographs, using his Zoopraxiscope (a projecting phenakistiscope). Silhouetted animals and humans cavorted on the screen to the delight of audiences in the 1880s. Muybridge (now styling himself Eadweard, after the Saxon kings) published his sequence work in 1887 as an expensive giant folio of over 700 plates, and around the turn of the century as two popular books. He returned to Kingston in 1894, and the centenary of his death in 1904 is now upon us. Of particular interest to us, his Zoopraxiscope, picture discs, biunial lantern and over 2,000 lantern slides and negatives survive.

Two good biographies were published in the 1970s. So what does this new book add to our knowledge of the man and his work? Well, not too much, perhaps, in terms of hard new information. Instead, Rebecca Solnit puts Muybridge into the context of his time. In particular, she muses extensively on the speeding-up of the late nineteenth-century world, and there is much about railroads and the 'annihilation of time and space'. She makes bold claims for Muybridge's legacy: 'From Muybridge's invention came Hollywood,' insists the jacket blurb, 'and from his patron Stanford's sponsorship of technological research came Silicon Valley.' In a sense both these claims are true, though no doubt both would have happened without Muybridge. Solnit's analysis of Muybridge's landscape

photography is very perceptive and helps to reinforce the growing reputation of this area of his work, and her digressions on native American Indians are interesting, though at times it feels as though she really wanted to write a book on that subject rather than on motion photography.

One small slip of terminology appears more than once. She writes of the 'triumph of chemistry, which made the film "fast" enough to record so brief an instant' (p. 4). Of a running horse: 'Muybridge will seize hold of that running, stop it on film, take it apart and put it back together like a Chinese puzzle' (p. 179). On photographing the racehorse Occident: 'If [the exposure] was too fast, the film would be underexposed' (p. 82). Perhaps it's unfair to point out these slips – Solnit clearly knows the technology of the period – but arguably they are not unimportant. The use of the word 'film' in this context indicates a mindset that perhaps isn't quite 'back there' in the 1870s world of glass plate photography. Even when used correctly the word is of course potentially ambiguous: not only is it used to refer to post-1880s roll film 'still' photography (a technology still used today, hence the slip), but it also means – and Solnit herself frequently uses it to mean – 'the movies'.

Of concern here is that her incorrect usage of 'film' when discussing glass plates subtly provides an unconscious reinforcement of the idea of Muybridge's famous action sequences as photographic 'moving pictures', rather than printed sequence photographs. Muybridge himself fudged the truth in his account of the production of the Zoopraxiscope images, and this, together with many contemporary newspaper reports of 'the photographs in motion on the screen', has understandably led to confusion. But the discs survive to be examined. They are painted images, in most cases meticulously traced from the photo sequences, and retaining the vitality of real-life humans and animals in motion. In our digitally manipulated world their production method actually adds to their interest: what constitutes a 'real' photograph?

Solnit insists (p. 202) that as well as painted images, Muybridge projected actual photos with the Zoopraxiscope, because a sequence of small plates of a galloping horse, arranged in a circle, survives at Stanford University. I would think that this could only have been produced for a private experiment, and the photographs in question would have looked 'squashed' on the screen. The Zoopraxiscope distorted images on projection, which is why painted images copied from photographs – but distorted to compensate for this 'squeezing' – were used.

Muybridge is a big subject, and only the brave take on the 'whole story' of his life and times. Solnit covers just about all of Muybridge's activities in detail, including his stereoscopic and panoramic photography, though his later years are thinly sketched. Missing areas include the lecture tours that he undertook in Britain and Europe, a subject that will be covered in some detail in a forthcoming book that I am editing for Kingston Museum.

Solnit's embrace of the USA's geography, geology, economy, politics, media – and much else – during Muybridge's active life produces an engaging, if at times somewhat rambling, reverie. Her stream-of-consciousness technique works rather well in places, but the final chapter reads almost as a parody of the style. She writes fluidly and imaginatively, and isn't afraid to put herself and her own experiences into the account. In some ways that makes the book read more like a novel than a 'traditional' biography or history.

Don't let the apparently negative comments in this review put you off reading this book. As a Muybridge enthusiast myself, the smallest points of contention jump out at me, but will be less obvious to the general reader. Rebecca Solnit's book is a deeply considered and thought-provoking account of the rushing, galloping world of the latter part of the nineteenth century, and putting 'the crusty old shape-shifter Muybridge', as one American reviewer has described him, into that context is a good contribution to have made.